

ROMANS—WEEK 12

CHRISTIAN POSTURE



F. Michael Slay
A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

The cover image is the Conversion of Saul by Michelangelo Buonarroti

Here Paul teaches us how we are to relate to others. We are not to be haughty, or wise in our own eyes. Rather, we are to humbly give respect and honor to others, without regard to their station.

However, with respect to those in high station (government rulers) we are also called to submit to them. We should even bless our persecutors.

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1 Romans 12:14–15 (NKJV)

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep.

The word “Christian” means Christ-like. This passage describes that better than any other. Since being Christ-like can’t mean things like “raise people from the dead,” it must refer to normal human behaviors like these.

Except that these behaviors aren’t so normal, especially the first one. *Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.* That sounds crazy, though Jesus clearly commanded it.

“But I say to you who hear; Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who spitefully use you.” — Luke 6:27–28 (NKJV)

If you want to learn to be more Christ-like, it’s probably best not to start with the most advanced skill. Verse 15 is less intimidating. *Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep.* That sounds simple, even obvious, yet few of us do this consistently. Are you really happy for someone else when they get something good and you don’t share in it? How about a promotion?

The opposite is much more common—schadenfreude (taking pleasure in the misfortunes of another). That word became popular when Martha Stewart went to prison. People weren’t happy about justice; they were happy that Martha got taken down a peg. They resented her success simply because she was successful.

That’s pride, and it’s everywhere. We’re at our worst when nothing more than pride is on the line. You see this in amateur sports. Guys playing softball act like it’s life-or-death. Henry Kissinger noticed this kind of pride in university politics. He quipped that it’s, “so vicious because the stakes are so low.”

We’re overly competitive; it’s part of our sinful nature. That’s what Paul is commanding us to throw off in this passage. The essence of “Christian” behavior is avoid being self-focused. That’s unnatural and, from a worldly perspective, stupid.

But it’s the goal.

Our competitive, self-promoting nature gets in the way of growth in Christ. No one wants to be unpopular, but trying to be popular doesn’t work. Just forget about yourself and focus outward. Easier said than done, right? That’s why verse 15 is such a good starting point. Still you can’t just throw a switch and become more empathetic. You have to work at it.

Be ever mindful of the goal, so that you catch yourself whenever you’re resentful of someone else’s good fortune or unconcerned about their misfortune.

And of course, ask God to help you see your errors. Effort is not the key to becoming more Christ-like.

Prayer is.

2 Romans 12:16 (ESV)

Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight.

Having just challenged us to throw off our competitiveness and turn our attention outward, Paul now commends us to practice humility.

The Greek grammar here is important. The second sentence can be translated to say, “*Do not be haughty, but give yourselves to humble tasks.*” Whether that sentence includes tasks, or is just about attitude, it’s the opposite of being haughty. Don’t avoid things you think are beneath you.

This was taught brilliantly in the TV show “Dirty Jobs.” In it, Mike Rowe showed how all kinds of people do the jobs that are essential to making our society work. It was a real eye-opener.

When I was growing up near Washington, DC, I had my eyes opened by an amusing coincidence. Every time we had a blizzard, lots of closings would be announced on the radio—schools, government, etc. The announcements always included the words, “Only essential personnel need to report to work.”

What struck me is that the “essential personnel” are the lowest paid people. Their bosses could be out for a week and no one would notice. But let the people who maintain and run things miss a single day and everything grinds to a halt.

Whether the Greek means we should associate with these people, or actually do these jobs, it’s clear that it’s wrong to think we’re above them. They’re the most important people.

Which bring us to the last sentence, which actually says in the Greek, “*Do not become wise in your own sight.*” This is the essence of real humility.

As mere mortals, we should recognize that we don’t really understand anything.

Many professors love to talk about how human understanding in their field is woefully inadequate. This is especially true in physics.

We don’t know what time is, or why it can be stretched. We don’t know what matter is (and we keep building ever more powerful atom-smashers to try to figure out what in tarnation is actually going on). We don’t know what energy is. We don’t understand how gravity works. The Holy Grail in physics right now is to find a single model that includes gravity as well as the other forces.

For now we see through a glass darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then I shall know even as I am known. – 1 Corinthians 13:12 (KJV)

When we get to heaven, we’re sure to laugh at all the things we thought we understood.

For now, we should at least act like we believe 1 Corinthians 13:12.

3 Romans 12:17-21 (ESV)

Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” To the contrary, “if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.” Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

All of this makes sense except the bit about heaping burning coals on someone’s head. What does that mean?

We don’t know. Paul is obviously using a slang expression from that era, but its meaning and origin has been lost to the ages. There are two possible interpretations of what “heaping burning coals” might mean: building up punishment in the afterlife or building up guilt in this one.

