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From Exegesis to Sermon in Romans 12:9-21

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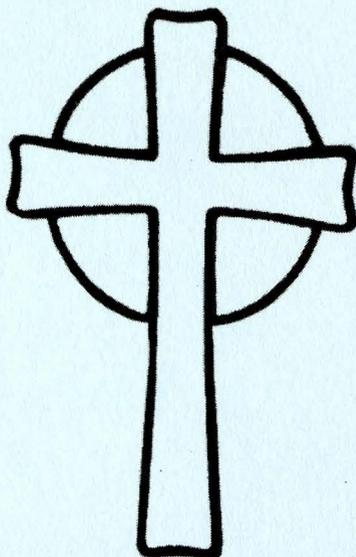
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FROM EXEGESIS TO SERMON IN ROMANS 12:9–21

TIMOTHY SENSING

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“Παπακαλῶ οὖν, ἀδελφοί, διὰ τῶν οἰκτιρμῶν τοῦ θεοῦ, . . .” (*I appeal to you therefore, brothers, on account of the mercies of God, . . .*). Paul’s appeal to practical matters in the paraenesis of Rom 12:1–15:13 is based upon his previous discussion in chapters 1–11. These are the instructions of how this newly redefined people of God should live. These exhortations are consequences of Paul’s doctrine “the righteous will live by faith” (1:17).

Paul’s intent is not to lay down a comprehensive ethical system for all of Christianity. Instead, these appeals presuppose that those addressed have been baptized into Christ and belong to him (Rom 6:1 ff.) and that they are faced with specific ethical issues and conflicts that need to be addressed in light of their relationship with Christ.¹ These ethical imperatives follow from the indicative and participate with the indicative to accomplish God’s eschatological future.² When Christians act in accordance with the will of God, they demonstrate the truth of the indicative. Paul’s vision for their future rests on hope but also depends upon their participation to actualize that hope.

Paul’s purpose for writing Romans has been vigorously debated.³ Paul had not visited Rome. He states his desire to come and visit as a means of introducing himself and his mission (Rom 1:10–15; 15:22–29). He desired Rome to be the launching pad for a new mission to Spain.

¹ Victor Paul Furnish, *Theology and Ethics in Paul* (New York: Nashville: Abingdon, 1968) 91.

² The eschatological dimension is emphasized in the paraenetic section in 13:11–14 and also functions as the motivation of the concluding verses of the section in 15:7–13.

³ See Karl P. Donfried, ed., *The Romans Debate* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991). He concludes, “[C]onsensus has been reached that Romans is addressed to the Christian community of Rome, which finds itself in a particular historical situation” (lxix).

Although the Roman church was a community with Jewish roots, it also included Gentile converts.⁴ When the decree of Claudius in 49 CE expelled the Jews from the city, the Gentile members of the community found themselves in the majority. When Jewish Christians trickled back into Rome after permission was granted in 54 CE, they found a Gentile congregation that tended to discount the importance of their Jewish heritage. Tensions grew, leading to separate house churches split along racial lines. The theological issue: What is the place of Israel in a mixed community of Jewish and Gentile Christians?

David Aune demonstrates that Romans is a *logos protreptikos*, or “speech of exhortation”—a letter intended to convince others of a particular lifestyle.⁵ This identification of the letter’s genre is useful for understanding how the paraenesis functions for Paul; namely, he is explaining the particulars of the abstract implications of the gospel in terms of the duties and obligations of Christians living in community.⁶

Paul’s quotation of Hab 2:4, “The righteous will live by faith,” can easily be translated “The righteous by faith will live.” To know which way Paul intended the phrase to be taken is determined by the context of his argument. Paul will express both ways of translating the verse as truths in the letter. The dual theme of the letter is expressed by the one phrase. The righteous have new life in Christ because of their faith, and the righteous will proceed to live in accordance with their faith.

Paul’s gospel revealed God’s righteousness and wrath (1:17–18). Preaching revealed God’s own moral integrity. Paul preached that the righteousness of God is ours by faith (1:17) and that we are justified freely from his wrath by this same faith that responds to the gospel (3:22–24; 5:1). The conclusion in chapter 3 is a climax to the heart and soul of Paul’s gospel.

Romans 6 connects to Romans 12 in theme more so than any other passage in the letter. Our baptism into the death of Jesus and our resurrection to walk in a new life (6:4–10) are the basis for all the actions in the following pericope (6:11ff.).⁷ Therefore (*oun*, 6:12), based on what has

⁴ See Wolfgang Wiefel, “The Jewish Community in Ancient Rome and the Origins of Roman Christianity,” in *The Romans Debate*, 100–119.

