



Texts in Context

“Do not repay evil with evil”: Preaching Romans 12:9–21

ROY A. HARRISVILLE

THE TEXT

[9] Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; [10] love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. [11] Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. [12] Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. [13] Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. [14] Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. [15] Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. [16] Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. [17] Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. [18] If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. [19] Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” [20] No, “if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.” [21] Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Three notes need adding respecting this NRSV translation. In verse 11c, a few witnesses read “serve the time” instead of “serve the Lord”;¹ in verse 13a many of the same witnesses read “contribute to the commemorations” instead of “to the needs of the

¹This variant attracted Luther who translated, “Schicket euch in die Zeit” (“put up with, be resigned to the time”). See Martin Luther, *Die Deutsche Bibel* (1522–1546), vol. 6 (Weimar: Böhlau Nachfolger, 2001) 68.

This text from Romans contains thirty imperatives—which would merely be another set of moralisms and religious requirements were it not for the “renewing of your mind” that Paul commends in Rom 12:2. Only God in Christ can work that transformation, and only then do Paul’s commands become possibilities.

saints”; and finally, in verse 20 the NRSV overcautiously avoids use of the masculine pronoun by rendering the nouns in the plural (“if your *enemies* are hungry, feed *them*, etc.”).

THE CONTEXT

Our text is set within the complex of Romans chapters 12 to 15, often termed the “practical portion” of the epistle. According to this view, whereas chapters 1 through 8 deal with the epistle’s theme in the abstract, after the “intermezzo” dealing with Israel’s past, present, and future in chapters 9 through 11, chapter 12 proceeds to render the theme concrete, to give it intelligibility. The view is incorrect. Following his task of outlining the *boundaries* set to a true and genuine faith in chapters 1 through 8, in 12 through 15 Paul now turns to the task of describing the *shape* which that faith assumes. The relationship between the sections is not that the one does not cohere with the other but that precisely the same theme is being dealt with, though from a different perspective.

The opening verses of chapter twelve (12:1–2) furnish the heading for everything to follow:

[1] I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. [2] Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.²

Following the heading, Paul launches into his treatment of life lived in the body of Christ, first, in the enumeration of the *charismata* or spiritual gifts in 12:3–8. What follows in our text falls largely under the theme of love. The sequence, that is, the enumeration of spiritual gifts followed by the love-theme, is precisely the same as in 1 Corinthians. There, after enumerating the *charismata* in chapter 12, Paul proceeds to his portrait of love in chapter 13. One commentator finds the sequence odd and disjunctive, suggesting that the coupling reflects a tradition independent of Paul. Should that be the case, he adds, the disjunction becomes more intelligible, with love assuming its place at the head of the spiritual gifts.³ Thus, to the opening word in 1 Cor 12:31, “and I will show you a still more excellent way,” corresponds “let love be genuine” in Rom 12:9.

A BIT OF GRAMMAR

The text contains a host of participles: seventeen, to be exact, plus nine imperatives. Since, according to Jewish, rabbinic, and Greek usage, the participle may function in the imperative mood, the number of imperatives is raised to twenty-six. Further, since in Hebrew as well as in Greek the infinitive is used to express the

²In verse 1, the NRSV replaces the synecdoche “I appeal to you brothers” with “brothers and sisters,” and in verse 2 renders the noun “mind” of the original in the plural.

³Erik Peterson, *Der Brief an die Römer* (Würzburg: Echter Verlag, 1997) 336.

imperative mood, the two infinitives translated imperatively in verse 15 (“rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep”) raise the number to twenty-eight. And, if in New Testament Greek the adjective may also be added to this class,⁴ then the adjectives in verses 10 and 11 translated “outdoing one another” and “do not lag in zeal,” raise the number to thirty. So, with the exception of the three verbs in the quotation of verses 19 and 20, every verbal or adjectival form is to be construed in the imperative. The NRSV translation has it right. Finally, since the imperatival participle reflects not only rabbinic but also Hellenistic usage, to stretch the hypothesis of a pre-Pauline tradition to the point of a Semitic source brings it to breaking point.⁵

STRUCTURE

In the main, our text is a hymn to love, though not exclusively (see v. 12: “rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, etc.”). To speak of it as a “hymn” may be to say too much, since there is little of conceptual connection between the verses. The piece, then, is determined more by similarity in form than content. At any rate, it is divided into two parts, verses 9–13 dealing with love for those inside the Christian community, and verses 14–21 presumably for those outside. In the first part, verse 9 with its injunction to live without hypocrisy heads the list, functioning as a kind of title-verse. In verses 10 through 13 follow injunctions grouped in pairs, the last echoing the first. Altogether, the “hymn” is clearly social in character. It distinguishes two types of object (the friend and the enemy), characterizes two types of behavior (acting and refraining), and clusters its injunctions about verse 11 with its exhortation to “serve the Lord.”

