PARALLEL GUIDE 28
The Letter of Paul to the Romans, Part III

Summary

This chapter concludes the study of Paul's letter to the Romans. You have been studying the heart of New Testament theology in these chapters. The themes of this concluding section include exhortations for life in the church, relationships with others, and a final note about Calvin and the theme of predestination.

Learning Objectives

• Read chapters 12-16 of the Letter of Paul to the Romans

• Learn the meaning of:

sōphrosynē

predestination

hyperphronein

charismata

• Understand the doctrine of election and Calvin's interpretation of it

Assignment to Deepen Your Understanding

1. List the three themes or notes in Paul's letter to the Romans which strike you as most important. How have these shaped your life?

2. What are the chief obstacles produced by our culture that prevent the rule of grace and love, as outlined by Paul, from making a full impact on all people?

Preparing for Your Seminar

Paul's theology has shaped western thinking for nearly two millennia. What are the benefits and what are the questions which now arise for you in your seminar? How is this connected to your ministry?

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For Further Reading

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Chapter 28
THE LETTER OF PAUL TO THE ROMANS, PART III

Third Part: Exhortation (12:1-5:13)—An Invitation to the Christian Life

Grounds for the Exhortation

Paul comes to the third part of his protreptic, which is its climax: the call to a life worthy of Christ. The appeal is founded on “the mercies of God” (12:1). Paul exhorts his readers in the light of all that he has already said about God’s loving kindness. As always, Christian ethics are grounded in Christian belief. The good news of God’s grace requires a worthy response: “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (12:2).

The Proper Response to God’s Mercies 12:1-2

“For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you . . . .” Paul begins the substance of his exhortation solemnly, and again cites the grounds on which he gives it, but this time in a personal way, “by the grace given to me” (12:3). Paul also depends on the compassion of his sovereign. At the same time his use of “everyone” or “each one” makes the address personal, although addressed to all.

Some Basic Principles for Life in the Church 12:3-13

What Paul advises in the first instance is "sober judgment" or (perhaps better) "moderation" (Greek: *sōphrosynē*)—the classic Hellenistic virtue. "I say to . . . you," he says, playing on words, "not to think of yourself more highly (*hyperphronein*) than you ought to think (*phronein*), but to think (phronein) with moderation (*sophronein*) as God has assigned to each the measure of faith" (12:3, NRSV alt.).

Paul continues with an image that he apparently liked, for he uses it elsewhere (see 1 Cor. 6:15; 12:12-27), and one that would certainly have been familiar to his audience, since it was quite well known among other Greco-Roman writers—that is, the metaphor of the community as a body. For Paul, of course, the community of faith is something more than simply a body, for it is "the body of Christ." For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us. (12:4-6a)

Since all believers are united with each other "in Christ," their being cannot properly be understood except in terms of their relationship to the whole body. All their particular "gifts" (Greek: charismata, the plural of charisma) are rooted in the one gift that finally matters, God's "grace (charis) given to" them in Jesus Christ (12:6). Paul regards such gifts as given by God to individual members for the benefit of all. There are, as Paul observed on another occasion, "varieties of gifts" but it is always "the same Spirit" who gives them, and they are "for the common good."

There follows a series of counsels, all related to the life of the church. The vision Paul presents to the church is of a community of grace whose members, being graced and living in hope, are therefore gracious to each other. To this extent it is marked

by the Christian ideal. That granted, we need not deny that it began from the classic Hellenistic virtue of "moderation" (12:3). In other respects—its concern with familial affection (12:10), mutual "honor" (12:10b), and the ability to "endure" (12:12) that is the mark of true self-control—it is also an ideal Hellenistic community. Just as the picture of the world in chaos from which the letter to the Romans began was a picture calculated to raise a frisson of disgust in the mind of Paul's Hellenistic readers, Jew and Gentile alike, so his vision of the church appeals to all that are noblest in their aspirations.

