



A New Vision of Righteousness: Paul’s Exhortations in Romans 12-15*

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It has been said that life is enriched not so much by good answers as it is by good questions. As a seminarian I was given such a question by Prof. Gerhard Forde when he asked in a lecture: “Now that you don’t have to do anything for salvation, what are you going to do?” I knew at once that it was both the most beautiful and aggravating question I had heard. It would take a lifetime to answer (which was its intent). It was beautiful because it captured the essence of the gospel; it was aggravating because the implicit answer seemed to be “nothing” or “nothing special.” The question drove me to Paul’s letter to the Romans, since it was Paul who came up with the formulation that “a person is justified by faith apart from works of the law” (Rom 3:28). His answer is found most explicitly in Romans 12-15, where Paul gives specific directives concerning Christian behavior. Selections from these chapters are heard as the second lesson on Pentecost 15, 16, and 17 in Series A. In these chapters, Paul draws a connection between the way we are saved and the way we act in the world, between justification and doing justice.

1. Pentecost 15: Romans 12:1-8

There are really three sermons in this pericope; one might consider breaking chapter 12 into three parts, thereby making a five-part series out of chapters 12-15. In other words, the material in sections 1.a and 1.b (below) could be used in two introductory sermons which would spell out the basis for Paul’s ethical appeal. The series would then continue with three sermons focusing on the appeal itself (sections 1.c, 2, and 3). Alternatively, in a three-part sermon series more directly related

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to the lectionary, the material in sections 1.a and 1.b could be used as background material—either in the first sermon or distributed throughout the series.

a. Romans 12:1. Paul begins chapter 12 with the word “therefore.” This little word indicates the motivation for Christian action; it insists that what Paul has been saying in the letter up until now (chapters 1-11) is necessarily connected to what he is about to say (chapters 12-15).

What he has been talking about in the first 11 chapters is a new vision of God’s righteousness: Jesus Christ. This new vision of righteousness has many facets. Christ is the

righteous one, the one whom God has vindicated, the one who has prevailed. Christ is also a model of goodness, a vision of what it means to act righteously. Christ, as the new word of God's righteousness, is encountered as both gospel and law, and the believer's relationship to God's righteousness has both vertical and horizontal implications. In relation to God (vertical), we are made righteous (justified) through faith in the righteous one, Jesus Christ (Rom 3:26). Our life in this world (horizontal) is empowered by our connection to this righteous one in baptism (Rom 6:4). Through faith and baptism, we have our being in righteousness. We "walk in newness of life" (Rom 6:4).

Rom 12:1-15:13 is about the "new walk" which finds its motivation in this new vision of righteousness. Through faith in Christ, we are made righteous for righteousness' sake, justified to do justice. We look to Christ as a forerunner, who leads us in the new walk of life, both in its temporal and eternal dimensions. For a more playful image, we might use not a walk but a dance: a dance of righteousness. God is the choreographer, who reveals the dance itself. Christ is the master dancer, the Lord of the dance, who shows us the right moves. He dances righteously, and we, as his disciples, imitate him. We are the company, having been invited to dance by the master and admitted into the company by virtue of our faith in him. God will use us for expression. We are God's "instruments of righteousness" (Rom 6:13).

b. Romans 12:1-2. Paul's exhortation "to present your bodies as a living sacrifice" is a logical response to this new vision of God's righteousness. God's righteousness has been most clearly revealed in Christ's sacrifice on the cross for our sake. It is not a sacrifice of self-denial, but of self-giving. A sacrifice in Paul's time was not only a burnt offering for sin but also a feast to celebrate God's goodness. The mention of the word sacrifice would more likely set the mouth to drool than put fear in the heart. In this sense, a living sacrifice would be a body given for the world to feast upon. This happens in Holy Communion with the sacrifice of Christ's body and blood-it is eaten and drunk. To return to our dance image, we offer our bodies as God's instruments so that the world may feast its eyes on the dance of God's righteousness.

Paul has a wholly positive view of the human body, for bodies are the place where the righteousness of God will be worked out in the world. Paul's whole point is to get bodies to move, to make faith active. The appeal to sacrifice our bodies calls to mind our baptisms, where we participated in Christ's sacrifice by being buried with Christ in his death (Rom 6:4). Luther called this the happy exchange in which we trade our sin for Christ's righteousness.¹ But God gets more than sin out of the deal, God also gets bodies. God will make righteous use of those bodies. Paul can

¹Cf. *Luther's Works* 31.190.

describe our activities as "holy, acceptable, good, and perfect" (Rom 12:1-2) without fear of "works-righteousness," because what is being expressed is God's righteousness in Christ through the instruments of our bodies.