TOWARD EXPOSITION

It's all been said before

There is scarcely a word, to say nothing of a sentence, that Paul has not already uttered earlier. For example, verses 11, 13, and 14 echo 1 Cor 4:12; 9:12–18; 14:1, 5. Verses 12, 13, 16, and 17 echo Phil 2:3, 5–8; 3:14; 4:5, 6, 8, 14–18, and 1 Thess 4:9–10; 5:15, 17 take up the remainder in verses 10, 12, and 17. The Jesus-tradition is likewise echoed in the “hymn.” For example, the injunction to “bless those who persecute you” in verse 14 repeats Jesus’ word in the Sermon on the Mount recorded in Matt 5:44: “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (cf. Luke 6:28). Or again, the injunctions in verses 17–18 (“do not repay anyone evil for evil...so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all”) echoes Jesus’ word in Matt 5:39: “Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also.”

⁴Cf. Eduard Lohse, “Paränese und Kerygma im 1. Petrusbrief,” *Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 45 (1954) 76.

⁵Cf. Hermann von Lips, *Weisheitliche Traditionen im Neuen Testament* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1990) 381.

Wisdom gives the clue

More significantly, ancient Jewish wisdom tradition has left its traces everywhere in this text. Verse 15 reads like a piece torn from Sirach (“Do not avoid those who weep, but mourn with those who mourn,” 7:34). Verse 16 is a later edition of Prov 3:7 (“do not be wise in your own eyes”). Verse 17 seconds the thought in Prov 17:13 (“evil will not depart from the house of one who returns evil for good”) or in 20:22 (“do not say, ‘I will repay evil’”), and with its taking thought for what is “noble in the sight of all” the same verse echoes Prov 3:4 (“so you will find favor and good repute in the sight of God and of people”). Verse 20 is a quotation of Prov 25:21–22: “If your enemies are hungry, give them bread to eat; and if they are thirsty, give them water to drink; for you will heap coals of fire on their heads, and the Lord will reward you.” In addition to these reminiscences from biblical wisdom, the injunction in verse 21 has its parallels in the apocryphal *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*. The *Testament of Gad* 6:1–3 reads:

And now, my child, I exhort you, let each love his neighbor, and remove hatred from your hearts; love one another in deed and word and intention of soul...Love one another from the heart, and if anyone sins against you speak peace to him, and do not hold to treachery in your soul; and if he repents and confesses, forgive him.

The *Testament of Joseph* 18:2 reads:

And if anyone wishes to do evil to you, in doing well pray for him, and you will be cleansed by the Lord from all evil.

The *Testament of Benjamin* 4:2–3 reads:

For the good man does not have a darkened eye, for he has mercy on all, even if they are sinners. And if they plan evil against him, by doing good he conquers the evil, being sheltered by God. Those who do unrighteousness he loves as his own soul.⁶

As is well known, of all the Old Testament writings the body of literature termed “wisdom,” to which Sirach and Proverbs belong, enjoys remarkable affinity with the experiential or theoretical reflections of Israel’s neighbors. In its universal applicability to human life and existence consists the striking similarity between biblical wisdom and the wisdom literature of the Near East. At least where our text is concerned, Nietzsche’s dictum to the effect that Christianity is “mortally opposed to the ‘wisdom of this world,’” does not apply.⁷

Wisdom gives the clue. The fact that Paul can happily expropriate a handful of injunctions that had their home in a duke’s mixture of cultures throughout the “fertile crescent”—and without qualification, addition, or subtraction—more,

⁶The *Greek Versions of the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*, ed. R. H. Charles (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1966) 166–167, 208, 219.

⁷Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings*, ed. Aaron Ridley and Judith Norman, trans. Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005) 46.

that the editors of the NRSV can list them as “Marks of the True Christian,”⁸ indicates that for Paul such a thing as a specifically Christian ethic does not exist. To no particular attitude, habit, act, or performance can the epithet “Christian” be applied, by which it can be distanced or detached from any other. But if so, if “The New Life in Christ”⁹ cannot be distinguished from any other, then that life is marked by ambiguity. This fact has long irritated some to the point where they have decided upon certain attitudes and actions as criteria for determining Christian faith or the absence of it. And it has suggested to others that since there is no way by which to distinguish Christian attitudes and behavior from that of any other person with a bit of moral scruple, the structures of existence in faith are identical to those apart from faith, and thus no real change has occurred.¹⁰ Both perspectives are in error; both have shipwrecked on the hiddenness attaching to Christian existence. There may be no specifically Christian ethic, but there is a specifically Christian faith, which takes on concreteness, palpability, tangibility—albeit ambiguous, hidden. And that ambiguity or hiddenness is rooted in a death that on its surface appears to be only that of a tragicomic hero whom Christians are now urged to trust and serve—“the Lord.”

