

Notes on Romans 12

This is a synopsis with some modifications and additions of the relevant section of NT Wright, *The Letter to the Romans: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections*: New Interpreter's Bible, Volume X (Abingdon Press, Nashville, 2002).

IV. God's Call to Worship, Holiness, and Unity

12.1–16.27

After Rm 9–11, Paul's main argument is still not done, even though there's a huge turn at 12.1 in both content and style. The exposition of 'the good news' that began at 1.3–4—the announcement of Jesus the Messiah, whose resurrection marks him out as God's Son and the world's true Lord indeed—continues right through to 15.7–13, one of the most telling theological passages in the letter, whose themes complete the huge circle begun in Rm 1. The unveiling of God's 'righteousness' or saving justice isn't complete until the 'justified' community actually lives on the basis of its faith that God has raised Jesus from the dead and made him Lord of all. The 'fellowship' or 'communion' of faith (*κοινωνία τῆς πίστεως*) must embody the 'righteousness of faith' (*δικαιοσύνη τῆς πίστεως*) by which it's saved. So God's bringing together of Jew and Gentile in the Messiah—one of the major theological themes of Rm 1–11—now becomes one of the major practical themes of Rm 12–16.

The opening of the section (12.1–2) doesn't just echo what has gone before, but restates major themes. God's 'mercies' appeal to those who have received them. The renewal of body and mind (*νοῦς*) looks back to the human devastation described in Rm 1, to its initial reversal in Rm 4, and especially to the promise of restoration, beginning in the present, in Rm 8. After showing in Rm 9–11 how the Gentiles were brought in, Paul now shows how Jews and Gentiles alike offer the living and true sacrifice to the One God, in which Israel's worship (cf 9.4) is made complete. In fact, *because of* Rm 9–11, Paul can now explain how Rm 1–8 is to be realized. Ecclesiology—our understanding of God's people in the Messiah—provides both context and challenge for 'morality' as well as for what the later fathers call 'theosis'.

As does eschatology. Rm 12.1–2 draws on the Second Temple Jewish view that world history divides into the 'present age' and the 'age to come', and insists that the two now overlap and that Christians belong to the latter. So the good news and the power of the Spirit don't just help Christians to do what others have tried. Rather, the Day has begun to dawn, and those who belong to the Messiah must and do live in its light rather than in the darkness of the present world.

The pattern of Christian living that Paul sets out here includes the call not to be overcome by evil, but to overcome evil with good (12.21). This challenge, summarizing much of Rm 12, is then developed further in 15.7–8, where its Christological underpinnings become explicit. The pattern of overcoming evil not by revenge but by patient suffering and trust in God's justice (12.14–21) is one of the most striking themes in early Christianity, and at several points in this section Paul seems to be echoing the actual words of Jesus himself—something that he very seldom does.

We can't always be sure who the 'strong' and the 'weak' were, that he's concerned about, but Paul clearly has very specific aims in writing to the Roman church. Rm 12–13 lays a general foundation with an eye on the particular situation, and Rm 14–15 provides specific instruction, yet with an eye on other situations (cp Rm 14–15 with 1Co 8–10, for instance).

We can't drive a wedge between Rm 1–11 and Rm 12–16, or between Paul's 'theology' (either 'dogmatic' or 'mystical') and his 'moral teaching'. Paul's theology is always ethical, and his ethics are always theological. However, it's striking that in Rm 12–16 the 'righteousness' word group (*δικαιοσύνη* and its cognates) just doesn't occur. 'Faith' is an important theme (12.3,6; 14.1–2, 23–24), but people sometimes (incorrectly) assume it means something different than in Rm 3–4

and 10. Jesus isn't highlighted until 13.14, although he's everywhere in 14.1–15.13. He's not absent from Paul's mind at any point in Rm 12-13, of course; the apparently incidental reference to being 'in the Messiah' at 12.5 is actually thematic. However, he doesn't discuss the Messiah or his death and resurrection directly. Unlike Rm 5–8 and 9–11, his biblical references here don't evoke a larger narrative; 15.7-13 does point to Israel's eschatological and messianic hope, but Paul doesn't lay out the rest of the grand story. He doesn't need to repeat himself. We've reached the summit here, and can see all around; we have to go down the other side, but there won't be the work of climbing, though we'll still have a sense of continuity in our aim and goal. What follows the word 'therefore' (*oun*) in 12.1 is about results, not process.

