

The Consequences of the Gospel

Romans 12:1–21

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Archaeological Moment

Before we open Romans 12, I want to take a moment for what I call an Archaeological Moment — a brief look at some historical or cultural background that connects us more concretely to the text.

Tonight I want to direct your attention to a place called Cenchreae. If you know your ancient Mediterranean geography, you know that Cenchreae was the eastern port city of Corinth. Corinth sat on the narrow strip of land connecting mainland Greece to the Peloponnese, with a port on each side — Lechaion to the west, facing Italy, and Cenchreae to the east, facing Asia Minor. Archaeologists have uncovered remains at Cenchreae, and what they've found gives us a tangible feel for the kind of cosmopolitan, trade-driven world in which the early church was planted.

You may be wondering why I've chosen Cenchreae. Here is the connection: in Romans 16:1, Paul writes,

| *"I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church at Cenchreae."*

Phoebe — a deacon, a sister in Christ — was from Cenchreae. She is widely understood to have been the one who carried Paul's letter to the Romans all the way to Rome itself. That means this extraordinary letter, one of the most theologically dense documents in the history of the world, was entrusted to a woman from Corinth's eastern harbor town.

To give you a sense of what Phoebe and her world looked like, I also want to show you what is sometimes called the "Woman in Red" — a Fayum mummy portrait from Roman Egypt. These portraits were painted in encaustic, a technique using pigmented wax that was heated and fused to a wooden panel. They are startlingly lifelike — the eyes especially — and they give us one of the most direct windows we have into what ordinary Roman-era men and women actually looked like. A woman like Phoebe, moving in the port culture of Cenchreae, would have inhabited that world.

I've chosen Cenchreae as tonight's Archaeological Moment because it is a small but vivid thread connecting the church at Corinth to the letter to the Romans — which is exactly where we're going this evening.

Introduction

The reason I want to look at Romans 12 tonight actually grows out of my Sunday study in 2 Corinthians 12. As I worked through that passage, I kept noticing that what happens in 2 Corinthians 12 — the actions, the patterns, the posture Paul describes there — seems to become the instructions of Romans 12. That overlap is what brought me here. The connections between the two chapters are love, sacrifice, and the shared context in which they were written.

And that context is worth pausing over, because I think the book of Romans was written during a specific window we can actually locate historically. Turn with me to Acts 20:1–3:

“After the uproar ceased, Paul sent for the disciples, and after encouraging them, he said farewell and departed for Macedonia. When he had gone through those regions and had given them much encouragement, he came to Greece. There he spent three months.”

That brief note — “he came to Greece” and “spent three months” — is where I believe Romans was written. It was during those three months, on his third visit to the church at Corinth, that Paul composed this letter. A few details from Romans itself confirm this. Paul tells us he has already collected the relief offering from Corinth for Jerusalem (Romans 15:26). Phoebe, who is apparently carrying the letter to Rome, comes from Cenchreae — Corinth's eastern port (Romans 16:1–2). Paul is staying with a man named Gaius (Romans 16:23), whom he had baptized in Corinth (1 Corinthians 1:14). And Erastus, who is with Paul when he writes (Romans 16:23), is identified in archaeological inscriptions as a public official from Corinth. The evidence converges.

When you picture Paul in Corinth, with Rome sitting just a ship ride away across the Adriatic, it isn't hard to understand why this letter has the particular shape it does. Paul had never been to Rome. He longed to go. And so this letter functions partly as a theological introduction — here is the gospel I preach — and partly as a kind of missionary support letter for a proposed journey to Spain, with Rome as the staging ground. That he never made it to Rome the way he planned, arriving instead as a prisoner, is its own remarkable story. The reason he didn't go directly was twofold: he bore responsibility for delivering the Corinthian offering to the saints in Jerusalem, and he knew — with a clarity that reads almost like premonition — that the Lord was calling him to Jerusalem itself, whatever the cost. He understood that going to Jerusalem

was the full extent of his own dying to self. He knew what was waiting for him there, and he went anyway.

All of that is the world behind Romans 12. Now let's enter the chapter itself.

