

BaptistWay: A lifestyle of worship

October 31, 2015

- *The BaptistWay lesson for Nov. 15 focuses on Romans 12:1-21.*

Chapter 12 of Romans has received quite a bit of attention. In comparison with the three chapters preceding, it is a breath of fresh air to readers. Nonetheless, readers should remember chapter 12 still is connected to the concerns and argument of chapters 9-11, as is indicated by the first word of Romans 12:1—“Therefore.” In other words, whatever Paul is about to say in chapter 12 is linked to his discussion of the salvific fate of Israel and of God’s covenant faithfulness to the children of Abraham. Along these lines, we should note this passage is addressed to “brothers and sisters.” That is, this chapter is for the whole community to hear as one and to respond as one.

Renewing the mind

The chapter’s first paragraph highlights the importance of the “renewing of your mind” (v. 2). In the next verse Paul states, “Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment” (v. 3). Observing the play on a Greek word for “mind,” one commentator notes this verse could be rewritten as follows: “Do not be super-minded above what one ought to be minded, but set your mind on being sober-minded.” This repeated word is the same one used in Philippians 2 to encourage believers to “have the same mindset as Christ Jesus” (2:5). Clearly, one’s mindset is important to following Christ.

Within Romans, this reference to the mind is even more significant. In Romans 1, Paul noted one of the serious results of sin was “God gave them over to a depraved mind, so that they do what ought not to be done” (1:28).

The renewing of the mind in Romans 12, then, is more than merely one's intellectual endeavors. Rather, it involves one's whole life and is part of "your true and proper worship" in conformity to God's will (v. 1). We might remember both Paul's earlier discussions of the Old Testament *Shema* and Jesus' discussion of the greatest commandment. People should love God with all of their heart, soul, and mind (Matthew 22:37).

The phrase "true and proper" comes from a word that can be translated several different ways. For instance, the New Revised Standard Version has "spiritual worship," while the New King James Version has "reasonable service." Regardless, the point is there is an appropriateness to this worship, although as the passage states, worship here also is a bodily task. That is, offering our bodies "as living sacrifices" certainly does not mean ignoring them. Instead, it is a reversal of the "degrading of their bodies" discussed in chapter 1 (1:24). In other words, salvation is more than a spiritual reality. Thus, true Christian worship and living permeates all aspects of life. As another commentator writes, Paul is promoting "the liturgy of life."

Liturgy of life

Romans 12:9-21 focuses on the character of this liturgy, the shape of this way of life. Immediately, we might notice two points of resonance with the rest of the New Testament. First, the common Pauline triad of faith, hope and love appears (12:9-13). Second, themes of this section echo Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7).

While these echoes are significant, three key words emerge as central to understanding this passage—love, peace, goodness. Beginning with the last term, Paul admonishes the Roman Christians to pursue the good and steer clear of evil (vv. 9, 21). This means the people of God should seek to live rightly and to display the righteousness of God in their day-to-day existence (v. 17), avoiding evil even when the end seems to justify the means.

Living in peace and harmony with all people is not easy, yet it is the exhortation of this passage (vv. 16, 18). This is not a conditional statement, as though one is exempted if one is wronged. Retaliation is prohibited: “Do not repay anyone evil for evil.” Peaceable living certainly will be hard, especially toward those who attack us. Still, Paul states, “Do not take revenge” (v. 19). We should note “heap(ing) burning coals” on the head of an enemy is not a path to revenge either. Instead, it is designed to diffuse the enmity between the two parties, in the same manner as Jesus’ admonition to turn the other cheek (Matthew 5:39). The goal of each is identical—turning enemies into friends.

Sincere love

Love stands at the heart of this passage. However, Paul is not interested in weak or disingenuous love aimed at personal gain. Rather, he writes, “Love must be sincere” (v. 9). This kind of love is displayed not in words, but in deeds such as hospitality, faithful prayer and patient suffering (vv. 12-13). Here is love is not only a gift from God, but also a way of life toward others. Indeed, love is what empowers the church to offer a gift to an enemy or to bless those who persecute (vv. 14, 20).

After seeing these themes, it becomes easier to make sense of Paul’s earlier encouragement: “Do not conform to the pattern of this world” (v. 2). That is, the pattern of this world is one of evil, violence, discord and even hate. In contrast, when we are living in love, peace and goodness, then we discover we truly are continually being “transformed by the renewing” of our minds (v. 2).