The last five chapters of Romans divide naturally as follows:

- A. 12.1–13.14 The life of a united church; general comments, in an *a-b-c-c-b-a* chiasm:
 - a 12.1-2 Renewed way of life in the messianic age: Worship in body and *nous*
 - b 12.3-13 Unity and love: Members of one body
 - c 12.14-21 Living under God's regime in the present age: Relations with outsiders, hostile and not
 - c' 13.1-7 Living under God's regime in the present age: Relations with civil authorities
 - b' 13.8-10 Unity and love: Love fulfills the Torah
 - a' 13.11-14 Renewed way of life in the messianic age: Living in the light
- B. 14.1–15.13 Unity across barriers of custom and ethnic identity:
 - 1. 14.1-12 The weak and the strong: both have the same Lord, who died and rose again as Lord of all. There will come a judgment at which all will give account, and it's not up to one Christian to pre-empt God's right in advance.
 - 2. 14.13-23 How to cope in practice, given that both sides agree not to condemn each other; respecting, and not making demands on one an-

other's consciences (cf also 1Co 8.7-13).

- 3. 15.1-13 Mutual welcome as all praise the one God in the Messiah:
 - a. 15.1-6 The Messiah led the way to this united praise, in 'not pleasing himself';
 - b. 15.7-13 Mutual welcome, based on the Messiah's welcome; Jews and Gentiles worship together under the rule of the risen Messiah, through whom the One God will supply the hope, by the power of the Spirit.
- C. 15.14–16.25 Matters at Hand
 - 1. 15.14-33 Paul's ambassadorial plan to go through Rome to Spain
 - 2. 16.1-24 Exhortations and commendations:
 - a. 16.1-16 Commendation and greetings
 - b. 16.17-20 Look out for divisions
 - c. 16.21-24 Greetings from Paul's colleagues
- D. 16.25-27 Concluding doxology.

A. The Life of a United Church

12.1–13.14

Rm 12.1-2 and 13.11-14 locate Christian living in its wider eschatological framework, insisting on the obedience of bodily and spiritual life in the present age; 12.3-13 and 13.8-10 expound the obligation of love within the Christian community; and in the middle, 12.14-21 and 13.1-7 deal with the life of the church over against the surrounding world

a Renewed life in the messianic age: Worship in body and *nous* 12.1-2

The key word 'therefore' (*oun*) links this section with what Paul has been saying up to now (see, e.g., 6.12; 8.12). As he often does, he opens with a dense theme-statement, which he then unpacks. And his first word tells us what is to come: *parakalō*, the modern Greek word for 'please'; literally 'appeal', 'beseech', even 'exhort'— and the ground of the appeal is 'God's mercies', already mentioned in 9.15 (quoting Ex 33.19, 'I will show mercy on whom I will show mercy'). Here, 'mercies' sums up up 'the depth of God's riches and wisdom and knowledge' (11.33) in 'shutting all up in disobedience, that he might have mercy on all' (11.32).

Those in the Messiah, indwelt by the Spirit, are to offer God the living and pleasing sacrificial worship to which the cult of the Jerusalem temple had long pointed (12.1). This does with temple worship, in other words, what 2.25-29 did with circumcision, and as 15.7-13, at the close of the section and of the letter's great argument, will do with Israel itself: Jew and Gentile alike join in worshipping the true God under the Messiah's lordship. This can hardly be overemphasized. True 'worship' (*latreia*)¹ was one of Israel's privileges (9.4), and like the other elements in that list, this worship is now offered by all Christians, Jew and Gentile alike (see also 10.9-13).