“to no particular attitude, habit, act, or performance can the epithet ‘Christian’ be applied, by which it can be distanced or detached from any other”

Now, just such ambiguity as attaches to Christian existence makes room for the imperative. But the imperative is not to be construed as something imposed upon the Christian from without. From that kind of imposition, which Paul calls the “law of sin and of death,” the Christian has been set free (Rom 8:2). To the Christian who still lives in this world, surrounded by a host of alternatives begging for allegiance, and to which he or she may succumb, the imperative works to proffer the possibilities of the new life, as if to say, “See, Christian! This is what you can do, what Christ has set you free to do!” Such an understanding, I take it, lies behind the Reformer’s interpretation of the commandments as possibilities open to the Christian for action on the other’s behalf. Thus, for example, commandment number five means:

We should fear and love God, so that we neither endanger nor harm the lives of our neighbors, but instead help and support them in all of life’s needs.¹¹

⁸The heading to our text in the HarperCollins NRSV.

⁹The chapter heading in the HarperCollins NRSV.

¹⁰One of Luther’s most eminent pupils, Matthias Flacius Illyricus, is reputed to have held that even in faith the Christian was the *imago Satanae* (image of Satan).

¹¹Martin Luther, *The Small Catechism*, in *The Book of Concord*, ed. Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000) 352.

The engine

None of what has been said makes sense apart from a return to the chapter's heading (Rom 12:1–2). That is, nothing makes sense *Christianly speaking* apart from those initial verses of chapter 12. Without returning to them, our text is nothing but one more aggregate of do's and don'ts, a law superimposed from without, requiring the summoning up of whatever moral sense may or may not be inherent in human being. Who knows, perhaps the inability of Erik Peterson, Ernst Käsemann's first teacher, to make sense of our text with its host of injunctions, lay in inattention to the engine pulling this train.

And there it is, in the form of that transformation occurring by “the renewing of your mind.”¹² It is the transformation that makes sense of the parenthesis, more, makes possible giving hands and feet to those thirty imperatives, those thirty possibilities, without which they are nothing but mere moralisms. That odd coupling of terms (“the renewing of your mind”) makes clear that the transformation consists in something more than a rearrangement of ideas. In view of the popular notion adhering to the term “mind,” a call merely to its transformation would not have conveyed what Paul had in mind, that is, a radical transformation of the total person. The transformation effected by this “renewing of the mind” will turn the imperative into an indicative, into an activity consonant with the transformation. Whether a call to a practice of a life in sacrifice for the service and worship of God (“present your bodies as a living sacrifice,” v. 1), or the summons to refuse the claims made by the old eon (“do not be conformed to this world,” v. 2), it is all the same a call to transformation and to an activity corresponding with the true “self” of that new body.

IF YOU PREACH IT

1. Whether or not it's the first thing, it is important to note that Paul is not talking to an individual here but to an entire community, a whole congregation. Some of his interpreters insist that he never ever had in mind the destiny of the individual, but always the totality, the community he first called “people of God” and later preferred to call “body of Christ.” To suppose otherwise, so the argument reads, is un-Jewish, un-apostolic.

2. Next, that Paul differentiates insiders or believers in verses 9–13 from outsiders or unbelievers in verses 14–21 is, of course, an assumption. “Love one another with mutual affection” and “bless those who persecute you” may just as easily apply to friends and enemies within the same fellowship. As his earlier letters indicate, times without number the apostle suffered at the hands of those who asserted that they were followers of Christ. The notion that in its earliest stages the Christian community was one grand, cozy fellowship, which only subsequently began to tear

¹²Not “minds” (NRSV), as though it had to be made clear once more that Paul is addressing a community, not an individual. In fact, the reader of Romans will be hard put to find anything in the epistle but address to a community.

apart, contradicts New Testament evidence and the subsequent history of the church. From the beginning the community of Christ contained a mix of friends and enemies, believers and unbelievers. If not, the community would never have reached back into its memory for Jesus' parable of the Wheat and Tares, which ended with the command to allow both to "grow together until the harvest" (Matt 13:24–30).

