

Transformed Into Community

A Welcome Word for a Lonely World

A Prep Guide for Sessions 7

by Dr. Allen Hilton

Open – Our Need, Paul’s Help

“A Loneliness Epidemic.” That’s what Cigna, a Hartford-based insurance company, has called the American illness. The phrase encapsulates the findings of their massive research initiative that tracks the precipitous decline in personal, friendly connections among us. Living isolated, in torn neighborhoods, split cities, and polarized nations, people in the U.S. and other mostly-Western nations have lost the art of friendship and let the healthy habits of community-making lapse. The harm of this to our well-being should be obvious from the fact that an insurance company spent money researching it. Cigna (and other companies) got interested because they were paying on a skyrocketing number of claims that had their roots in loneliness and the mental health problems it brings.

The Cigna study is only the latest diagnosis of our cultural disease. Twenty-first-century America may be the most individualistic culture in the history of the world. Sociologists like Robert Bellah (*Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life – 1985*), Robert Putnam (*Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community – 2000*), and Mark Dunkelman (*The Vanishing Neighbor: The Transformation of American Community – 2014*) have chronicled the increasing atomization of our society over decades and sounded the alarm.

In this context, American religion has often catered to the isolated individual as well. Christian evangelists summon us to personal salvation, and electronic access to the message make the messiness of community unnecessary. Those who lean new age equip the “Spiritual but Not Religious” to go it alone through mindfulness and meditation. Post-Covid, these trends have increased, with more people getting their Christianity from the comfort of their own homes, alone.

The Apostle Paul would be scandalized by these trends. In fact, Paul could not have imagined a solitary Christian. His day job was creating little conventicles of Jesus people and equipping them to function as a healthy “body of Christ” without his daily health. In fact, his Letter to the Romans speaks directly to our need, at a theological depth that is welcome amid quick-fix attempts to patch the wounds of loneliness.

Romans 12–13 reveal that the good news of which the apostle is unashamed (1.16-17) comes with a community, no extra charge. His splendid vision of how God rescues each of us through Jesus, your and my claim on that rescue through faith, a grace that abounds in personal life change, a new daily life walked in the Spirit as we were created to walk – the apostle could never have imagined even one element of his good news coming to fruition apart from its

natural home in a community. All of his letters reflect this value and this assumption. In this week's section of the letter, Paul brings those assumptions powerfully to the surface.

I do hope you'll be free to join us on Ash Wednesday to watch how this plays out. But, given the responsibilities and worship commitments many of you have, I've written this prep guide especially to help you who will be in other communities on that blessed evening.

The Outcome of Transformation

I love the occasional self-help book. The latest for me is James Clear's best-seller, *Atomic Habits*. I likely have in common with you a deep longing to be my better self – to change my habits so they align more with the person I'd like to be. And the self-help industry sells transformation. People who crave change love a Before/After juxtaposition. "I was this, and now I'm that." Whether the "After" features weight loss, wealth accrual, bigger biceps, or saner schedules, the testimonial usually features one person's journey from "There" to "Here" in a distant cousin to John Newton's sweet narrative, "I once was lost, but now am found; was blind but now I see." When we see someone's "Lost" and their "Found" next to one another, we're willing to shell out the bucks to make it happen in us. We long for transformation!

Paul's all for transformational change, of course. He has shown us, in chapter 6, how we can present the members of our body to God's purposes and, in chapter 8, how life in the Spirit has freed us from life hounded by the power of Sin provoking us with Law. The *Nuvi δὲ* comparisons we've seen in 3.21 and 7.5 introduce the "After" state that Paul celebrates – imputed righteousness and new life in Spirit, respectively.

Paul celebrates transformation! But three significant markers distinguish Paul's vision for effective change in Romans from the standard self-help schema.

Gratitude as the Prompt

The self-help industry appeals to our dissatisfaction with the way we currently are. Paul begins to talk about transformation by reminding us of the gifts God has already given us. He spent the first half of his letter (chapters 1–8) spelling out the divine gifts of rescue from our predicament and the ways that the Holy Spirit makes that rescue matter our daily way of life. Then, in chapters 9–11 he unveiled God's encompassing plan to magnificently, ultimately bless all nations – the mission given to Abraham's family in Genesis 12.4 that has now been fulfilled in Christ. Now he invites his brothers and sisters in the city of Rome to feast their eyes on these splendid gifts. The NASB renders Paul's summons literally.

I urge you, therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship.

To get at the spirit of Paul's call, though, I love how J.B. Phillips has paraphrased:

With eyes wide open to the mercies of God, I beg you, my brothers, as an act of intelligent worship, to give him your bodies, as a living sacrifice, consecrated to him and acceptable by him.