⁵ Aune, “Romans as Logos Protreptikos,” in *The Romans Debate*, 91. His thesis is supported by Stanley K. Stowers, *Letter Writing in Greco-Roman Antiquity* (LEC; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986) 114.

⁶ Aune, “Romans,” 119.

⁷ Cruz, *Christological Motivations*, 165. For an extended discussion of baptism, see 155–69. He contends, on 438, that the most fundamental motive for Paul is our

already taken place in baptism, the righteousness of God must be realized in the life of the believer. Due to our participation with Christ, our lives are to be offered (sacrificial language), not to sin, but to God as "instruments of righteousness" (6:13). Our "offering" in 12:1 is clearly connected to, and expounds upon, what it means to respond to God's mercy.

Romans 8:2-10 describes the indwelling Spirit. The Spirit lives in us as we live between the times. Although we already possess the new life of Christ, it has not yet been fully realized. As we live in the world, the indwelling Spirit enables us to demonstrate the implications of the gospel in the way we live and think.

The tension between Jew and Gentile that has created division and a superiority complex centers around the doctrine of Israel's place in God's plan. Justification by faith is the basis on which Paul argues for the equality of Jews and Gentiles. Does this mean that God's promises to the Jews are void? Not at all. Paul defends God in Romans 9-11, demonstrating that both Jew and Gentile belong together and are integral to God's plan of salvation. Paul therefore unifies the concepts of equality of all in the gospel and the priority of the Jews. He concludes with the doctrine of God's mercy for all (Rom 11:28-32), which is beyond analysis (Rom 11:33-36).

Romans 12:1-2 reiterates, in the imperative mood, what it means to receive by faith the revealing of God's righteousness (1:16-17). *Oun* functions as a connection immediately to God's mercy (Rom 11:30-32),⁸ but also to the entire argument Paul has been making in Romans. With the words "Therefore, I urge you," Paul's exhortations connect with the previous teachings.⁹ The "mercies of God" are not limited only to chapters 9-11.¹⁰ *Oun* indicates that Paul presupposes the theological assertions made in the entire letter. However, these exhortations also supply a further explication of what the gospel is and how it works as God's power for salvation.¹¹ Mercy is the keynote of chapters 9-11 as Paul reaches the climax of his entire teaching on the gospel of God's righteousness (1:17).¹²

dying and rising with Christ (Rom 6:4-10).

⁸ John Piper, *Love Your Enemies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979) 103, gives the parallel relationship of the appeal in 15:30 ("love of the Spirit" and "the Lord Jesus Christ") to 5:5, 8. Paul again connects appeal to earlier theological discussion.

⁹ C. E. B. Cranfield, *Romans*, vol. 2, ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1975) 596.

¹⁰ Furnish, *Theology and Ethics*, 101. Furnish notes, 102, that the themes and vocabulary of Romans 12 correspond throughout the letter and especially in chap. 1.

¹¹ Furnish, *Theology and Ethics*, 106.

¹² Parsons, "Being Precedes Act," 116.

The *parakalō* functions to introduce the real concern of the letter.¹³ It is one of Paul's stronger words to exhort the believers to respond. The action called for by the *parakalō* will have a clear connection with the theology of the letter.

Rom 12:1 orients the entire text for the individual and the community. With one phrase, Paul has set the entire paraenesis within a theological framework: the theme of "reasonable service."¹⁴ Our sacrifice is called *logikên latreian* (logical service) and is related to Paul's service (1:9).¹⁵ Our self-sacrifice is an appropriate response to God's mercy.

The sacrificial language of 12:1 is also connected to 1:7a. Our election by God, our calling to be saints (a holy people), and our new relationship with God based upon righteousness by faith have implications for how we define this service. Saints are to be priests who offer sacrifices. In light of the gospel, saints will offer themselves as the sacrifice.¹⁶ "This is what happens when we offer ourselves as living sacrifices (12:1). It brings about a cross-like situation. But we can do so with trust and hope that God will intervene in a resurrection-like manifestation so as to make us truly Christ-like for this person."¹⁷

This consecration of our lives will be seen as we separate ourselves from the world for service. Transformation involves the whole person. The totality of God's gift envisions the totality of God's demand. Obedience involves the whole person and cannot be subdivided into individual acts. Particular instructions demonstrate the concreteness of Paul's ethic in a variety of situations.