Jews already spoke of non-sacrificial worship as the equivalent of the temple cult, even in the psalms themselves (e.g. Ps 51.16, 141.2), but Paul actually does envision physical sacrifices when he says, 'Present your *bodies* as a living sacrifice' (12.1). 'Body' doesn't mean just the physical part of our being, but the whole person within space, time, and matter. He has already said we must 'put to death the (mis)deeds of the body' (8.13); the whole self is to be 'presented' (the word itself carries sacrificial overtones) to God. Worship 'in spirit and in truth' (Jn 4.23) is still *bodily* worship—both in the obedience to the commandments and in the course of worship.

These sacrifices are 'holy', both in the sense of moral uprightness and in allusion to the temple cult; NJB translates 'dedicated'. And they are 'well-pleasing to God'—not just 'acceptable' (KJV, RSV, NRSV). Paul repeats the word 'well-pleasing' in the very next verse, making it clear that what a Christian does, in the Messiah and by the Spirit, actually delights God.² The alternative to 'pleasing God' isn't just living a morally neutral life, neither pleasing nor displeasing; it's 'to please oneself' (14.7; 15.1), or to be a 'people pleaser' (Ga 1.10). How a creature and sinner can please the living God, the holy creator, has to do with the restoration of God's image in us (see 1.18-25; 8.29; Col 3.10).

This 'living sacrifice' is 'your *reasonable* worship'. The word 'reasonable' (*logikē*) is sometimes translated 'spiritual' but this isn't *pneumatikos* (having to do with *pneuma* or 'spirit'), the opposite of physical. *Logikē* means 'related to the faculty of *logos*', which is 'reason' or 'the ability to understand meaning'. It's a worship 'worthy of thinking beings', that is, of persons who use *logos*, who know *meaning*. Sometimes it's translated 'reasonable worship' (KJV; Divine Liturgy). Offering the *body* is what *thinking* creatures do! There's an echo of Stoic ideas here as well, in which the *logos* formed

the true inner core of every human, but the Stoics would not have agreed that offering the body to God was appropriate.³ But for Paul, worship includes the body.

The Age awaited by Judaism has broken in to the present, in the Messiah. Christians thus live where the two ages overlap, and must constantly reject the pressures of the present age and be open to the life offered in the Messiah. Here 'eschatology' intersects 'morality'; given the heavy use of 'Light symbolism', transfiguration metaphors, and so forth in 12.1-2 and in 13.11-14, it intersects 'mysticism' as well: in the Messiah we belong to the Age to come, and we are renewed (and must renew ourselves) accordingly. Rm 12.1 focuses on the body, with the mind involved as well (the 'reasonable worship'); Rm 12.2 focuses on the renewal of the mind, which is transfigured (*metamorphousthe*), and rendered able to work out what is the right thing to do in the body.

'Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mould' (12.2, J.B. Phillips). This isn't just to resist pressure from the outside and discover the pure unsullied world 'within'—Paul nowhere speaks of discovering a hidden spark that's already inside us. In 1.18-32, he pointed out that the human mind and heart are darkened, rebellious, and full of wickedness. We must not just live 'authentically', but be 'renewed'. The transformed mind reflects God's image, and does God's will.

Nous or 'mind' is a key category in Paul's vision of renewal (cf 7.25 and 8.5-8). Instead of the 'unfit mind' of 1.28, the renewed mind is able at last to discern what will please God, instead of being darkened by the deceitfulness of sin. Indeed, 'we have the mind of the Messiah' (1Co 2.16). The Christian doesn't live by a list of ethical commands, but discerns, tests, approves what God's will is. Rules matter but are not the driving force; thought and reflection matter but ethics is more than just rational. The renewed mind recognizes God's will and what is 'good, pleasing, and perfect'.

'And if the Messiah is in you, the body [may be] dead because of sin; but the Spirit is life because of righteousness' (8.10).