Relations with the World at Large 12:14-13:14

Paul now moves from the exhortation regarding hospitality to exhortations regarding relationships with those beyond the boundaries of the believing community. He begins—perhaps because it is where he himself began (1 Cor. 15:9; Gal. 1:13)— with what might seem to be the most extreme case: "Bless those who persecute you; bless, and do not curse them" (12:14)! He continues, "Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another: do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly" (12:16a). The expression translated "live in harmony with one another" means either "have the same concern and esteem for each other as for yourselves" (so NEB), or else "have a common mind" (so RSV). In neither case need we assume that Paul's concern has ceased to be the church's relationship with those outside the church. Paul was perfectly capable of understanding that the manner in which believers treated each other was a factor in the attitude of the world to the gospel and the community that professed the gospel.

"Do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all" (alluding to LXX Prov. 3:4). "If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. 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’” (citing LXX Deut. 32:35). “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” (citing LXX Prov. 25:21-22a). “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (12:16b-21). Paul presents the Christian life as fulfilling the noblest aspirations of his hearers.

This short section is quite remarkable. Such things as universal human rights and obligations are fairly widespread assumptions today, at least in Western Europe and North America. Western Europeans and North Americans tend to forget how unusual—and in some respects even novel—those assumptions are, in the history of human ideas. In Paul’s day both Jews and pagans tended in general to regard those who were outside their particular communities as being, by that very fact, somewhat less than fully human. How extraordinary, therefore, is the present passage, with its assertion of concern for the essentially human hopes and problems even of those who are outside the believing community—rejoicing “with those who rejoice,” and weeping “with those who weep.” We have only to read a study of ancient attitudes such as Paul Veyne’s essay “Humanity” in Andrea Giardina’s The Romans to be made aware what a remarkable step forward such a conception represents. Reflection on

Thomas Jefferson’s wrestling with the problem of slavery indicates how difficult was the notion of “human equality” or “human rights” for a basically enlightened person as late as the beginning of the nineteenth century. Even only a brief reflection on twentieth-century history provides salutary evidence of the degree to which it is still imperfectly grasped or realized.

There is a theological connection between what Paul asserts as proper behavior for the believing community toward its enemies and the argument that preceded it. The entire thrust of Romans 9-11 is that those whose hearts are presently “hardened” can also be recipients of God’s “mercy.” What then can the church see even in “those who persecute” but people who are destined in God’s purposes to be “coheirs” (8:17)? Had not Paul himself been a persecutor? In seeking to “bless” its persecutors the church is, therefore, in the last analysis, simply seeking a blessing for itself, looking for the completion of its own life in God and in union with “the whole creation” that “groan[s] in labor pains until now” (8:22).

In connection with the attitude of believers to those outside the church, Paul moves to a more specific question. “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities” (13:1a). By the “authorities,” it seems likely that Paul meant primarily the civil authorities, what we now speak of as “the state.” In common with the broad consensus of pagan and Jewish thinking in the Greco-Roman world, he regards all such institutions as related to divine authority: “for there is no authority except from God”; therefore “the authorities” with which one must deal—that is, the Roman emperor and his servants and officials—“have been instituted by God” (13:1b).

The second part of this statement is as important as the first. Concrete as always in his hortatory concerns, Paul is speaking to the present situation of those whom he addresses, although he is also arguing from a generally held principle with which he would have expected his listeners to agree. He speaks specifically of the Roman imperium as he perceives it at that time in relation to the church.

A view of government as “instituted by God” points in two directions. On one level, it serves to call into question any form of disobedience to the imperium so long as the imperium limited itself to functions proper to its scope. As the Hebrew prophetic tradition made clear, it leaves the state open to challenge wherever and whenever it claimed too much for itself or betrayed the purposes of its institution. What then of the situation in which Paul found himself? In the first flush of Nero’s reign, when Paul was writing, the new emperor was regarded with high hopes. Although it may be disappointing for those who wish to extract from the apostle’s every word lasting principles, there seems not the slightest reason to suppose that Paul’s letter does not reflect that situation. Paul notes, . . . whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who

resist will incur judgment. For [the present] rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Do you wish to have no fear of the authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive its approval, for it is God's servant for your good. But if you do what is wrong, you should be afraid, for the authority does not bear the

sword in vain. It is the servant (Greek: *diakonos*) of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer. (13:2-4)

Diakonos is used here in its basic sense to speak of one appointed to an office performed on behalf of the one who appoints. Specifically, Paul is saying that those who have civil authority have it from God for the good of the individual citizen—which includes, of course, the execution of "wrath" against wrongdoers, for which reason they "bear the sword." Such an attitude toward civil authority makes that authority entirely limited and relative. If it is instituted by God, and is God's *diakonos*, then it is subject to God, and may not claim for itself the honor that is God's alone. Paul's advocacy of submission "because of conscience" (13:5) must not be taken to imply blind submission to any rule, however tyrannous or unjust. There is here no essential difference between Paul and the theology of the Book of Revelation. Paul counsels respect for the state perceived *as God's agent*. The Book of Revelation opposes the state *claiming divine honors* for itself (Rev. 13:1-18). Among traditional Romans there were those who would, at least in principle, have agreed with the author of Revelation.