The passage fits a divine pattern dating all the way back to God's recitation of the Ten Commandments on Mt. Sinai. Plaques in homes around the world feature the Top Ten in terse fashion, beginning with, "Thou shalt/You shall have no other gods before me." But that's not actually how Exodus 20 begins. Instead, God first recounts the divine act of rescue, then summons Israel to new communal habits of life.

And God spoke all these words:

I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.

You shall have no other gods before me. (Exodus 20.1-2 – NIV)

"Look first at what God has done, then decide what your proper response will be." That sequence appears again in Romans 12.

Divine Help as the Means

Self-help gurus offer self-starters effective ways to make ourselves better. Paul's vision realizes that we cannot do this alone and points us to God as a primary Actor in our change.

For Paul, the power that changes us originates outside us, coming from the God who acts to save us and transform us. Romans 12.1-2 is transformation central in the scriptures, and its second verse solidifies this point.

²And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect. (Romans 12.1-2)

The passive voice of the underlined verb is key. Notice that Paul does not call the Romans (or us) to "transform yourself" or "change yourself" or "pull yourself up by your bootstraps." A passive command requires an actor outside the self. The command to, "Be hit on the head!" requires a hitter; "Be shown into the building!" requires an usher; and "Be transformed!" requires a transformer.

Verses 1 and 2 of this chapter establish that God's gracious acts in Christ and the Spirit ought to produce a gratitude that prompts us to hand ourselves over to God to be changed.

Community as the End

Self-help, as the term implies, is directed to the solo improvement of the individual. Paul's vision of transformation necessarily deposits us in community.

While its customary isolation in memory-verse packets and as a sermon text, which keeps the verse hermetically sealed from what comes next, Paul's familiar-sounding call in 12.1-2 to be "remade from within" (Phillips) or "transformed by the renewing of our minds," (NASB) actually flows directly and powerfully into a next verse:

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. 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. (Romans 12.3-5)

Transformation happens in a community and toward a community that is nothing less than the very body of Christ. In the portrayal of Paul's conversion in Book of Acts, the risen Jesus equates himself with the very groups of people Saul has been harassing: the churches. In the most confusing moment of Paul's life, he hears a voice from heaven shout, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" Acts 9.)

Life as the Body of Christ

In Romans 12, Paul continues this theme to build a theology of community: God gives different gifts to different people to serve the larger group. "We are members one of another." The spiritual gifts theology in this passage (and its parallel in 1 Corinthians 12) revolutionizes church. You and I sometimes shorthand our search for a new congregation with the term "church shopping." Paul would not like this term. In a Pauline church, membership is not about shopping like a consumer. "What do they have that I like?" is not the question. In Paul's world, God transforms us so that we are equipped to build community together. Here are the God-gifted roles Paul gives as examples.

We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; if it is servicing, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully. (Romans 12.6-8)

Paul's list in 1 Corinthians 12 adds a charismatic few – wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, miraculous powers, distinguishing good from evil spirits, speaking in tongues, discerning tongues. And we know that neither list is comprehensive. From your experience, what other gifts would you list?

For Paul, God makes us good at things, not primarily for our own aggrandizement, but for the sake of the community of people with whom we do life and faith. The average church-going American attends worship a around once a month, mostly because we feel like we're making an intake choice. What would happen to that number if each of us knew we were as crucial to our church as an elbow or eye is to a body? And what would it do to the way you look at the person next to you in the pew if you knew that she or he was that important, too? Christian congregants often refer to attendance at worship as "going to church" – an experience that usually involves very little participation from most of the people in the room. What would need to happen in the way we do church to give every member a vital role?

Another central element to Paul's image of the body of Christ is the way we treat one another. Paul's description of transformation lived out together in community is beautiful:

Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

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; 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. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.
(Romans 12.9-18)

Sounds pretty amazing, right? Good news: this is the church that God is making us into. Through the Holy Spirit's work, we are becoming the body of Christ. Who doesn't want in on that picture?!

Anger

We live in an angry age. Politicians and media outlets both know that there's money to be made enraging us, so they push our buttons. A friend of mine coined an appropriate term for the current culture of news broadcasting and political commentary: "Angertainment." One research study has noticed a troubling rise in the frequency of angry behavior. Their description is clinical-sounding:

The overall prevalence of inappropriate, intense, or poorly controlled anger in the U.S. population was 7.8%. Anger was especially common among men and younger adults and was associated with decreased psychosocial functioning. Significant and positive associations were evident between anger and parental factors, childhood, and adulthood adverse events.