'The Spirit itself bears witness with our spirit, that we are God's children' (8.16).

b Unity and love: Members of one body 12.3-13

Rm 12.3-13 has a good deal in common with various other Pauline exhortations to the church to live as a single com-

¹ KJV, perhaps in an effort to avoid the 'Catholic' connotation of the word 'worship', translates this as 'service', but one would then have to think of a church service, not of waiting on someone.

² See also 14.18; 2Co 5.9; Ep 5.10; Ph 4.18; Col 3.20— all the same word as here; see also the use of *areskō* in 1Co 7.32; 1Th 2.4; 4.1; and, most strikingly, 8.8, where 'those in the flesh' can't please God but, it's strongly implied, 'those in the Spirit' can and do.

³ See Philo *Special Laws* 1.277; Epictetus *Discourses* 1.16.20-21; 2.92. See also A.J. Guerra, *Romans and the Apologetic Tradition: The Purpose, Genre and Audience of Paul's Letter*; SNTSMS (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) 157-58; T. Engberg-Pedersen, *Paul and the Stoics* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000) 262-65.

munity, notably 1Co 12 and Ph 2. What really counts is for the community to be shaped by the Messiah himself. In particular, Christians are to strive for unity in the Messiah, which will come through humility as each thinks soberly about his or her own gifts rather than placing too high a value on them. Reference to the church as 'one body in the Messiah' (12.5) stands near the head of 12.1–15.13 much as the reference to the Messiah as 'of their race according to the flesh' (9.5) stood at the head of Rm 9–11, and indeed as reference to the Messiah opened the letter as a whole (1.3–4). Certainly the unity of believers in the Messiah continues to be a recurring theme all the way to 15.13.

Rm 12.3–13 divides as follows:

- 12.3–8 As members of the Messiah and one another, we belong to each other.
- 12.3 Introduction: not to think more of self than we ought.
- 12.4–5 Main statement: We are one body in the Messiah.
- 12.6–8 Application in terms of the use of different specific gifts.
- 12.9–13 General ways Christians are to build up the community.

As usual, Pauline unpacks the dense opening of 12.1–2 with an explanation (*gar*): 'Offer God the true worship; be transformed by having your minds renewed— because you should be thinking as one people in the Messiah'. Rm 12.3 thus belongs with the whole sequence of thought, not least with what follows 12.4–5, which further explains the point (*gar* again). The basic appeal— which Paul addresses emphatically in the singular— i.e., to every single one of his readers— is not just from Paul himself. He makes it because of 'the grace given to me' (12.3a). Paul is conscious that God had appointed him to a specific task and role, as he mentions elsewhere.⁴ Sometimes this introduces a specific reference to his ministry to the Gentiles (cf. 11.13), and the appeal in this verse echoes 11.20,25 where the respective places and roles of Gentile and Jew are at stake, so we may suppose that the same thought is not far from his mind here. He is, after all, laying foundations here for chaps. 14 and 15, where that mutual relationship is again in view.

'Do not overthink above what you ought to think, but think in sober-thinking ways' (12.3b). The *phron-* root not only continues the emphasis on the mind in 12.2, but also reminds us of the 'carnal *phronēma*' not being 'pleasing to God' in 8.5–8, and the *phronēma* of the Spirit, which 'intercedes for the saints' in 8.27. Just as in 11.25 Gentiles should not think too highly of themselves, so here Paul appeals to all of his audience to keep guard on their own self-opinion;

⁴ Rm 1.5; 15.15; 1Co 3.10; 15.10; Ga 2.9; Ep 3.2,7–8; cf. Col 1.25.

their judgment should be sober and serious, and in accordance with the appropriate standard, which is 'the measure of faith' God has apportioned (12.3c).