Social groups, cultural norms, institutions, and former traditions all have the power to mold individual behavior.¹⁸ Many new converts (both Jewish and Gentile) desired to hold onto previous patterns of behavior and thought. Conversion occurred through faith in the gospel, yet the process of

¹³ Romans contains two *parakalō* formulas (Rom 15:30-32). Both are connected to the thanksgiving in Rom 1:8-15.

¹⁴ Ernst Käsemann, *New Testament Questions of Today* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969) 189.

¹⁵ The choice of "rational" or "logical" as the translation for *logikos* is based upon its connection with *nous* in 12:2. Sacrifice was the center of temple worship. Every day of Paul's life, sacrifices were made in the temple for atonement.

¹⁶ Patte, *Paul's Faith*, 247. Käsemann, *Questions*, 189, also connects "spiritual worship" as a description of what it means to stand under the righteousness of God.

¹⁷ Daniel Patte, *Preaching Paul* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984) 79-80.

¹⁸ James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 9-16*, Word Biblical Commentary 38b (Dallas: Word, 1988) 712.

socialization into a new community proved difficult. The imperative not to conform recognizes the human responsibility to resist old and/or outside pressures that counter the gospel. As members of a new community, Christians will have a new identity expressed in their daily living. The exhortations of 12:9-21 will reflect both the negative "do not conform" and the positive "be transformed."

Since our minds have been renewed for the discernment of God's good will, our moral identity will also be shaped. There is no dualism here between the mind and body. "Renewal of mind" is bound with "presenting the body." The goodwill of God that is accomplished by his renewing of our minds gives us the discernment to do good.¹⁹ Each situation, therefore, will be assessed in light of our past participation with Christ and his cross and the coming *eschaton*. This new discernment is possible due to our participation in the Christ event.

Our relationship with God cannot be viewed in isolation from the community (12:3-8). The Christian community will function as a corporate unity. Instruction in appropriate behavior was assuredly part of the process of resocialization that accompanied baptism.²⁰ Cruz indicates that the community as the body of Christ is one of Paul's primary motivations for his exhortations.²¹ The attitude is transformed not only in how we view ourselves, but also in how we view others in that same body. The controlling concrete admonition directed to the community's body life is "Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought." It is directly related to the Jewish-Gentile tension. Both groups were taking pride by claiming favored status (2:17-20; 3:27; 11:18-20).

The seven different gifts in the community all function for the purpose of edification.²² Therefore, within this redefined community, God's righteousness and mercy will continue to find concrete expression. That will be seen as the body imagery of this section gives way to the family imagery seen in the *phileo* word group of the next section.

The paraenesis found in 12:9-21 is integrally connected in the larger literary flow of Paul's argument. The admonitions of 12:9-13 expound upon the internal relations within the body. Paul's discussion about external

¹⁹ Structurally, God's goodwill is connected to three strategic verses in Paul's admonitions, namely, 12:9b, 17, and 21. Later analysis will highlight the key position these three antithetical parallel phrases play in unifying the whole text as a rhetorical refrain.

²⁰ Meeks, *First Urban Christians*, 139.

²¹ Cruz, *Christological Motives*, 138, 147-48.

²² *Ibid.*, 151.

relations with the world found in 13:1–7 begins in 12:17–21. The middle verses of 12:14–16 reflect backward and gaze forward. Many of these thoughts are integrated in Paul's thinking and cannot be easily separated in terms of insider/outsider. Christians at Rome, especially, found that the insider was often acting as the enemy.

Walter Wilson connects Romans 12 structurally with the Hellenistic form. The programmatic section is 12:1–2; the descriptive section is 12:3–8; and the prescriptive section is 12:9–21.²³ The paraenetic form of the prescriptive section of 12:9–21 is structured as follows: (1) thematic statement (12:9a); (2) protreptic maxim (12:9b); (3) lists of consequences (12:10–13); (4) central statement (12:14); (5) explanatory admonitions (12:15–20); and (6) summarizing maxim (12:21).²⁴

Formally, paraenesis relied upon earlier traditions. Paul, too, relied upon a well-defined tradition that provided precedents for his ethical instructions. He "filtered these traditions through his interpretation of the event of God's act in Christ, and the claim God makes on the believer."²⁵ He selectively used these sources with christological discernment to suit his interests, perspectives, and objectives.²⁶

There have been several convincing analyses of the pericope that find both unified structure and theology. While 12:10–13 is loosely constructed structurally, it is held together by repetition, parallelism, and theme. J. D. G. Dunn concludes that there are rhetorical parallels of ten clauses in 12:10–13 that form a 2, 3, 3, 2 pattern.²⁷ Cranfield also recognizes structural unity, noting there are five pairs of ten admonitions.²⁸ Structural unity is also seen verbally: *poneros* and *kakos* (9, 17, 21) parallel *agathos* and *kalos* (9, 17, 21). The theme of love is woven through the section by the use of *agapê*, *philadelphia*, *philostorgos*, and *philoxenia* (9, 10, 13). The entire section is seen to be a literary unit when it is recognized that 12:21 functions as an inclusio with 12:9b. All of these words work to elaborate the distinctive characteristics of love (12:9a). Seen in this way, the admonitions have a climactic step-ladder effect that leads to the central statement at 12:14,

²³ Wilson, *Love Without Pretense*, 128–142.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 143.

