

Chapter 12

So, those were the main theological arguments. I wanted people to keep them in mind for what came next. I had said that God is, through King Jesus, fulfilling all his ancient promises. He is restoring humans to their true purpose. This applies to the whole world and therefore the promise is for both Jews and non-Jews. Both have their parts in God's purposes. The Instruction, the gift that marked out the Jewish people, is extremely significant but it is not the path to the right way to be human, at least not in the way that I used to think. Every category of humanity had lived in the wrong way, and, in King Jesus, God has reached out to all of us with the gospel, which is the path to the right way to be human. This has raised questions about the continuing role of Israel, and I have addressed these.

Now, I'm going to suggest some of the implications of these arguments for everyday life and I'm going to apply them to some of the issues that I'm aware of within the different groups of Jesus-followers in Rome. Do you remember that King Jesus said we were to be merciful because God is merciful?¹ I have just explored the way in which God is merciful to every part of humankind. In the next few chapters, I'll try to show how being merciful plays out in practice.

Verses 1-3 Life in the people of God

This is my appeal to the Jesus-followers in Rome. I try to spell out the ways in which they should respond to the mercy they have received from God. I begin with some general suggestions before getting down to the specifics.

1. Speaks for itself, I think. I have just been speaking about the mercy of God to both Jews and non-Jews. This mercy is one which brings them out of a state of disobedience into one in which they are obedient to God, that is that they start to live in the way God always intended that people should live. I use sacrificial language, temple images, to describe this. I do that because I want people to make the link to the self-giving of King Jesus that I discussed earlier in the letter. To live in the way God always intended is an act of worship.
2. In the past, the Romans had lived as those whose pattern was Adam and all those like him. Now their lives are to have a different shape; a shape that comes from the renewing work of God's Spirit in their inner being. When the Spirit does that work we become aware of the true purposes of God for us; we recognise what it is that God wants.
3. In this verse I'm underlining the points made earlier that neither Jews nor non-Jews should Lord it over the other, or anybody else, come to that. A little bit of self-awareness goes a long way. I was saying this out of my apostolic authority.

These are general points. The more specific suggestions follow. The key points to note are that Jesus-followers are called to live a particular kind of life in response to what God has done for them. The way of life can be understood in terms of the fulfilment of the worship that took place in the temple, and it is based on inner transformation and not on outward marks. This helps sum up some of the arguments you will remember from earlier in the letter.

¹ Luke records this in his Gospel at 6:36.

Verse 4–8 The community of Jesus-followers and the human body

Here, I'm offering an illustration about the life of local congregations drawn from observation of the human body. The idea is that the human body has many limbs and organs, and each is different, and each is vital to the wellbeing of the whole, and that the communities of Jesus-followers can be compared to this. Together we make one body and that's how we belong to one another. And just as each part of the body has a function, so everyone in the church has a particular gift that God has given them and that they should exercise. Examples include prophecy, service, teaching, exhortation, giving, guiding and caring. The list is not meant to be exhaustive. The idea is that we all belong, and we all have a part to play. This is a shorter presentation of an idea I explored at greater length when I wrote to the church in Corinth.²

4. The human body has many different parts and each part has a different purpose. There is an essential unity but there is also a necessary diversity.

5. It's the same with a community of Jesus-followers. There are lots of us but, because we belong to Jesus, we are like one body and each of us belongs to all the others.

6. And just as the parts of a body all have different purposes, so we all have different gifts. What we offer depends on the gifts we've been given. Prophecy, for example, depends on faith; you offer it insofar as you can be confident that the content comes from God.

7. If your gift is to serve those in need, then minister to them; if it's teaching, then teach.

8. If your gift is encouragement, then be encouraging and if it's giving, then be generous; if leading, then be diligent; if compassion, then be cheerful.

The reports we had heard said that there was lots of division among the Jesus-followers in Rome. They didn't respect one another, and they didn't work together. If the church was going to thrive, they needed to be united. Everyone needed to respect and appreciate everyone else. The same was true if they were going to become partners in the mission to Spain we were planning. The purpose of the illustration was to begin to address this problem.