Does he mean that every Christian has a different 'measure of faith', some greater, some less? That would make some sense: one should regard oneself in terms of the amount of faith one has. And this would presumably point on to the discussion of the 'strong' and the 'weak' in Rm 14–15. But throughout the letter so far, 'faith' is the same for everybody (3.27–30): belief that Jesus is Lord and that God raised him from the dead (10.9; cf. 4.24–25). Paul's point here is that all should exercise their varied gifts on a level field. The last mention of 'faith,' in fact, was in a very similar context: branches were broken off because of unbelief, you only stand fast because of faith, and the branches themselves can be grafted in again if they do not remain in unbelief— so do not think too highly of yourselves! (see 11.19–25). The 'measure' here, then, is not a kind of portion given to different people, but a measuring-rod, what the later fathers will call the 'canon' or 'rule' of faith, the same for all. Each person has to see where they come against that standard, since it's the only one that matters.

Rm 12.4–5 gives us one of Paul's most powerful images for explaining the combined unity and diversity of the church; and this, alongside 1 Corinthians 12, is one of the two classic passages on the 'body of the Messiah':⁵ 'We, being many, are one body in the Messiah.' Since the resurrection demonstrated Jesus to be the Messiah, in that capacity he now represents his people, summing them up 'in' himself, so that what is true of him is now true of them. This is the logic of Rm 6, and of the decisive 8.1, as well as the many other 'in Christ' passages elsewhere in his writings. To be 'in Christ,' as here, is to be a member of the Messiah's people; to speak of 'one body in Christ' is to emphasize the unity of that people despite its obvious diversity.

Paul speaks of the solidarity between the Messiah and ethnic Jews in terms of 'flesh' (9.4), but something has happened to create a different kind of unity or solidarity, which he speaks of in terms of 'body.' Compare 'my flesh' in 11.14, the background to which is found in 2Sm 5.1 || 1Ch 11.1, where the tribes of Israel say to David, 'We are your bone and flesh' (see also Jg 9.2; 2Sm 19.12–13). This substitution of terms fits so well with his regular language about the corruptible, dying self ('flesh') and the self that is to be resurrected ('body'), that he seems to be suggesting that the 'body in Christ' is the resurrected version of 'Israel according to the flesh'.

If this is the truth of the united whole, what is true of each one individually? They are members of one another (12.5).

⁵ In Ephesians and Colossians a subtly different point is made, Christ there being spoken of as the head of the body; see Eph 1.22; 4.15; 5.23; Col 1.18; 2.10,19.

The emphasis of the Greek is almost 'one by one,' as though Paul were pointing to each person in the room in turn. They belong to one another. We are so used to the word 'member' referring to someone who belongs to a society or club that we are in danger of overlooking the fact that 'members' (*melē*) means 'body parts'. In 1Co 12 Paul spells this out in terms of the metaphor: one is an eye, another a foot, and so on. Here, he launches straight into a list of gifts.

The gifts listed in 12.6-8, which he refers to as 'spiritual gifts' (*charismata*), is identical neither with the list in 1Co 12 nor with the similar lists in, e.g., Ep 4.11, though they overlap. His main point is that just as God has given him grace for his task (12.3), so God gives the church grace for its multiple and mutually supportive tasks, and whatever they are, they must be exercised to the full extent of one's powers.

But what about the strange phrase in 12.6 that explains how 'prophecy' should be exercised? Prophecy, it seems, should be exercised 'according to the analogy of faith' (*kata tēn analogian tēs pisteōs*), which NRSV takes as meaning 'in proportion to faith', JB paraphrases: 'as your faith suggests'; NJB, 'as much as our faith tells us', etc. The implication would be that the level or content of the 'faith' one has in what one is saying will vary from prophet to prophet, and that a prophet should exercise his or her gift as best s/he can. But as with the 'measure of faith' in 12.3 we should understand 'the faith' as the same for all, so that the point is that prophets should not feel themselves at liberty to say whatever comes into their heads, but rather should speak in conscious accord with the beliefs that make the church what it is. This is the only NT passage in which *analogia* occurs, but its basic meaning concerns proportion; here that would be the proportional relationship between the faith as a whole and what individual prophets say, rather than to the proportional relationship between the gift of prophecy and the amount of faith an individual prophet may have.