²⁵ Furnish, *Theology and Ethics*, 43.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 81.

²⁷ Dunn, *Romans*, 738.

²⁸ Cranfield, *Romans*, 2:631–40. See David A. Black, "The Pauline Love Command: Structure, Style, and Ethics in Romans 12.9–21" *Filologia Neotestamentaria* (1989) 5–9.

where the first finite verb is found.²⁹ This central verse provides both a climax and resolution to the tension found in relationships at Rome.

The admonitions that follow contribute to the themes of retaliation (12:17-19a, 15, 20), fear of the Lord (12:19b), and humility (12:16).³⁰ They are held together by two ring compositions, one inside the other, seen in the chart below:

v. 14	A	Return evil with good;
v. 15	B	Respond to the needs of others;
v. 16	C	Know your place and be humble;
vv. 17-19a	D	Live at peace with all people;
v. 19b-c	C'	Leave vengeance to God;
v. 20	B'	Respond to the needs of enemies;
v. 21	A'	Overcome evil with good;
v. 17a	E	“Never repaying evil for evil,
v. 17b	F	taking thought for what is good
	G	before all men;
v. 18a	H	If possible, so far as it depends on you
v. 18b	G'	with all men
	F'	living at peace;
v. 19a	E'	not taking your own revenge.” ³¹

12:14 forms an antithetical construction with 12:21. The central point in the chiasm is 12:18a, “If possible, so far as it depends on you.” This will become the focal point of the example sermon that follows. This aspect of peace-making is essential in the Roman situation and will be analogous to the present congregation the following sermon is designed to address.

These exhortations function as concrete commandments that define what the will of God is. The claim of God confronts the Christians’ lives and relationships as they make choices in the world.³² Love stands programmatically at the beginning of this series of admonitions. The admonitions, therefore, are negative polemics against behavior that interferes with love and positive expressions of love.

The exhortation to the Christians on their relationship with outsiders has its connection to Jesus’ teaching on enemy love found in Matthew 5 and

²⁹ Wilson, *Love without Pretense*, 144.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 173. Wilson follows the tradition in naming nonviolence as the major theme. However, retaliation is closer to the concept being taught by Paul and the Jesus tradition.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 176.

³² Furnish, *Theology and Ethics*, 74-75.

Luke 6.³³ This text becomes Paul's longest explanation in all his writings about relationships with outsiders. Romans 5 clearly teaches that we, too, were God's enemies when he demonstrated his love toward us in Jesus. Paul now exhorts us to let our enemies experience what we experienced when we were God's enemies.³⁴

This is the first time human love is expressed in Romans; however, love is seen as an expression of divine love in 5:5, 8; 8:35, 39; 15:30. Yet this love should not be compartmentalized into groups such as Christians, outsiders, enemies, and God. The exhortation to love needs to be viewed holistically in all situations, even the most demanding ones; otherwise, it is not love at all.³⁵

Although the individual admonitions in 12.9–21 are varied and more-or-less detachable, and the logical connection from one exhortation to the next can be somewhat loose or abrupt, all these ideas and injunctions are meant to be understood together and in light of one another, contributing to a single theme, namely, Paul's appeal to the Romans to love without pretense.³⁶

A number of themes for preaching could be developed from Romans 12. Once the indicative is well established with a community, more emphasis can be placed upon individual admonitions. Sometimes, it may serve the preacher well to develop only one of the admonitions, such as hospitality (13b). Yet, even then, the theology of Romans must be woven into the sermon, providing the christological motivation for the exhortation. The sermon ought to connect the need for Christians at Rome to practice "stranger love" with those they disdain and the modern need to see hospitality as a means of expressing God's hospitality to us. This sermon, therefore, moves beyond mere moralism.