Or both. If the belief in ultimate justice was widespread in the first century, then acting charitably towards your enemies would put stress on them. They must either bury the hatchet or be subject to judgment. That would explain how this technique would *overcome evil with good*.

That’s the easy part. The hard part is doing it. Chapter 12 has been full of commands that are hard to follow, and here it finishes with a real corker. This command is harder than, “*Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.*” Instead of just blessing our enemies, we have to feed them.

That’s a faith challenge. Either we’re willing to do what the Lord commands and let the chips fall where they may, or we’re not. And there’s no promise that this will be pain free either. Our adversaries may come around in time to avoid any unpleasantness, or they may not.

This strategy works only if by “works” you mean God is glorified.

Pain avoidance just isn’t His thing.

This is very advanced. While it is good to stay mindful of the command, the ability to actually act this heroically doesn’t come naturally. It’s supernatural. It comes by praying.

“*Ask, and it will be given to you.*” — Matthew 7:7a

This chapter has been so content rich that if we asked God to help us with every one of these aspects of growth, we’d be on our knees all day.

Actually, a whole day in prayer isn’t a bad idea. Failing that, look back over all of Chapter 12 and ask God to reveal to you a plan of attack. What were you most convicted about? Do you see a pattern in what Paul says in Chapter 12 that speaks to you?

How is God calling you to *be transformed by the renewal of your mind*?

4 Romans 13:1–4 (ESV)

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer.

I can see Paul writing this under our current system of government, but under a Roman emperor? How on Earth could Paul have written these words back then? Roman emperors were anything but *God's servant for your good*.

Or so they thought. Looking back 2000 years, we can see God's agenda and how the Roman Emperors facilitated it. Their torture of the early Christians is in the history books, providing a wealth of references for the events of that time, and certifying the sincerity of the martyrs.

No other religion has a treasure like that.

We should always pray for our leaders. Sometimes we agree with their choices; sometimes we don't. But what are the chances that we understand God's agenda anyway?

How arrogant it would be to just pray that our leaders conform to our will. Pray for God to bless them and lead them to do the right thing. Include state and local officials too.

And this doesn't just apply to our own leaders. Our disappointment with our government officials is nothing compared to what we think of some of the leaders in other countries or at other times in history. But each one of them is *God's minister* too.

Which brings us to a tough point. We should pray for the persecuted church regularly, but what about their persecutors? Should we pray for them?

Of course.

"But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." — Matthew 5:44 (ESV)

If we're supposed to pray for those who persecute us, it goes without saying that we should pray for those who persecute other Christians. Those of us who are not suffering persecution are not overwhelmed (physically and emotionally) by crises. We have more time and clearer heads with which to pray.

This is a great duty. Prayer matters. We are warriors in a great war, and we need to pull our weight.

Find some time to pray for the persecuted church—and for their persecutors.

5 Romans 13:5–7 (NIV)

Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also as a matter of conscience. This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing. Give to everyone what you owe them: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor.

No government is perfect, least of all the first century Roman government. Yet Christians are called to submit to the authorities, not just out of fear, but to have a clear conscience.

Yeah, but what do you do about a law that violates your conscience? With some laws, disobeying them seems like the right thing to do. What then?

This passage isn't about unusual special cases. Numerous Old and New Testament references speak to refusing to obey wrong laws, even under pain of death.

Then the men went as a group to King Darius and said to him, "Remember, Your Majesty, that according to the law of the Medes and Persians no decree or edict that the king issues can be changed." So the king gave the order, and they brought Daniel and threw him into the lions' den. — Daniel 6:15-16a (NIV)

Then they ... commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. But Peter and John replied, "Which is right in God's eyes: to listen to you, or to him? You be the judges! As for us, we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard." — Acts 4:18-20 (NIV)

The crowd joined in the attack against Paul and Silas, and the magistrates ordered them to be stripped and beaten with rods. After they had been severely flogged, they were thrown into prison, and the jailer was commanded to guard them carefully. — Acts 16:22-23 (NIV)

Paul couldn't possibly have intended to contradict these examples; he lived them. No, this passage is about general respect for the rule of law. The prime example, which is perfectly relevant today, is to pay taxes.

Every Christian is duty bound to pay their taxes and to be as pure as the driven snow about doing it honestly. You never know how this will play out. Doing your taxes honorably glorifies God. Doing your taxes wrong is an opportunity to embarrass Christ.

Your attitude towards getting audited by the IRS should be, "Go ahead. Make my day."

Compared to loving your enemies, this is a piece of cake. Yet, we fall short. The problem is how the passage ends. *Give to everyone what you owe them: ... if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor.*

We struggle with the respect and honor bits. Our pride gets in the way. This has gotten particularly nasty in politics. People can't just agree to disagree anymore. Some folks even take pride in their hatred.

We should be more relaxed about these things. We know who controls the future.