Rm 12.9-13 then gives a general list of ways in which individual Christians and groups or churches are to behave, which are concerned with building up the community as a whole (i.e., not simply with the pursuit of individual virtue or holiness as though for its own sake).

Love stands at the head of the list, as often in Paul (12.9; see above all 1Co 13; and also Ga 5.22). Love is loyalty, not just feelings—the practical care for each other that marked the early church (see 1Th 4.9-12). Paul presupposes that there is a large area of moral life that does not need spelling out; everyone knows that some things are good and others evil, and at this point there is a substantial overlap between the Christian community and their neighbors both Jewish and pagan.

The rest of the list (12.10-13) consists of lightning sketches of ways to build up the community, and it reads like a charming little poem in Greek. There must be real affection;

Christians should 'go first and lead the way in showing honor to one another'; should not be lazy about diligence (12.11). Their spirits must be constantly aglow, like the fire that burns in an old-fashioned stove to keep the house warm and to be ready for cooking and similar tasks. And they must regard themselves as servants of the Lord, that is, of Jesus himself. Their life (12.12) should be a steady stream of rejoicing in hope, remaining patient under suffering, and giving themselves insistently to prayer. And (12.13) they should share with Christians in need, and be eager to be hospitable, open their homes to those in need. This is what early Christians meant by 'love'.

c Living under God's regime in the present age: Relations with outsiders, hostile and not 12.14-21

At the heart of the A-B-C-C-B-A structure of 12.1-13.14, two paragraphs (12.14-21 and 13.1-7) deal with the life of the church in the world.

Taking 12.14-21 and 13.1-7 as two halves of a statement of Christian responsibility with respect to outsiders gives the whole of 12-13 a certain symmetry. It is true that some parts of 12.14-21, especially 12.15-16, could be seen as speaking still of life within the church, but the transition in 12.14 is quite marked, grammatically as well as in content, and it is probably better to see those parts, though relevant to church life, as dealing principally with Christian responsibility toward outsiders. In particular, 12.19-20 forbids vengeance in terms that link closely to the description of the rulers' obligations in 13.4, and it seems clear that Paul intends these two passages to be mutually interpretative. Those outside the Christian community can be wolves on the attack or God-given civic authorities whose vocation it is to keep order and peace.

So the attention shifts in Rm 12.14 to those who would attack and harm the Christian community. We don't know of any persecution in the Roman church during the 50s, but Paul assumes that it will come to those who are loyal to Jesus (1Th 2.14; 3.3-4; cf. 2Tm 3.12). The appropriate response is blessing, not cursing. Paul stands firmly with Jesus and the entire early Christian tradition against *all* other European or Mediterranean traditions known to us; elsewhere, only Buddhism may be an exception. The seven brothers in 2Mc 7 go to their deaths calling down solemn curses on their persecutors. But in both Jesus' teaching and practice, hostility was to be met with prayer, and violence with blessing.⁶ It's hard to imagine this becoming the church's norm, as it clearly did from the very start, unless it was firmly rooted in the words and example of Jesus himself.

⁶ Mt 5.38-48; Lk 6.28-35; 23.34; Ac 7.60; 1Co 4.12; 1P 2.20-23; 3.9; probably Ep 5.1 as well.

In this context, 12.15-16 is not so much about the internal life of the church, as about how to live alongside pagan neighbors. They should not keep themselves aloof, but rejoice and sorrow with them. 'Thinking the same things toward one another' (12.16) is the kind of command Paul can issue to Christians (e.g., Ph 2.2), but here refers more generally to getting along with fellow citizens. 'Don't get wise beyond yourselves' (12.16) is a strong echo of 11.25 and 12.3 (using the *phron-* root again); clearly Paul wants to head off any attitude of superiority, whether against Jews (11.25), fellow-Christians (12.3), or pagans (12.16).