Being used as God's righteous instruments involves a transformation or metamorphosis of the mind (Rom 12:2). Like a butterfly that emerges from a cocoon, so must the mind change from being centered on the world to being centered on Christ. Paul knows that where the mind is, there will the body be also. "We have the mind of Christ," he declares (1 Cor 2:16). The metamorphosis is a present reality: "And we all with unveiled face, reflecting the glory of the

Lord, are being changed (transformed) into his likeness” (2 Cor 3:18). The body that is sacrificed, the member that is yielded to righteousness, will take the form of Christ, the Christ who is good, acceptable, and perfect. For Paul, ethics will not only be centered on Christ but primarily centered on the cross. “The Christian life is always cruciform.”²

As master of the dance, Christ’s moves reveal God’s righteousness. We, as disciples of the master and instruments of God’s righteousness, are called to imitate them. Paul spells out three such “moves” in Rom 12:3-15:13; these correspond to our three lectionary pericopes for Pentecost 15-17.

| <i>Sunday</i> | <i>Pericope</i> | <i>Area of Concern</i> | <i>Theme Word</i> |
|---------------|-----------------|-------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Pentecost 15 | 12:3-21 | Community relations | “Do not think too highly”(12:3) |
| Pentecost 16 | 13:1-10 | Political relations | “Be subject” (13:1) |
| Pentecost 17 | 14:1-15:13 | Interpersonal relations | “Welcome” (14:1) |

Paul supports this whole discussion with sayings and traditions from the life, death, and resurrection of Christ (the righteousness of God revealed). Each theme word is a move by the body of Christ in God’s righteous dance, a step in the walk of new life.

c. Romans 12:3-8 (3-21). The topic in Rom 12:3-21 is community relations. The theme is a call “not to think of oneself more highly than one ought to think.” This phrase has commonly been summed up in the word “humility,” which assumes it is spoken only as law to accuse the proud and cut them down to size; the issue, however, is not just humility, but proper thinking about oneself. Paul exhorts us to get our thinking straight, just as he has previously exhorted us to transform our minds. To the Christian with low self-esteem, this comes as good news, for the proper thinking about oneself is that the believer is made righteous through faith in Christ and will be used by God as a righteous instrument. To the self-important Christian, this comes as a reminder that all have the same status in Christ, namely righteousness. No one can claim a superior righteousness, for in Christ everyone is superior.

To reinforce this notion, Paul employs the image of a body, the body of Christ. Out of the sacrifice of many bodies (Rom 12:1) is made one body, each member with equal status and worth. To continue with the dance image, now rather than many

²J. C. Beker, *Paul the Apostle: The Triumph of God in Life and Thought* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980) 198.

bodies dancing, we visualize one body—in all its parts—doing one dance, the dance of righteousness. Just as the fingers have no more or less expressive potential than the hips or the feet, so every member of the body is equally important to God’s expression of righteousness. The dance has been danced before in the body of the master, Jesus Christ. The new body of Christ, made up of many gifted members, will make the same moves in a new context. When Paul talks about “gifts given” (12:6), he has in mind the many different expressions of God’s righteousness.

Paul talked often about his mission to the Gentiles as the gift given to him (esp. Gal 3:2, 7, 8); this gift allowed him to think highly enough of himself to claim equal status with the apostles and to defend his ministry in the face of threat. Each and every Christian ought to think as highly about his or her task in the body of Christ as Paul did of his—but not too highly, for every other task is equally vital to the life and work of the body; each expression is crucial to the message of the dance.

The “moves” of the body of Christ are revealed in Rom 12:9-21. “Serve the Lord” stands literally in the middle of all the other exhortations contained there. In 12:14-21, Paul uses sayings from the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5:39, 44//Luke 6:28, 29) to reveal the righteousness of God in the words of Christ as they apply to community relations. The phrase “do not be haughty” (12:16) is amplified in Phil 2:3 where Paul describes the humility of Christ. Christ has revealed the dance of righteousness in his life and words, his death and resurrection.

2. Pentecost 16: Romans 13:1-10

How is the body of Christ supposed to relate to other political bodies? What is the protocol for us, as ambassadors for Christ (2 Cor 5:20)? What rules are we, as citizens of the heavenly commonwealth (Phil 3:20), supposed to follow? Such are the questions of Rom 13:1-10. The topic is political relations and the theme word is “be subject.” Subjection is not such a popular word in an age when everyone wants to “get government off the backs of the people.” Yet subjection is what Christ exemplified as he was tried a criminal and crucified on the cross, according to Roman law.

Paul has clearly established our independence from earthly governments: members of the body of Christ are “resident aliens” in the world; now, he exhorts Christians to submit to the rule of governing authorities. Paul makes the radical statement that the authority of these rulers has been instituted by God. With the persecution of the church by political authorities an ever present danger, if not a reality, Paul’s appeal must have fallen on skeptical ears. Perhaps we share that skepticism. Most polls reflect a deep and abiding cynicism concerning the effectiveness of our politicians. To say they are appointed by God is laughable. Paul’s words do not vindicate particular politicians as much as they refuse to allow us to withdraw from political life in this world. Paul’s claim is that even unrighteous, money-grubbing, and scandal-prone politicians—not to mention decent ones—have a divinely appointed job to do. We, for our part, ought to participate fully in the system and not turn away from it. Paul’s claim is that God and politics do mix—necessarily so. For Christians of that era, obedience was the only option for political expression.³ In a democracy, the possibilities for political participation are much more numerous, beginning with—but not limited to—the vote.