The following sermon develops the indicative fully. If the sermon is in a longer series, *lectio continua*, a lesser development will be desirable. Even then, the indicative will be woven into each sermon in such a way that God's grace in Christ dominates. Romans 5 was chosen to parallel the text so that the indicative will be explicit in this sermon. The temptation with a single sermon is to be too inclusive of the rich material for preaching waiting in Romans.

I chose peacemaking as the central theme. The theme of peacemaking as a response to God's mercy and as a demonstration of the self-sacrificial

³³ Lohfink, *Jesus*, 113–14.

³⁴ Piper, 'Love Your Enemies,' 104.

³⁵ Wilson, *Love without Pretense*, 199.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 198.

love prescribed in the text will find concrete expression in the elaboration of some of the other more specific admonitions to relevant particular instances within the local setting. Even though this sermon will focus on application of one of the exhortations, the unity of the whole pericope will be respected.

Moving from Text to Sermon: An Example

The movement of this sermon is plotted as follows: The hatred between enemies knows no limits. However, the distinctions of who our enemy is, are sometimes blurred, for our enemy is just like us, and we are God's enemies. But God's mercy established peace. That mercy is displayed through us when we initiate peace with others. Therefore, make your love real by living at peace with others.

Peace Initiators

Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves. Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. Share with God's people who are in need. Practice hospitality. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited. Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord. On the contrary: 'If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.' Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. (Rom 12:9-21)

My close friend in college served as a missionary in Yugoslavia before the fall of the Iron Curtain. He left behind a small group of Christians in Sarajevo that enjoyed close fellowship and relative freedom to practice their faith without outside interference. When the Iron Curtain fell, we knew in our hearts that the opportunity for the spread of the gospel was greater than ever. For the most part, that hope has been realized. Yet the red hand of oppression that had also silenced bitter enemies was now no longer enforcing peace. Once the military peace was removed, ancient ethnic hatreds once again lashed out in violence. The savage siege of Sarajevo shocked our modern sensitivities. Humanity knows no limits to its hatred after battle lines have been drawn between enemies. God becomes the first draftee, truth the first casualty.

On another part of our great world, ancient rivals talk peace. The PLO and Israel are finally sitting down at the peace table. Many factions of the Palestinians, though, oppose this effort. By terrorism they hope to thwart these initiatives. Our sympathies for our allies in Israel were horrified just a few months back when it was an American-born Israeli doctor who stormed into a Mosque massacring innocent worshippers. It will take a miracle to bring about peace between these ancient enemies in the Middle East.³⁷ God becomes the first draftee, truth the first casualty.

Looking back, I wonder if the assignment was too heavy for a sophomore in high school. Reading *All Quiet on the Western Front* did not fit my idea of John Wayne war movies. The cruel realities of war from an insider's perspective were sobering. Battle lines become blurry between enemies and allies. Both claim God to be on their side. In an introductory remark about the book, the author states,

This book is to be neither an accusation nor a confession, and least of all an adventure, for death is not an adventure to those who stand face to face with it. It will try simply to tell of a generation of men who, even though they may have escaped its shells, were destroyed by the war.³⁸

The book speaks about a series of friends who came and died. When recalling their instructors in basic training, our hero states,

The idea of authority, which they represented, was associated in our minds with a greater insight and a manlier wisdom. But the first death we saw shattered this belief. . . . The first bombardment showed us our mistake, and under it the world as they had taught it to us broke into pieces. While they continued to write and talk, we saw the wounded and dying. While they taught that duty to one's country is the greatest thing, we already knew that death-throes are stronger. . . . We loved our country as much as they; we went courageously into every action; . . .³⁹

And later, recounting that even death of a friend has become a matter of pragmatic indifference, our hero states,

Müller is dead. Someone shot him point-blank in the stomach. . . . He lived for half an hour, quite conscious, and in terrible pain.

³⁷ This introduction is designed to help the audience image the reality of the term "enemy." It is this term used by Paul that I will demonstrate the need for God's mercy. This sermon will not begin with the immediate text but will establish the indicative of the context that gave rise to Paul's words in Romans 12.

³⁸ Erich Maria Remarque, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, trans. A. W. Wheen (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1929) n.p.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 11-12.

Before he died he handed over his pocketbook to me, and bequeathed me his boots—the same that he once inherited from Kemmerick. I wear them, for they fit me quite well. After me Tjaden will get them, I have promised them to him.

