

THE LETTER OF PAUL TO THE ROMANS

Commentary by Rev. Msgr. Gregory Mikesch

Lesson 16 - Romans 11:25-12:8

Romans 11:25-36

For this concluding segment of chapter 11, some versions of the NRSV have the heading "All Israel Will Be Saved", others have "God's Mercy on All". As we come to the end of chapter 11, Paul summarizes what he has been saying in chapters 9 through 11. His main thesis is that God's plan is going forward and in the end all Israel will believe in Christ.

In verse 25 Paul again warns the Gentile Christians not to think of themselves as superior to the Jews. They can be grateful because they have received the gift of faith, but this is not due to their own efforts. There is a mystery taking place; the mystery is the way God works. God wants to bring all people to himself. For his own hidden reasons, God employs a plan which Paul describes as having three parts. The first part is that God has caused a "hardening" to come upon part of Israel. With this statement Paul is facing again the paradox of the relationship between God's power and human freedom. Paul does not presume to be able to answer this dilemma. What he does is uphold both truths - God is in control and human beings are free to respond. This "hardening" which has come upon Israel has resulted in the gospel being preached to the Gentiles.

The second part of this plan is given at the end of verse 25. Paul says that Israel will remain in unbelief "until the full number of the Gentiles has come in." Does this mean that all Gentiles will come to believe or does it mean that there is a certain number who will believe? Paul does not say. But he would certainly believe that it is God's will that all people accept Jesus Christ.

The third and final part of the plan is found in verse 26. In this verse Paul clearly says that "all Israel will be saved." He supports this belief by quoting the prophet Isaiah 59:20. Paul now uses the passage from Isaiah in support of Israel. He says that God will send a Deliverer (Redeemer), whom Paul recognizes as Jesus, and this Deliverer will remove all sin from Jacob, another way of saying Israel.

The next passage, in verse 27, is from Isaiah 27:9. As Paul quotes this passage, he takes the liberty of inserting a word he wants to emphasize, the word "covenant." The original text does not use this word, but Paul is mindful that he has based part of this argument on the promises made to the patriarchs.

The unconditional covenants made with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are still applicable to their descendants. When the physical heirs of the patriarchs become descendants in faith, then they will receive the blessings from the new covenant (Jeremiah 31:31).

In verse 28 Paul struggles with another paradox. He says that the Jews are the "enemies of God" and yet he goes on to say that they are "beloved." They are enemies because they have not accepted the gift of faith and they have not accepted Jesus as the Messiah. But for Paul, this alienation is temporary. God may be displeased with his people, but they are still his Chosen People. The time will come when they will repent and return to their rightful place. Paul says that God's love is constant. God has pledged himself to his people in the promises he made to the patriarchs. At this point we can also reflect on our own relationship with God. If God is so firm in his commitment of love based on a past pledge, then how much more certain can we be of his love which is sealed in the blood of his Son? God's love is indeed constant.

Verse 29 shows why Paul is so firm in his hope for eternal salvation. The hope for eternal life is not just the desire or wish that this will happen. For Paul, and for us, hope for eternal life is the deep conviction and certainty that this is going to happen. This conviction is not based on human efforts but on the promise of God. God's gifts and call are "irrevocable." God is always true to his word to us and his Word to us is Jesus Christ.

The logic of verses 30 and 31 is not easy to follow. A paraphrase might help us understand what Paul is saying. Paul is saying to the Gentiles, "At one time you were disobedient in the sense that you did not believe in God. Some of the Jews are now disobedient in the same way because they do not believe in Jesus. The disobedience of the Jews has resulted in your being given mercy. And the mercy you receive is a sign that the Jews will receive the same mercy. This is God's plan." There are other ways in which these verses could be paraphrased, but the final word is that mercy triumphs over judgment.

Verse 32 is the climax of Paul's logic. Paul is looking at the human condition, meaning the evidence given by all humanity. The evidence shows that all people, Jews and Gentiles alike, are subject to sin. Since God causes everything, this must be part of God's plan. But God has "imprisoned all" not out of spite or contempt, but so that he can be merciful to all. At this point, Paul is not discussing human freedom; rather he is concentrating on the nature of God. And it is God's nature to be merciful. If we were to say to Paul, "If God controls everything, then why didn't he make us obedient?" then Paul would address the issue of personal responsibility. Even though God is in control, we are still free.

The final four verses in chapter 11 are a hymn of praise to God for the wonders of his mercy. Paul has searched with his mind to the best of his ability to understand God's plan of salvation. He does not claim he has full comprehension but trusting in God, he has come to his conclusion. All that Paul can do now is stand back in awe at the wisdom and knowledge of God.