Having exhorted proper behavior toward those inside and those outside the church, Paul plays on the notion of what is "owed" to bring him full circle back to the point from which he began. It is all—even paying the proper taxes and certainly the giving of proper honor—a part of love. "Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law" (13:8; see 13:9-14).

The Problem of the "Strong" and the "Weak" 14:1-15:13

Although Paul begins somewhat obliquely, and although some details of his appeal are a little obscure to us, the overall thrust of this section is plain. Paul finally touches—very lightly at first!—on the question of rival groups in the church at Rome. The overall intention of Paul's appeal is plain, but some details of it are obscure. For example, it is not entirely clear whom Paul means by his reference to "those who are weak in faith" (14:1). Reference to eating "only vegetables" (14:2) may well be a description of how the orthodox practice of halakhah regarding meat appeared to those who did not understand it. To restrict themselves on occasion to a vegetarian diet may have been a way in which some Jewish Christians solved the problem of maintaining Christian table fellowship with their Gentile sisters and brothers while not breaking their own traditions regarding kosher meat (cf. Dan. 1:3-16). This section, for all the obliqueness of its expression, was intended, and would have been heard, as an appeal to the parties at Rome, on the basis of the gospel, to live in harmony with one another even where they disagreed with each other (note especially 14:13-21; 15:1-13). Our own divided communions continue to need this message as much as did the Christians at Rome whom Paul originally addressed.

The Epistolary Conclusion—15:14-16:23

Paul's Plans 15:14-33

Paul speaks of the work that Christ has already done through him (15:18-21) and goes on to speak of his future plans for mission westward into Spain (15:23-24). He hopes to visit Rome briefly and then to be "sped on my journey by you." Paul here uses a Greek word that occurs elsewhere when he speaks of being sent by a community with its support and as its representative (cf. 1 Cor. 16:6). Luke also uses the

word when he speaks of Paul and Barnabas being sent to Jerusalem as the official delegates of the church at Antioch (Acts 15:3). It is likely, therefore, that Paul was hoping that the church at Rome would accredit him in his Spanish mission and take some responsibility for covering his expenses. If this is so, we can understand all the more why Paul would have been anxious not only to make his own theological position clear to the believers at Rome, but also to plead for unity among them. Paul's first concern is "aid for the saints" in Jerusalem (15:25). This collection by the Gentile churches for those at Jerusalem was very important to Paul, and he mentions it elsewhere (1 Cor. 16:1-4). It was appropriate that the Gentiles, who had received spiritual gifts from Jerusalem, should minister to Jerusalem out of their material wealth (15:27), but such gifts from the Gentiles to Jerusalem were also to be seen as a further sign that the messianic age had come (cf. Isa. 60:8-14).

Commendation of Phoebe 16:1-2

Phoebe is to be welcomed on three and probably four grounds. First, she is "our sister," that is, she is a member of the family. Second, she is "deacon (Greek: *diakonos*) of the church at Cenchreae," the form of Paul's expression suggesting that he here understands *diakonos* to refer to a particular office commanding respect among Christians. Third, she is *prostatis*—benefactor, or patron, "of many, and of myself." In first-century Greco-Roman society to declare someone your "benefactor" or "patron" was to make a serious claim about their status. By using that word Paul spoke of himself as Phoebe's client and her protégé. As for the fourth ground, other surviving examples of commendatory letters indicate they were to be delivered by those they commended. Probably Phoebe was to deliver the letter to the Romans. If so, that Paul trusted her with such an office for such a document would speak more of his view of her than did even the words of his commendation.