We have been able to bury Müller, but he is not likely to remain long undisturbed. Our lines are falling back. There are too many fresh English and American regiments over there. There's too much corned beef and white wheaten bread. Too many new guns. Too many aeroplanes.⁴⁰

Earlier, our hero had said, "We are forlorn like children, and experienced like old men; we are crude and sorrowful and superficial—I believe we are lost."⁴¹

All Quiet on the Western Front is unusual for Americans because it presents World War I from the German perspective—not politically, but humanly. It speaks about homes, dreams, mothers, lovers, and their loss. Even our hero dies on a day when the only thing carried by the news wires was "All Quiet on the Western Front." Just a statistic—and another mother longs to embrace a son who will never come home.

It is still uncomfortable to think about the enemy as not being too much different from yourself. For your enemy is human, too.⁴² Have you seen the movie *Schindler's List*? In the midst of eleven million crucifixions, one Nazi industrialist sacrifices all to save a handful of Polish Jews from concentration camps. The Japanese could have used a Nazi like that in the American concentration camps. Which concentration camp did God favor? It is uncomfortable to think about the enemy as not being too much different from yourself.

War zones abound. They abound on Elm Street, behind locked doors, where another spouse is beaten into respect. War zones abound in the inner city, yet the front lines have moved into the suburban school. War zones wage hot over the minds of our children. And they are the ones who suffer the most from our "friendly fire." War zones abound in our neighborhoods while we mow the grass, do the laundry, and sleep well at night.

It abuses our sensitivities to hear about World War I from the enemy's perspective. When Oprah interviews the confessed spouse abuser, we refuse to sympathize or identify with this enemy of decency. Yet, deep down, every one of us knows the enemy's perspective, for we have met the enemy. We have met the enemy every morning in the mirror staring us in the face.⁴³ We

⁴⁰ Ibid., 276-77.

⁴¹ Ibid., 123.

⁴² Although this illustration may be too lengthy, it is designed to create identification with the term "enemy."

⁴³ Paul does not hesitate to make explicit one's true condition outside of Christ.

have met the enemy in our prejudices. We have known the enemy's anger in our fits of rage. We have practiced the enemy's savageness with our own sharp tongues. We don't like to look at the dark side of humanity's cruelties to humanity, for we do not want to gaze inward to the darkness of our soul. We have met the enemy in the mirror staring us in the face. Sin is ugly. And sin is the ugliest when it is our own.

Paul knows the truth. He knows the truth about himself. He knows the truth about the Christians to whom he writes in Rome. He knows the truth about us. "We have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" (Rom 3:23). Paul is brutally honest. He declares that we are God's enemies (Rom 5:10). As enemies of God, we are actively engaged in opposing God. Ungodly in our actions, ungodly in our essence, rotten to the core, and powerless to make a difference. We are enemies actively engaged in battle against God.

Every court in the land would grant God a divorce from humanity on the grounds of "irreconcilable differences" and "cruel and inhuman treatment." Beyond just a divorce decree, we have been tried for war crimes against the Most High and found guilty.

"But God!" In between our petty bickering and polite gossiping, God intervened. In between our acts of crudeness and our displays of rudeness, God acted on our behalf. In between the lusts and the passions, God demonstrated his love for us; "while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom 5:8).⁴⁴

God did not initiate peace talks. Peace treaties are tenuous at best as seen recently in North and South Korea. By our violations of peace every day, we engage the enemy again and again. No one, no, not one, is at peace with God. But God's act was more than establishing a demilitarized zone on the thirty-eighth parallel. God went beyond a Golan Heights buffer on earth. God's violent act at the cross on behalf of us, the peacebreakers, was in the midst of our sin.

War brings out the best in some. Rarely will one sacrifice safety in order to rescue a comrade. Even the enemy performs acts of heroism during the war. Sometimes a good Samaritan dives in front of oncoming traffic to save the life of an innocent child. Rarely. And rarely would it happen for the sake of the enemy. "But God demonstrated his love toward us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom 5:8).

If the identification of the audience has not been made so far, I too make it explicit before proceeding to describe Paul's doctrine of mercy.

⁴⁴ The image now shifts to God's mercy.

The cross was God's peace plan, God's peace initiative. Not peace through strength. Not peace through negotiation. God established peace through sacrifice.⁴⁵

The familiar hymn reads:

*O the love that drew salvation's plan! O the grace that bro't it down to [us]!
O the mighty gulf that God did span at Calvary. Mercy there was great, and
grace was free; pardon there was multiplied to me; there my burdened soul
found liberty, at Calvary.*⁴⁶

We did not deserve mercy. If we deserved mercy, it would not be mercy.⁴⁷

Remember Jesus on the cross, in between the thieves. In the midst of his own death, he initiated peace, saying, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they are doing." Remember Stephen, on the ground, in between the stones. In the midst of his own death, he initiated peace, saying, "Lord, do not hold this against them." Mercy. A demonstration of God's mercy.⁴⁸

Thus Paul writes these Romans who are in need of God's mercy. The church in Rome was a house divided. Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians were at war with one another. Both of these ancient enemies were convinced that God loved them best. Both believed the other was rejected by God. Both drafted God to their side. Both were killing the truth of the gospel. Both needed a wake-up call by God's justifying mercy.