In verse 33, Paul speaks with the voice of Job. Like Job, Paul is in awe of the mysterious ways of the Lord. No one but God could draw harmony out of alienation, mercy out of disobedience, life out of death. The unbelief of Israel is painful to them and to God. However, ultimately God will heal this wound and he will draw all people to himself in an eternal embrace. This is our God.

In verses 34 and 35, Paul quotes Isaiah 40:13 and Job 35:7. (The exact reference in Job is difficult to determine, but 35:7 is a probable text). These passages convey the truth that no one can instruct God in how he should accomplish salvation. No one can act so as to make God a debtor. God is always free and in this freedom he bestows his gifts upon his people.

Verse 36 is the doxology (i.e. an expression of praise) which summarizes Paul's prayer of praise. The doxology proclaims that everything comes from God and everything is destined to return to him. He is the meaning and goal of all creation. Paul is saying that we should trust that we will never cease to be amazed by the beauty and goodness of our God. The abundance of his mercy is far beyond what we could imagine. His love exceeds our greatest hope. This is the God who has saved us. This is the God who loves us. This is the God we will one day see face to face! "To him be the glory forever. Amen."

* * * * *

Side Note: The Prophet Ezekiel

Ezekiel (cir. 620-565 B.C.) is the third major prophet of the Hebrew Scriptures. He lived in Jerusalem as a young man, but was taken to Babylon as an exile when the Babylonians captured Jerusalem in 597 B.C. In the first half of his book, his message is harsh and condemning. He is writing from Babylon and he tells the Jewish people that if they do not reform their lives then the city and the temple will be totally destroyed. Even the exiles thought that God would never permit the temple to be desecrated.

The people did not listen to Ezekiel's message. In 587 B.C. the Babylonians again attacked Jerusalem and this time completely destroyed the city. A second group of Jewish exiles were brought to Babylon. From this point on, Ezekiel's message became one of comfort and support. In the second half of his book, he encourages the people to trust that God will bring about their return to their own land. Ezekiel probably died in Babylon, but his prophetic words were fulfilled in 537 B.C. when Darius, the Mede, conquered Babylon and allowed the Jewish exiles to return home.

Romans 12:1-8

Chapter 12 marks the beginning of a new section in Paul's letter. In chapters 1 through 8, Paul establishes his foundational belief that salvation comes through faith in Jesus Christ. In chapters 9 through 11, he speaks of how this salvation will eventually come to all of Israel. Now, in chapters 12 through 15, he shows how a person of faith responds to God.

Paul has the ability to delve into the mystery of the ways of the Lord. He is familiar with the Hebrew Scriptures. He has his own experience of seeing the Risen Lord. He knows the meaning of the good news. Because of this knowledge and experience, Paul can speak in detail of the origin and meaning of the righteousness which comes from God. Paul is also aware of the incarnational nature of faith. This means that faith must be lived out in the daily activities of life.

Any author can be easily misunderstood if certain words or phrases are taken out of context. This can happen to Paul. When he says that salvation is a gift and there is "no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus," (8:1) the impression could be given that Christianity is an escape from this world. Nothing could be farther from the truth. The gift of faith plunges us into the very midst of life, as we are called upon to transform this world. This is what Paul is saying in chapter 12. Our works of charity and compassion are not our means of salvation but rather, they are our response to a loving God who calls us to build up his kingdom.

With verse 1, Paul begins a segment in which he describes the qualities of a person of faith. As one who has authority to speak in the name of Christ, Paul appeals to his readers to offer their bodies, meaning their very selves, to God as a "living sacrifice." In the previous three chapters, he stresses the mercy which God shows to both Jews and Gentiles. Now, his readers should respond to that mercy and dedicate their lives to God. The practice of worship in Judaism involved the death of the lamb, or whatever animal was sacrificed. But Christians are a living sacrifice in two senses: First, through baptism the Christian has been brought from death to life (6:13). Second, that which is offered is the daily activity of life. No human activity is devoid of some relationship with God. Our vocations, occupations or ministries are all part of the process of the building up of God's kingdom.

The honesty and integrity, charity and compassion which are practiced at home, or at the place of work, or in social gatherings are all part of the spiritual worship which is holy and acceptable in the sight of God. All Christians are called to be aware of this reality, but particularly Catholic Christians who believe in the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist. In our Eucharistic worship we believe that we share the presence of Christ at the table of his Word and at the table of the Eucharist. Our worship of God does not end when the priest says, "The Mass is ended, go in peace." The very word "Mass" comes from the Latin "**missa**," which means "mission," "to be sent." We are sent out to live what we have just celebrated. We are called upon to carry Christ to the world that he may touch others through us. This is all part of our spiritual worship.

