

Romans 12

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. ²Do 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. [3 For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. ⁴For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, ⁵so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. ⁶We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ⁷ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; ⁸the exhorter, in exhortation; the giver, in generosity; the leader, in diligence; the compassionate, in cheerfulness.] 9 Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; ¹⁰love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. ¹¹Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. ¹²Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. ¹³Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. 14 Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. ¹⁵Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. ¹⁶Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. ¹⁷Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. ¹⁸If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. ¹⁹Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.' ²⁰No, '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.' ²¹Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

There is a **big problem** for all three faiths who claim Abraham as the father of faith in one God, in how each faith treats the other, the neighbor, the stranger, and particularly, the enemy. If Christians had chosen to memorize and recite this 12th chapter of Romans, I believe Christian behavior may have been better, and could still improve, if we take this message of Paul and Jesus to heart.

The best evidence against the truth of the Christian faith, I am fond of saying, is historically, once Christians became worldly powers, how they treated the Jewish people, whom our Jewish messiah Jesus loved and died for. My Jewish and Muslim sister and brother are better qualified than I to identify their own faith's biggest internal challenge.

But I will say that in the Quran, and the Hebrew Scriptures, and the Christian New Testament, there are passages that have legitimated religious violence, and condemnation of religious enemies perceived as a threat. This is still a problem all over the world.

The answer to the urge to fight the religious enemy must be a stronger appeal to, and living out of, our Scriptures by people of good will. Living our faith for peace and love can overcome the reading of antagonism and condemnation.

Neighborly love is God's will, even to the enemy. And respect for persons, especially when we don't like their ideas. We have to learn to talk about ideas we don't like with kindness. Then we can show the supreme desire to overcome antagonism with God's non-violent goodness.

Paul's letter to the church at Rome is considered Paul's most important contribution to Christian faith. This 12th chapter describes how the Christian is to live. We live in accord with God *only* out of **gratitude** for God's **mercy**.

All people are accountable before God. All people with faith in the supreme creator God are equally children of Abraham. And "all people **sin** and fall short of the glory of God," and thus oppose God's will.

Here is where Paul differs, and I understand that Christianity differs, from both Islam and Judaism. Christians see the problem caused by evil and sin, or estrangement from God, as being *exactly like* being enslaved or addicted to a drug or superior hostile power. Our free will alone is not able to triumph over evil, so God must **help** us.

We call this help *grace*, to be transformed from people who frustrate God and each other, into people able to please God and love our neighbors. So when the passage in chapter 12 begins, "I appeal to you by the mercies of God to present your bodies as living sacrifices," Paul describes our human need to be transformed from violent people estranged from God and each other, by God's help.

For Christians, this help is supremely provided in Jesus' willing sacrifice of his life on the cross. By his blood and body offered, enemies of God may receive grace, or help, to become the friends of God and humanity. In response, we are not only to obey God's law or teaching, but more immediately, like a child to a parent, to know and share in God's will. In response, we become, in gratitude for God's help, living sacrifices to God.

We are to love. And to hate what is evil, but not the persons in whom we may think we see evil. With hope, we are to be patient in adversity, persistent in prayer, and to give to saints, code word for Jesus followers, and to show hospitality to strangers.

We are to "bless those who persecute" us, "bless and do not curse them." "Do not repay anyone evil for evil," but do what is peaceful and noble for them. Only God has the right to vengeance or reprisal. Chapter 12 closes with Paul quoting from the Hebrew Scriptures, Proverbs, chapter 25, vs 21-22, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them. If they are thirsty, give them something to drink. For by doing this, you "heap burning coals on their heads." What does this final metaphor mean? It is **not** a final hostile wish that God will punish God's enemies. Rather, the burning coals will provide the energy, the grace, just as the cross of Jesus did for Christians, to help to purify or transform even the enemy, as out of ore, comes pure gold.

The burning coal metaphor is a specifically general, not Christian metaphor for God's desire to transform everyone, whether or not they are Christians, into people who love God and love neighbor. The burning coal is God's grace, helping us and our enemy to treat the other as the neighbor we want to love.

Christians, Muslims, and Jews have certainly failed in awful ways to bless those who persecute or oppose us, and to refrain from vengeance and condemnation. Today, God is calling all humanity to show hospitality to strangers and enemies.

God is asking all faithful people to give up religious violence in all forms, and to work in so far as it in us lies for peace and what is noble in the sight of all. This would lead to more peace in the Holy Land than security walls and suicide bombers. This approach could prevent armed confrontation between the good people of Iran, their hostile and anti-Semitic leaders, and the people of the U.S. and Israel.

The President of Iran, Ahmadinejad, is a good test case. John McCain has said he would not meet with him unconditionally. Barak Obama has been criticized for saying he would, just as Regan met with Gorbachev. Ahmadinejad has expressed the desire to annihilate the Jewish state and probably the Jewish people, and calls our country the Great Satan, also doomed.

Should a U. S. President, and the Prime Minister of Israel, and any Muslim leader be willing to meet with Mr. Ahmadinejad. Unconditionally, yes. And not only to meet with, but to pray for, bless, show hospitality and patience with, and show him an honor he may not deserve. To work for peace, and to show the nobility the burning coals above our heads are meant to bring forth in all God's children.

"Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."