Greetings to God's Household 16:3-16

It is not surprising that Paul should wish to be remembered to those whom he knew personally in the church at Rome. One interesting feature of the list is the number of women named. Among Christians greeted at Rome itself, Prisca and Aquila are first, getting high praise for their work with Paul, and Prisca receives first mention at that (16:3-4). Mary is presumably another Jewish Christian (16:6). Andronicus and Junia (this is how it was understood by Greek-speaking Chrysostom; RSV "Junias" is almost certainly wrong) are probably another husband and wife team and are "prominent among the apostles" (16:7). A third of those named on the list are women, including "Persis" (16:12; this is not apparent in English but perfectly clear in Greek).

Paul in His Own Hand 16:17-20

The appeal in verses 16:17-20 was probably written in Paul's own hand (cf. 2 Thess. 3:17; Gal. 6:11), as opposed to that of the amanuensis. The section emphasizes what the letter has taught throughout: Paul's hearers are to avoid "those who cause dissensions and offenses. . . such people do not serve our Lord Christ" (16:17-18).

Greetings from Paul's Colleagues 16:21-23

Notably, these involve a mixture of Jewish and Gentile names. So even this last word of the letter confirms what Paul has argued from the beginning: that by the grace of God, Jew and Gentile are now to be one new people in Christ.

Calvin and Romans 9-11: A Note on Interpretation

The account of Paul's letter to the Romans 9-11 given above differs from the interpretation given by John Calvin (1509-1564). Since Calvin's views have influenced many other Christian thinkers, it is useful to comment briefly upon them. When Calvin says that, according to Paul, the purpose of Pharaoh's "hardening" was "to proclaim the name of God" (1961, 206), he also regarded that hardening as the mark of a "predestination to destruction." He wrote, "Paul's purpose is to make us accept the fact that it has seemed good to God to enlighten some in order that they may be saved, and blind others in order that they may be destroyed" (207). Calvin understood the Greek word *katērtismena* ("ripe for" or "ready for": NRSV "made for," 9:22) to mean "appointed and destined" (211). Of course there can be no explanation of this, Calvin says, save that it is God's will and incomprehensible to us:

It is clear that Paul advances no higher cause than the will of God. . . . Conceited men are resentful, because, in admitting that men are chosen or rejected by the secret counsel of God, Paul offers no explanation, as though the Spirit of God were silent for want of reason, and does not rather warn us by his silence—a mystery which our minds do not comprehend, but which we ought to adore with reverence. . . . Let us know, therefore, that God refrains from speaking to us for no other reason than that he sees that his boundless wisdom cannot be comprehended in our small measure. (208, 209)

In Calvin's view a similar predestination to destruction was being spoken of for the Jews in verses 11:7-10. Thus he wrote on verse 7: "Paul's meaning in regard to the reprobate is that their ruin and condemnation stem from the fact of their having been forsaken by God" (243). This involved Calvin in a problem when he came to verse 11:11 ("Did they stumble that they might fall? By no means!"). Calvin himself saw the problem: "Whereas previously he [Paul] connected certain ruin with the blindness of the Jews, he now gives them a hope of rising again. These two ideas are quite contradictory" (246). Calvin's solution was this:

The apostle is speaking at one time of the whole of the Jewish nation and at another time of individuals. This explains the fact that at times he says that the Jews have been banished from the kingdom of God, cut off from the tree, and cast into headlong destruction by the judgment of God, while on other occasions he denies that they have fallen from grace. (245-246)

Despite the ingenuity of this, the text of the Letter of Paul to the Romans gives no warrant at all for the distinction Calvin made. Calvin's interpretation obliges us to insist that a different "they" is being referred to in verses 11:8-9 and 11:11. This seems quite impossible and is only required by Calvin's insistence that throughout chapters 9 to 11, "hardening" and "spirit of stupor" and so on always refer to ultimate rejection by God and not to a temporary situation that may and will be reversed by God. The interpretation offered above in the main text seems to make better sense

of Paul's total argument and to be what he eventually summarizes by the words, "God has imprisoned all in disobedience that God may have mercy on all" (11:32, NRSV alt.). In other words humanity, of which Israel is a part, is subject to what Karl Barth called a "double predestination": a predestination to wrath, for all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, and a predestination to deliverance, for God wills to have mercy on all.

End of Chapter