³Ernst Käsemann, “Principles of the Interpretation of Romans 13,” *New Testament Questions of Today* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1969) 205.

Paul offers the rule to “love your neighbor as yourself” as the example of God’s righteousness revealed in the words of Christ (Rom 13:8-10). Such love would never violate any human law since “love does no wrong to a neighbor.” Paul appeals to the law to support his political ethic (although these words were also spoken by Jesus—Matt 22:40). One might ask why Paul didn’t appeal more directly to the life, words, and deeds of Christ, if Christ is God’s righteousness

revealed, and furthermore why he could still quote the Torah in exhortation, if Christ was the “end” of the law. To be sure, Christ is the end (*telos*) of the law as a way of salvation; but Christ is also the goal (*telos*) of the law. From now on, the law, as an expression of God’s will, must be judged through Christ. Also, it is not so much the life of Christ but the cross of Christ that reveals God’s righteous will. The cross is the unifying principle in Pauline ethics.

Paul’s purpose in Rom 13:1-10 may have been only to avoid anarchy in the Christian community and to avoid unnecessary persecution by the government. The question remains: What are the limits of such subjection to authority? Is there a time when governments transgress the bounds of their authority and must be resisted? Paul does not answer the question directly, but he seems to think his exhortation would always hold. Although there are times when a Christian must resist governing authority, the Christian must always be willing to be subject to the penalty which the law provides. This is one of the main principles in non-violent resistance. Jesus himself practiced it. He was “subject” to the governing authority, even unto death. God proved the injustice of the government’s act (and the injustice of the world) by raising Jesus from the dead. When others use this principle to resist governments, they also prove the injustice of the law by their innocent suffering on its behalf. I think of Rosa Parks, who placed her body on the line by sitting in the “whites only” section of a bus, resulting in her arrest. By “presenting her body as a living sacrifice” and submitting to an unjust law, she sparked the beginning of the civil rights movement.

3. Pentecost 17: Romans 14:5-9

The lectionary pericope does not include the theme word for this section concerning interpersonal relations. It is found in 14:1: “welcome.” In this part of the letter, Paul is most explicit in his appeal to the example of Christ as the revelation of God’s righteousness. In 15:7 he pleads with the Roman Christians to “welcome one another, therefore, as Christ has welcomed you.” The idea behind the word “welcome” is hospitality (also used in Heb 13:2). The vision of God’s righteousness revealed in Christ calls us to welcome one another as honored guests, to treat one another with respect, to accept one another without judgment. Paul returns to his main theme: through faith we belong to Christ, who is the righteousness of God. We no longer concern ourselves with clean and unclean foods, since God does not—having sent the Christ to die a death that condemns him under the law, a death on the cross. “The kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness, peace and joy,” Paul says (14:17). If everyone in the body of Christ has equal status, having been made righteous through faith in Christ, then eating and drinking do not have any significance, for Christ has accepted all.

What distinctions do we make in our communities to “prove” one Christian superior over the other? Are those who are “pro-choice” in the abortion issue superior or those who are “pro-life”? Those who boycott grapes or those who don’t?

Those who condemn homosexuality or those who accept it? Those who advocate peace through disarmament or those who advocate peace through strength? The cross of Christ as the revelation of the righteousness of God crucifies our self-righteous agendas and allows God to work through us. If we accept one another as Christ has accepted us, then the body of Christ will have many different expressions, even as it conforms to the mind of Christ. Our salvation (our status before

God) does not depend on how well we conform our lives to Christ. We are made righteous by faith in Christ. Nevertheless, our status before God points the way to walk “in newness of life.” It is the way of Christ, who is God’s righteousness revealed. It is the way of the cross.

Not thinking too highly about oneself, subjection, and welcoming are three descriptions of God’s righteousness revealed through the cross of Christ—three movements in the dance of righteousness.⁴ They are ways of being in the world (of being righteous) that do not condone evil but unmask it, while revealing God’s intended justice (righteousness). It is an ethic that does not insist on its superiority over the world, that does not force its way into the world, but welcomes the world as it is, witnessing to God’s way of humility, submission, and acceptance—the righteousness of God revealed in Christ Jesus on the cross.

We might call the ethics of Paul “body politics”: God uses our bodies to show his way in the world. “But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying *in the body* the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested *in our bodies*. For while we live we are always being given up to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you” (2 Cor 4:7-12).

⁴Pastor Gary Lee of Cresco, Iowa has commented to me about the similarity between these three exhortations and the three movements in the 12 steps of AA.