In 12.17-18, Paul reiterates the basic command that runs through this paragraph: not to repay evil for evil (see 1Th 5.15; and, behind that, with further echoes, Pr 20.22). Instead, one must take 'forethought' (*pro-nooumenoi*) about what will show the world that one has nothing to be ashamed of. Of course, the world will not always relate when Christians refuse to go along with its ways (cf. Ep 5.11-14; 1P 4.35). But Christians should gladly join in the highest moral standards of the surrounding culture.

In 12.14, Paul said, Do not curse your persecutors; in 12.17, do not repay evil for evil; and now, a third time, do not retaliate, adding an explanation (*gar*) from scripture (12.19-20). Do not try to bring about your own justice (12.19). The verb *ekdikeō*, as its root (*dik-*) suggests, indicates doing justice, which Paul is not forbidding; what he prohibits is doing it freelance, in one's own favor (*heautous*)— in other words, what we call 'vengeance.' The traditional translation 'vengeance' is thus misleading; what he's getting at is judicial punishment: Don't try it on your own. It is 'vengeance' when offended parties take the law into their own hands. Instead of this, 'give place to wrath.' In mid-paragraph, he addresses his readers as 'beloved,' perhaps to encourage the sense that his audience is loved by God and must not imagine that they need to take matters into their own hands.

Without chapter 13 it might not be clear what 'not giving place to wrath' means— 'let your own wrath smolder away quietly,' 'leave room for God's wrath,' or 'let the process of moral cause and effect take its course'? He would certainly have ruled out the first of these— just sitting on one's anger till it subsides. The second points in the right direction, and the third might not have been foreign to him either. But with 13.4 coming up six verses later, we can be reasonably confident that he means 'allow God to do justice— and it may be done through the courts.' But one can't act in one's own case with impartiality, which is why Dt 32.35 declares that God reserves the sole right to judicial punishment. Paul isn't working with the larger story of Dt 32 here, but he quotes Dt 32.35 here, as he had quoted Dt 32.21 in 10.19, and will quote Dt 32.43 in 15.10; this was clearly a passage he drew on regularly.

In place of private vengeance, Paul shockingly recommends to feed a hungry foe, give drink to a thirsty one. He quotes Pr 25.21-22, that this will heap coals of fire on the enemy's head ('and YHWH will reward you,' adds Proverbs). The OT contains one or two striking examples of this practice, notably 1Kg 6.20-23, where Elisha commanded the king of Israel not to kill enemies who were supernaturally delivered into his hands, but to give them a banquet. In that instance, the Syrian enemies did not return to invade Israel.

At first sight it might look as though the 'coals of fire' meant some kind of punishment (however metaphorical); but this would hardly qualify as 're-paying evil with good,' since the vengeful intention would still be uppermost; it just gets God to do the dirty work. The 'coals of fire' are the burning shame for having treated someone so badly. The point is then that treating enemies kindly is not only appropriate behavior in its own right, refusing the vengeance that would usurp God's prerogative; it may also have the effect of turning their hearts.

Paul sums up the whole paragraph with another possible allusion to the Sermon on the Mount, and to the gospel events themselves, Jesus' death and resurrection: 'Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good' (12.21). Yes, there is evil 'out there' in the world. But God's people are to meet it in the way that even God met it: with love and generous goodness. The theology of the cross, in fact, can be glimpsed under this apparently detached ethical maxim: when God came to defeat evil, this was not achieved by using an even greater evil, but by using its opposite— namely, the surprising and counterintuitive weapons of goodness. To be consumed with vengeful thoughts, or to be led into putting such thoughts into practice, is to keep evil in circulation, whereas the way to overthrow evil, rather than perpetuating it, is to take its force and give back goodness instead. As with the commands of 12.14,17, we may question whether someone in Paul's tradition of Torah-based zeal could have come to this position had it not been for the example and teaching of the Messiah himself.