Our culture fosters anger, and it hurts us even when we don't act on it. The clever author and preacher, Fredrick Buechner, famously characterized this self-harm with a description that lands with most of us.

Of the Seven Deadly Sins, anger is possibly the most fun. To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll over your tongue the prospect of bitter confrontations still to come, to savor to the last toothsome morsel both the pain you are given and the pain you are giving back--in many ways it is a feast fit for a king. The chief drawback is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast is you.

Our culture has taught us to savor our anger, to nurse it and pounce on one another. We're taught to pass from an episode of anger to linger longer in it. The outcome is a population that is experiencing anger on steroids – a tendency to irascibility. (from the Latin for anger, "Ira")

The simplest and most self-aware observation of amped-up anger that I've encountered appeared in a social media post from a wise young pastor from North Carolina. Reverend Sharon Hodde Miller tweeted, simply,

I was reading my Gospel passage this morning and suddenly realized,
"I'm angry a lot more often than Jesus was.

What she knows is that rampant anger can destroy the kind of loving relationships Paul pictures in the body of Christ. In his essay "On Anger," Seneca, the ancient Roman Stoic and contemporary of the apostle Paul, describes the anti-communal nature of anger.

Humankind is born for mutual assistance, anger for mutual ruin:
the former loves society, the latter estrangement.
The one loves to do good, the other to do harm;
the one to help even strangers, the other to attack even its dearest friends.

Given this destructive force of anger, Seneca was keen to recognize the first flush of anger, which he acknowledged to be unavoidable, and the point at which our will can kick in and stop it.

This long introduction to the topic has prepared us for Paul's brilliant spiritual remedy to anger in the last verses of Romans 12. I'll caution you, Paul's remedy doesn't initially seem brilliant.

Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written: "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay," says the Lord. "But if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in so doing you will heap burning coals on his head." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. (Romans 12.18-21)

At first glance, these words can seem mean-spirited. It sounds like Paul is saying, “You don’t have to hit them, brothers and sisters. God’ll do that!” And then, “If you really want to get back at them, do something nice for them. They’ll absolutely hate it.” To say the least, the attitude Paul inculcates doesn’t seem very transformed!

I want to suggest that Paul knows how transformation works. As you know, if you’ve read any of the plentiful array of books on habit formation, neuroscience has contributed and confirmed the most effective way to alter our attitudes: don’t start with the attitudes. Our inner states change fastest when we act like what we want to be. To put it crassly, the best brain science of our time counsels us to, “Fake it ‘til you make it.” Studies have shown, for instance, that people who dress in doctor’s lab coats perform better on tests than people of the same intelligence who dress normally. The association we have between “Doctor” and “Smart” lights up a part of our brain and we get more answers right. The insight was anticipated by a sociological school called “symbolic interactionism,” which noticed that “a kiss does not merely express affection, it also produces it.”

Back to Paul. Read the passage again, and pay no attention to attitude for a moment. Just focus on the behavior Paul commends to the Romans. (I’ve underlined it here.)

*Never take your own revenge, brothers and sisters,
but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written: “Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,” says the Lord.*

“But if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.”

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

Paul knows that behavior change is an effective way to produce attitude change. And he knows that these people struggle, as all people, with temptations to angry response when attacked. As he runs his pen across that ancient page, I can hear Paul musing, “How can I get them to be non-avenging and kind people who thrive together in community. He breaks their challenge into three steps and supplies three steps. (What James Clear and others would call an “atomic” or “micro” habit.)

1. How can I get them to at least stop hitting enemies back?
2. How can I get them to start doing acts of kindness, even for enemies?
3. How can I get them to be non-avenging and kind people?

To give them motivation for each step, he supplies scripture.

1. Let them imagine God taking care of their enemy. (Deuteronomy 32.35)
2. Let them think that their kind act will aggravate their enemy. (Proverbs 25.22)

3. Watch them become transformed, people who overcome evil instincts with good ones.

Notice that a vengeful attitude remains in steps one and two. But as the behavior changes, they go from passively resisting the temptation to hit, to actively gesturing kindness that they don't yet feel. The culmination of the process comes in time. They are prepared to overcome evil with good.

There you go: the best of neuroscientific research, brought to you by our first-century friend, the apostle Paul.

The Church and the State

American culture is currently embroiled in a debate over the role of Christianity in the culture and government. "Christian Nationalism" is the label given to one emerging view. To recognize the animus in the air on this issue, we'll look first at the definition offered by the Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary. who wants to oppose it.

a worldview where one's theological imagination is coopted by state power. It exchanges the church's loyalty to the Lord of Peace for a false god fashioned by the myth of American exceptionalism...a form of political idolatry that distorts our knowledge of God and neighbor through a xenophobic, racialized and militarized gospel that is at odds with the life and teachings of Jesus.