Verses 9–21 This is what true Life looks like

This is pretty much the standard ethical teaching that was around in the primitive church. As you can tell, it's all based on the teachings of King Jesus. At this point, none of the volumes called 'gospels' had actually been written, though an earlier version of one of them was in circulation. However, stories about Jesus, summaries of his sayings and versions of the stories he told were all well known in the churches. Here I am summing up the teachings of King Jesus and occasionally using words or groups of words associated with the versions in circulation so that the readers recognise the source of the ideas. On other occasions I put things in my own terms. I often do this to make certain things more explicit. So, I've recast Jesus' teaching on forgiveness in terms of not seeking vengeance. Some may argue that there's more to forgiveness than this and they may be right, but in the Roman context where people can keep a feud going for generations, it seemed important to emphasise this aspect of

² See 1 Corinthians 12.4-27.

it. It's really important to keep stressing this stuff. So much of our ethics are at odds with the prevailing standards that we all need to keep reminding ourselves of who we are. Humility is a case in point; most of the free people associate it with slaves and lower-class servants. It would never occur to most of them that it's a virtue worth acquiring. Likewise, the idea that you should care for your enemy. Most people think that's what you do for your friends. It's not how they expect to treat their enemies. And the idea of living at peace with everyone might seem bland in some parts of the world in the 21st century, but it seemed remarkable then. Essentially, people understood life as a competition. For you to succeed, others must fail. The idea that you could be at peace with them seemed ridiculous. The Jesus-followers really were learning to be human in a new way, that is, in the way that God originally intended. They were living Life.

9. I think these words speak from themselves.

10. One of the stories about King Jesus that circulates round some the churches has him offering a new commandment to his followers; he tells them to love one another. Part of this is to honour one another.

11. These words seem plain to me. They communicated well in the first century and they seem apposite two millennia later.

12. The same applies here.

13. And here too.

14. Again, I hope you can clearly see the dependence of this teaching on the sayings of King Jesus. His teaching tells us about the Life that God originally intended for humans.

15. You will notice that lots of the teaching suggests that our actions should take their cue from the circumstances of the people around us. Lots of the teaching that was around in other circles at the time suggested that emotions were to be avoided and that people should insulate themselves from being impacted by the feelings of others. You can see that I taught something very different. Our ethics were – and remain – oriented towards others.

16. I've thrown in another plea here for those who heard the letter read out to get on with one another. Then, in telling the Jesus-followers to associate with the lowly, I am saying that they should make real friends with the poor. I don't want any of this nonsense where people think they are too good for other people or that it wouldn't be unseemly to be seen with them. King Jesus befriended tax collectors and prostitutes.

17. The denial of vengeance is at the heart of Jesus's ethical teaching, and it was a remarkable teaching in a culture where honour was often thought to depend on being seen to respond to any harm that was done to you.

18. This is an important goal; to be at peace wherever that is possible.

19. Back to this issue of vengeance and now I'm making it clear that this is an issue for 'wrath' – it is translators who have added the words 'of God' – by which I mean that it is for judicial processes to deal with rather than for us. Those processes may be human (as we will see more clearly a little later in the argument) and they may be divine.

20. Generosity to enemies is an important part of the teaching of King Jesus. It's not original to him though. Similar guidance is found in Proverbs. Jesus is very keen on the idea of generous actions that confound those who attack you. Think of his teaching about turning your cheek, walking an extra mile with a soldier, or handing over all your clothes to someone who sues you.

21. This is the line that sums up what has gone before. We are not to give in to the evil around us. We are seeking to bring it round to our way of thinking. Our responsibility is to live in the way that God intended. And to help others to see that it is the best way to live.

King Jesus taught us how to human as God intended. In these verses I've offered a summary of his teaching with the Jesus-followers in Rome in mind. I was trying to describe what it looks like when people live Life. Note that when I urged people to abandon vengeance, I told them to leave room for wrath (I carefully didn't say 'wrath of God') although the text I cite does bring him back into it. The idea of wrath as the thing that motivates those whose task it is to administer justice is an important one and it crops up in the next bit of the letter.