The Structure of Romans 12

Romans 12 opens with a single word that carries enormous weight:

| *"I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God..."*

That "therefore" is pointing us backward across eleven chapters. Romans 1–8 is a theology of the individual: humanity's condition before God, and what God has done in Christ to justify, redeem, and reconcile us. Romans 9–11 is a theology of history: God's purposes worked out across time, culminating in the great doxology of 11:36 — *"For from him and through him and to him are all things."* Chapter 12 is the hinge. Everything before it is orthodoxy — right belief about what God has done. Everything from here forward is orthopraxy — right practice, the shape a life takes when it has actually reckoned with that mercy.

Romans 12 is the consequence of the mercy of God given to us in the gospel of Jesus Christ. And the chapter has a discernible structure that reflects the direction the gospel travels.

First, the consequence of grace upon the individual (12:1–2). Second, the consequence of grace in the community of faith (12:3–13). Third, the consequence of grace toward the world from God's people (12:14–21).

The gospel flows to us as individuals, into the church, and out into the world. I want to walk through all three of these movements tonight.

The Consequence of Grace Upon the Individual (12:1–2)

| *"I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect."*

Notice first how Paul frames this appeal. He is not laying down a new law. The imperatives here are not new legislation bolted onto grace. They are what grace produces. Paul is not saying “now go earn what you were given.” He is saying “here is what you will do because of what you were given.” This is why he uses the word *parakalō* — “I appeal to you.” This is the language of an advocate, not a drill sergeant. Paul is pleading on the basis of mercy already received.

The first appeal is to present your bodies as a living sacrifice. Every sacrifice in Israel’s history required a death. What Paul is asking for here is unprecedented in the sacrificial system: a *living* sacrifice — *thysian zōsan*. The animal on the altar had no choice and no ongoing existence after the offering. The living sacrifice is different in kind. It is a continuous, daily, conscious yielding rather than a single transaction. This is precisely the shape of what Jesus described in Luke 9:23–24 — deny yourself, take up your cross daily. Dying to self in Scripture is not a euthanizing of the self; it is a redirected life, still fully alive, no longer self-directed.

And notice the standard Paul sets: holy and acceptable — not our leftovers. One of the great recurring failures in Israel’s history was giving God the second-best. The prophet Malachi confronted it directly in Malachi 1:6–8, where God rebukes the priests for offering blemished animals on his altar. A living sacrifice gives God the best — the best of your time, your work, your relationships, your money, your habits.

Paul calls this your *logikēn latreian* — which most translations render “spiritual worship,” but the word is more precise than that. *Logikos* is built on *logos* — word, reason, order. A better rendering might be “rational worship” or “reasonable service.” This is worship shaped by understanding, not raw emotional impulse. Given everything Paul has spent eleven chapters demonstrating about God’s mercy, offering your whole self back to him isn’t an act of blind devotion. It is, Paul is arguing, the only logical response available to someone who has actually understood the gospel. Feeling will follow. But the foundation is a mind that has seen clearly. We sometimes get that backward, especially in today’s world.

Which is exactly why Paul moves immediately to verse 2: *Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind.*

The philosopher and historian Carl Trueman, in *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*, offers a framework that helps us understand the contest Paul is describing here. A mimetic view of the world sees reality as having a given order and meaning, which we are responsible to discover and to conform ourselves to. A poietic view sees the world as raw material out of which the individual manufactures his own meaning. Rome, in its own way, offered a poietic vision — remake yourself, find your own significance, secure your own place. Paul’s gospel is mimetic to the core: there is a given reality, a given will of God, “good and acceptable and perfect,” and our task is to be transformed to fit it rather than to reshape it around our felt needs.

That transformation happens through the renewal of the mind — *anakainōsis*. The writer of Hebrews captures what this looks like in practice:

“*But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil.*” (Hebrews 5:14)

This is not a one-time decision but ongoing retraining: a mind continually re-formed by truth that comes from outside itself, so that it can test — *dokimazein*, to examine, to prove by trial — what God’s will actually is, rather than assuming the self already knows.

The Consequence of Grace in the Community of Faith (12:3–13)

Because of what the gospel does to the individual, it then flows into the community. Look at how Paul transitions:

“*For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.*”

How does God begin to work in a community? It begins with a right view of self — sober judgment, calibrated by the faith God has assigned to each person, not by comparison, not by pride, and not by false humility.