3. Suppose the latter part of our text applied to outsiders, to unbelievers, to enemies, what then? Then the imperatives deal with engagement in the world, not withdrawal from it. Whatever of Stoicism may be reflected elsewhere in Paul, here, if the summons be to engagement, it is light-years away from Stoicism, that philosophy for aristocrats. In his little catechism for budding Stoics, Epictetus writes,

If you ever happen to turn your attention to externals, for the pleasure of anyone, be assured that you have ruined your scheme of life.

Or again,

When you see anyone weeping for grief, either that his son has gone abroad or that he has suffered in his affairs....Do not disdain to accommodate yourself to him and, if need be, to groan with him. Take heed, however, not to groan inwardly, too.¹³

From this it is a Gulliver's leap to "rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep."

4. Friedrich Nietzsche viewed the entire Christian enterprise as one grand, colossal concession to weakness. Blessing one's persecutors, refusing to repay evil for evil, eschewing vengeance, feeding the enemy, giving the enemy to drink—it was all a sickness. Christianity, he wrote, "this secretive worm that crept up to every individual under the cover of night...and sucked the seriousness for *true* things, the instinct for *reality* in general right out of every individual, this cowardly, feminine, saccharine group"—such Christianity, he said, required sickness. "*Making* things sick," he concluded, was the real intention behind the entire system of "salvation procedures."¹⁴

In his comment on the last verse of our text Karl Barth rebutted:

[H]ow greatly Nietzsche misunderstood the consequence of the gospel here!—not, say, in weakness, but in power, not out of a feeling of inferiority, but in royal superiority, not indulgent, but by that very thing giving genuine resistance, by it fighting the victorious fight: with that very thing proving that the Christian is not overcome by evil but is in position to overcome the evil with the good.¹⁵

And Nietzsche, that Lutheran pastor's son turned Basel professor, had to admit that something more than sickness inhered in that "secretive worm":

¹³Epictetus, *The Enchiridion*, trans. Thomas W. Higginson (New York: Liberal Arts Press, 1948) 22, 24.

¹⁴Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, 49, 61.

¹⁵Karl Barth, *Kurze Erklärung des Römerbriefs* (Hamburg: Siebenstern Taschenbuch Verlag, 1972) 156.

What [Paul] guessed was how you can use the small, sectarian Christian movement outside Judaism to kindle a “world fire,” how you can use the symbol of “God on the cross” to take everything lying below, everything filled with secret rebellion, the whole inheritance of anarchistic activities in the empire, and unite them into an incredible power.¹⁶

In fact, as recent Black history shows, the seeming weakness in eschewing vengeance hides a terrible power. “To experience goodness from one treated as an enemy is for the hostile mood as unbearable as fiery coals on the head.”¹⁷

5. The assumption that we’ve all come equipped with the knowledge of love, with an understanding of love, and that what is required is merely an actualization, a making concrete of what we already know, is endemic. It is an assumption that has underlain a thousand and one wedding sermons. But to hurl all the injunctions of our text at the heads of congregants armed with that assumption will only plunge them once more into the morass of easy moralisms into which our society has sunk. Whatever you see in me I can alter. The racist, the misogynist, the misanthrope, the chauvinist in me I am able to change, to the point where you see in me nothing but a lover of all humanity. All that is an easy affair. But the self, the “I,” whatever is at the core of me, I cannot change, for which reason the call to me to love my neighbor or my enemy will always remain an alien thing. I need transforming, I need a “renewing of the mind.” The “I” that is at the center of my universe needs displacing if love for the other is to be more than skin-deep. And that is a matter that occurs by faith alone. Faith, then, not love, is the primary Christian virtue. Love is formed by faith, not the other way around, as per the scholastic. From out of faith, by which that presentation of the body “as a living sacrifice” or “renewing of the mind” occurs, arises love for the other. Without faith, love is as distant from me, as alien to me, as Paul shows them to be in that other, earlier “hymn,” in which the “I” and love are leagues apart.¹⁸

Let a Scotsman state the moral of our story:

O Love that wilt not let me go,
I rest my weary soul in thee;
I give thee back the life I owe,
That in thine ocean depths its flow
May richer, fuller be.¹⁹ ⊕

ROY A. HARRISVILLE is professor emeritus of New Testament at Luther Seminary, Saint Paul, Minnesota. He is, most recently, the author of *Fracture: The Cross as Irreconcilable in the Language and Thought of the Biblical Writers* (Eerdmans, 2006).

¹⁶Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, 61.

¹⁷Paul Althaus, *Der Brief an die Römer* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1966) 128.

¹⁸See 1 Cor 13, where nowhere is the “I” subject of the verb “to love.”

¹⁹George Matheson, “O Love That Wilt Not Let Me Go” (1882), in *Lutheran Book of Worship*, #324.