To the Gentile Paul writes: God's peace initiative was God's mercy. "As far as the gospel is concerned, they [the Jews] are [God's] enemies on your account; but as far as election is concerned, they are loved on account of the patriarchs, for God's gifts and his call are irrevocable" (Rom 11:28–29).

Referring directly to the Gentile Paul says, "Just as you who were at one time disobedient to God have now received mercy as a result of their disobedience, . . . (Rom 11:30).

Then referring to the Jew, Paul says again, "so they [the Jews] too have now become disobedient in order that they too may now receive mercy as a

⁴⁵ The sermon has shifted in imagery by beginning with war and enemy, then moving to mercy, and now to peace. Peace is the outcome of God's mercy. It will be this peacemaking that I have chosen to exhort the congregation to imitate when the sermon later shifts to a paraenetic mode.

⁴⁶ D. B. Towner, "Years I Spent in Vanity." Copied by permission, CCLI #536212.

⁴⁷ This song functions to bring to closure the indicative section of the sermon and is similar to, but not the same as, the doxologies used by Paul (e.g., Rom 11:33–36).

⁴⁸ These two illustrations are designed to move from the action of God to God's action through us.

result of God's mercy to you. For God has bound all . . . over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all" (Rom 11:31-32). God's mercy established peace.⁴⁹

"Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship" (Rom 12:1).

Called to be living sacrifices. Wanted by God both dead and alive. Dead to sin that once controlled us. Alive to righteousness as obedient slaves of God. The problem, however, with live sacrifices is they tend to crawl off the altar. But in view of God's mercy, we crawl upon the altar and stay.

"Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will" (Rom 12:2). Therefore, since you are able to discern the will of God, "hate what is evil; cling to what is good. . . . Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. . . . Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Rom 12:9b, 17, 21).⁵⁰

The altar of sacrifice finds itself located often where we least expect it. In our text, the altar stands in the midst of our fellowship with the saved.

For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you. . . . so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. . . . If it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully (Rom 3:3-8).

Crawling upon the altar, being a living sacrifice, involves living in harmony with one another. We have wars and disputes with one another. We each enlist God as our helper. Truth is the first casualty. We do not speak to one another. We gossip. We know the church would be better off without them. We want God to do some pruning in the vineyard.⁵¹ But because God's mercy established peace with all, his mercy flowing through them freely

⁴⁹ Before we move to the local setting, these last few paragraphs have strengthened the connection between the "then" and "now."

⁵⁰ The sermon begins to move into exhortations that find their basis in the indicatives in the text. This particular paragraph will allow the unity of the entire chapter to be served on a single plate.

⁵¹ Tensions within the local body are made explicit. The pew must realize that the sermon is not about a historical problem way back when, but part of its own reality.

given to us will also establish peace. "If it is showing mercy, do it cheerfully." If it is receiving mercy, do it gladly.⁵²

God's mercy overflows in abundance into your life. As it overflows into your life, it will pour forth into abundance into the life of others. As God's mercy overflows into their lives, it will also extend through them to us. God's mercy will make a difference in our relationships. As you live in peace with God, you are to live at peace with one another.

Just as God's mercy overflows into your life, you need to open up your heart so that mercy can flow to others. The cross is not a private possession. No one has a corner on the market on mercy. Imagine a water main supplying a fire hydrant with water. No matter how wide you open up that valve, you cannot open it big enough to exhaust the water supply. Thus no one should hoard the water of mercy; open wide that valve of mercy in your heart so that your brother or sister can know and experience it in full measure.

Many of us, I think, would be willing to display mercy in one giant heroic act. We would go up to Jerusalem and die with him. Yet often we are called to let our mercy flow to others one drop at a time. Imagine taking a dropper and adding from the ocean one drop of water a day into a glass. One drop, then two. In two weeks you would have fourteen drops. Discounting evaporation, eventually you would fill the glass. It is a patient work. Those final drops are held tightly by the glass because of surface tension, but finally, on a day you least expected, one drop of mercy will overflow that glass. And by the love of God flowing through you, someone will be touched by grace.⁵³

In view of God's mercy, then, let your love be real. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.