In verse 2, Paul uses a word which needs our attention. He says that we should not be “conformed to this world.” As we read and pray the scriptures, we should notice that the word “world” can have very different meanings. In this present verse, Paul uses “world” to mean anything which is contrary to the will of God. This is very similar to the way he uses the word “flesh” (7:5). But when we read John 3:16, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that whoever believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life,” we see that the world is the recipient of God’s love. God does not despise his people or his creation. God loves what he has created, and he has given his Son for the sake of redemption. God opposes anything which causes a barrier between himself and his people – anything which distracts people from seeing that God is the true meaning of life. This is what Paul means by the “world.”

Baptismal renewal and the righteousness which comes from faith have recreated us as new beings. Now that we have been renewed we are to be attentive to the will of God. The gift of the Spirit enables us to know God’s will, for the Spirit knows the mind of God (8:27). Under the old dispensation of the Law of Moses, there was a certain blindness which prevented people from knowing what was “good and acceptable and perfect.” But in the new dispensation of life in the Spirit, God has revealed to us the depth of love he has for us and all that is in accord with his love.

Verse 3 begins a paragraph which has the “body” as its main imagery. Paul looks upon the faith community as the “body of (or in) Christ.” He has had the experience of forming numerous communities and so he knows how pride, arrogance and competition can sever the bonds of unity. Paul is writing his letter to the Romans from the city of Corinth. He is right in the midst of seeing what factions can do to the faith community. He encourages his readers to use common sense, judge wisely, and always use their faith in Christ as the norm by which they conduct their lives.

Paul’s use of the imagery of the body is fairly short when compared to 1 Corinthians 12:12-31, but his point is the same. In verse 4, he says that the human body has many members and each member has a different function. However, each member works for the good of the whole person. There are parts of the body which may seem insignificant, but if they are injured or lacking, then the entire body is affected. In a similar way, the community of faith is made up of many members and each member has a particular gift. The various gifts help to build up the body of Christ. Some gifts may seem more prominent but each gift is important. The various gifts should not be a source of pride or separation, for Christ himself is the bond of unity.

In verse 5, Paul speaks of two truths. He says that we are united with Christ and that we are united with one another. There is a slight nuance with regard to the first truth, that we are united with Christ, which differs from what he says in Corinthians.

In this verse, Paul says that we are “one body in Christ,” while in 1 Corinthians 12:27, he says that we are “the body of Christ.” When Paul speaks of being “one body in Christ” he is emphasizing the unity of the members with Christ as the unifying force. When he says that we are “the body of Christ” he is adding the dimension of witness. The body of Christ is the presence of Christ in this world and this body becomes the means by which salvation is announced to all people. The second truth, that we are “members one of another,” probably recalls the event of Paul’s conversion. He could never forget that he participated in the martyrdom of Stephen. Paul knows that because of our unity in Christ, whatever is done to another Christian is done to Christ. He is present in each member.

In verse 6 through 8, Paul enumerates seven gifts which are given for the good of the faith community. He calls these gifts “charisms” because they come from the Spirit for the sake of building up the body. Paul knows that there are more than seven gifts among the members, but he chooses seven because this is the number which represents completion and perfection. (This is also why we have seven sacraments.)

The first gift he lists is “prophecy.” The primary meaning of prophecy is to proclaim the word of the Lord. All too often, prophecy is understood as the ability to predict the future. This is only a small part of the role fulfilled by the prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures. The prophets of yesterday and today stand with their people and proclaim God’s word. They know God and speak his will in the midst of joy or pain, peace or conflict.

The second gift is “ministry.” The Greek word Paul uses is **diakonia**. This means service to the community. It is the root word for the Diaconate, the first step in the sacrament of Holy Orders. Although the diaconate was already established in the Church (Acts 6:1-6), Paul is not necessarily referring to this. Each member of the community is called upon to be of service to the other members.

The third vitally important gift within the community is “teaching.” Parents, catechists and all others who explain the word of God, and speak of our relationship to God, are using this gift for the good of the body. St. Thomas Aquinas said, “The greatest thing one person can do for another is to teach that person about God.”

The fourth gift is “exhortation.” To exhort means to encourage people in the faith. This gift is used by parents, preachers, spiritual directors and all who share the journey of faith with another.

The fifth gift is “generosity.” The “giver” is one who shares whatever gifts are available. Sharing material goods is only one form of giving. Paul says sharing the gift of love is the greatest gift (1 Corinthians 13:1-13).

The sixth gift is received by the “leader,” one who is willing to take on the added responsibility of guiding the community. This leadership is to be fulfilled in diligence and humility, not in arrogance and power.

The seventh gift of “compassion” enables one person to “suffer with” another person. The community of faith is meant to be one body and each of these gifts fosters life in this body.

Copyright 2022. The Cornerstone Catholic Scripture Study

thecornerstonescripturestudy.org