How do you really feel, AMBS?

Most proponents of a close relationship between the values of the Christian church and the running of the state would not call their belief "Christian Nationalism" – it's a term coined by opponents. They would emphasize the centrality of Christian values in the founding of the republic and the strong traditional thread of church-going and Christian morality across U.S. history.

Of course, I begin our section on Romans 13 with this topic, because this chapter introduces one of Paul's most controversial passages. I quote the whole paragraph here, to remind us of the content.

Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and you will be commended. For the one in authority is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear

the sword for no reason. They are God's servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also as a matter of conscience.

And then, in a sentence that seems influenced at some level by Jesus' famous reply to the Pharisees about whether Jews should pay taxes (Matthew 25.15-22), Paul adds,

⁶This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing. ⁷Give to everyone what you owe them: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor.

The ink that has been spilt on these seven verses could fill an ocean, and we will look closely at them in our session Wednesday evening. For now, let's notice several components of Paul's context.

1. Audience

The letter is addressed to the church in the capital city of the largest imperial government in world history to that point.

2. History

We noticed in our last session that around A.D. 49, when there was a ruckus between Jews and Christians in the city of Rome, the Emperor Claudius expelled the offending parties from the city.

3. Tradition.

Israel's history includes, not only a tradition of monarchs like Kings David and Solomon, who are chosen by God, but also even strands of interpretation that saw foreign rulers like Cyrus of Persia as instruments of God's activity. (Isaiah 45.1)

4. Exceptions.

Israel's history also includes periods when civil disobedience to rulers' decrees was required in order to continue obeying God. (E.g., characters who are pictured defying governmental orders, like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego who won't worship the king and Daniel who prays illegally under Babylonian emperors; E.g., the Jews depicted in the books 1—2 Maccabees under King Antiochus Epiphanes, who courageously risk execution for circumcising their sons and otherwise obeying Torah)

5. Experience

Setting Paul's behavior alongside his words, we must recall that the apostle himself was imprisoned by government officials several times precisely for carrying out his missionary work in their cities.

Given these surrounding factors, Paul seems here to be offering a general rule. The theological grounding of temporal authority, he has inherited in part from the Hebrew Scriptures. (See #2

above.) The decision to include it in this letter (when he doesn't touch the subject in most of his other letters) may be driven by a sensitivity to the circumstances of his audience. Paul does not want Christianity to be mistaken for an anarchical movement. He knows – and has lived out -- times when a Christian must choose between obedience to the government and obedience to God. But he wants the Romans to observe a general respect for the governing authorities.

Both Jewish history and Paul's experience testify that Paul's theology here does not allow, "My country, right or wrong." In fact, some interpreters see in his words on taxes a bit of room for coded freedom.

This is an insufficient treatment of a complex passage, but it will have to do for now. We'll unpack the passage more when we meet on Wednesday.

The Sufficiency of Christian Morality

What seems like a subject change in the next paragraph likely is not. Paul turns from "Christian Behavior under an Empire" to "Christian Behavior Generally," with the subliminal point that Christian morality mostly enriches cities and neighborhoods. His words feel like primer-level review, but in the context of Roman law and its enforcement, Paul may intend them as a good citizen's resume of sorts for the career of Christianity and Judaism.

Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law. The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery," "You shall not murder," "You shall not steal," "You shall not covet," and whatever other command there may be, are summed up in this one command: "Love your neighbor as yourself." Love does no harm to a neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.

Here Paul reminds the Roman church that they answer to a higher call than their government. The commandments of God vastly exceed the requirements of Roman Law. For example, the Ten Commandments don't just cover murder and theft, which would have been illegal in Rome, but also the act of adultery and the inner state of covetousness – neither of which would have been illegal in Rome, but both of which contribute to community beyond the demands of Roman civic ordinances. And beyond this, Moses' and Jesus' command to "Love your neighbor as yourself" extends the societal contribution even further.

The Close

Paul closes his exhortations with more counsel about behavior, but with a summons to urgency that is proper for a people who know what time it is. Because "the night is far gone and the day is close at hand,"

[L]et us put aside the deeds of darkness and put on the armor of light. Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in carousing and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the flesh.

The sum impact of Paul's 13th chapter is to call the Romans to their life in Christ, which should be sufficient to make them top-notch citizens in a governmental structure that mostly wants to keep the peace.

We'll talk more about the tradition of Christian civil disobedience when we meet on Wednesday. For now, to you, peace.