I want to say a genuine amen to this, because in my experience the primary challenge a church faces is not a lack of spiritual giftedness. It is that people do not view themselves rightly. And the distortions can run in every direction.

Some people think, “I don’t need the church.” They overestimate their own spiritual strength and underestimate their need for the gifts, correction, encouragement, and fellowship of other believers. Others think, “The church doesn’t need me” — which sounds humble, but actually denies that God has given every member grace to contribute to the body. Still others measure their gift against someone else’s and decide theirs is more important, confusing visibility with faithfulness, or talent with maturity. Some use spiritual giftedness as an excuse to sidestep ordinary Christian obedience: “Hospitality isn’t my gift,” or “Mercy isn’t my gift,” as though the New Testament’s commands applied only to the especially inclined.

The distortions work in the other direction too. “My weakness means I am useless.” “My failure defines me.” “I cannot begin until I feel completely qualified” — which is often just fear wearing the mask of humility. Or on the other side: “Nothing can be done without me,” or “My

preferences are the same as God's commands," or "Grace has made me self-sufficient" — when in reality, grace makes us dependent on Christ and interdependent within his body.

All of this is what Paul is cutting through when he says: think with sober judgment. Serving the church begins not with gifts, but with seeing yourself rightly. The church needs you, and you need the church. You are a member of a body, and a body with only one member isn't a body.

That is why Paul moves immediately from sober judgment to a description of the gifts:

"For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness."

The gift list exists to be exercised within the body, not independently of it.

Then in verse 9, Paul shifts from gifts to the texture of what a community of grace actually looks like when it is living out these consequences:

"Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality."

That word *anypokritos* — "genuine" — means without hypocrisy, without the mask. Love that hates what is genuinely evil and clings to what is genuinely good, rather than love as performance. And the injunction to outdo one another in showing honor is a striking reversal of normal human competition: not competing to be honored, but competing to give it, across generational, cultural, and status lines.

That last item in the list — hospitality — is worth pausing over. The Greek word is *philoxenia*, which literally means love of the stranger. How people are greeted and welcomed in the church matters enormously. Grace that doesn't reach the stranger at the door isn't yet the grace Paul is describing here. If you see someone you don't know in this room, greet them, welcome them, talk to them. That is not a small thing.

The Consequence of Grace Toward the World (12:14–21)

The gospel flows to us as individuals, into the community, and now outward into the world. This final movement is where the stakes are highest, because Paul is asking us to carry grace into places where it will cost us something.

“Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. 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. Never be wise in your own sight. 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.”

I want to linger on the image of burning coals for a moment, because it is easy to misread. The temptation is to hear it as spiritualized revenge: be kind to your enemy so that God will punish him worse. But that reading collapses under the weight of Paul’s own conclusion in the very next clause — *do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good*. The image Paul is drawing on comes from ancient metallurgy, where burning coals were heaped onto ore in order to refine it. Feeding an enemy, showing him unexpected grace, is not a covert strategy for his condemnation. It is Paul’s picture of the only force strong enough to actually change a hardened human heart — not argument, not retaliation, but persistent, costly good.

That is the direction the gospel travels. It comes to us. It forms us. It moves through us into the church. And then it exits the church and enters the world — not as a program, not as a political strategy, but as a people who have so reckoned with the mercy of God that they can bless their persecutors, weep with the grieving, associate with the lowly, and answer evil with good.

Conclusion

Let me close by pulling the threads of this chapter together. Paul’s appeal in Romans 12 traces the consequence of gospel grace along a single trajectory: surrender, then discernment, then humility, then service, then hospitality and compassion, then peacemaking. We place ordinary, embodied life before God as worship. We refuse the age’s pattern and train our minds in God’s truth. We neither exalt ourselves above the body nor withdraw our gifts from it. We turn grace received into grace made useful for others. We make room for the stranger. We rejoice and we

weep. And we surrender revenge, pursue peace as far as it depends on us, and answer evil with good.

These are the consequences of the gospel. Not the preconditions. Not the payment. The consequences.

How are we, as a church, doing in these categories?

How are you, as a follower of Jesus, doing in these categories?