When your brother or sister breaks a promise to you about helping in the nursery and you opt patiently to take that person's place, continue to be devoted to what is good, for you are making a peace initiative. God's love is real in you.

- When your brother or sister angrily rips into your good name, and you opt to help plan an appreciation dinner on that person's

⁵² Although the admonitions predominately will encourage the listener to identify with the peacemaker, there is an attempt to maintain the identification established earlier that we are the one needing to receive mercy, for we are the enemy. The sermon will end this way also.

⁵³ Throughout these last several paragraphs I have woven the move to paraenesis into the already established indicative.

behalf, continue to honor one another above yourself, for you are making a peace initiative. God's love is real in you.

- When your brother or sister who has publicly opposed your work with the teenage class is taken to the hospital and you opt to rake the leaves, feed the cat, and sit with the spouse through the surgery, continue to share with God's people who are in need of mercy and give them your cloak as well, for you are making a peace initiative. God's love is real in you.
- When no one knows or cares about your volunteer work at a crisis line and you opt to increase your hours of quiet service, continue to be zealous in your spiritual service to the Lord, for you are making a peace initiative. God's love is real in you.
- When other fellowships cease supporting a struggling mission work and we opt to continue, let us continue to serve humbly without thinking too highly of our choices, for we are making a peace initiative. God's love is real in us.
- When someone reports that the father we are helping through rehab is only taking advantage of us and we opt to continue helping financially, continue to bless without cursing, for we are making a peace initiative. God's love is real in us.
- When the neighborhood opposes our stand on a social issue due to our Christian values and we opt to fight on with tenderness and compassion, continue to be patient in affliction and faithful in prayer, for we are making a peace initiative. God's love is real in us.
- When our funds are low and the air conditioner needs repair and we opt to continue working with transient people who will never repay us, continue to be joyful in hope, for we are making a peace initiative. God's love is real in us.
- When our building is vandalized with crude graffiti and we opt not to prosecute those apprehended, continue not to take revenge, for the Scripture says, "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. . . . Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." For then you are making a peace initiative. God's love is real in you. Remembering God's mercy to us, if it is possible, as far as it depends on us, let us live at peace with everyone.⁵⁴

⁵⁴ This is a set-piece designed to communicate the paraenesis of Romans 12:9-21. It is constructed with specific local contexts in mind and centered around the theme of peace. Peace was chosen due to local circumstances and the exegetical

The might of a full self-sacrifice that demands our souls, our lives, our all opens the portal of possibility of their future resurrection. Forgiveness is the key to overcoming evil. Forgiveness is two way—both in the giving and accepting. In view of God's mercy then, let our love be real. If it is possible, as far as it depends on us, live at peace with everyone.

By being peace initiators, we are allowing God's activity to flow through us his people. When someone comes to us, accepts us, loves us, forgives us, we will know we have just witnessed God's real love.

Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves his fellowman has fulfilled the law. . . . 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' Love does no harm to its neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law. Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God. . . . May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit (Rom 12:8-10; 13:7, 13).⁵⁵

Buried with Christ, my blessed Redeemer, dead to the old life of folly and sin; Satan may call, the world may entreat me, there is no voice that answers within. Dead unto sin, alive through the Spirit, risen with Him from the gloom of the grave, all things are new, and I am rejoicing in His great love, His power to save. Sin hath no more its cruel dominion, walking 'in newness of life,' I am free-Glorious life of Christ, my Redeemer, which He so richly shareth with me. Dead to the world, to voices that call me, living anew, obedient but free; dead to the joys that once did enthrall me-Yet 'tis not I, Christ liveth in me.⁵⁶

discovery that 12:18 functions as a central phrase in the ring construction. It also relates well to analogous situation at Rome. Throughout, allusions are made to other familiar material as well as specific references to this text. It begins and ends the same way, forming an inclusio. Although the piece begins with admonitions to an individual, it shifts to admonitions to the community. Not every phrase in the text is referred to due to length.

⁵⁵ The sermon may best stop before the Scripture; however, I deemed it wise to return to Paul's words in Romans. The quoted passages are the verses that bring closure to Paul's paraenetic section.

⁵⁶ L. O. Sanderson, "A New Creature." Copied by permission, CCLI # 536212. All of my sermons are followed with an appropriate hymn. Since the sermon belongs to a larger worship assembly, other hymns especially relevant would be "When My Love to Christ Grows Weak," "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross," and "At the Cross." A reference from "When My Love to Christ Grows Weak" was used in the sermon, namely, "the might . . . of a full self-sacrifice." These songs begin with the indicative while the last verse is an imperative.