

## CEC Bible Study: Romans

Session 7: Romans 12 – 13  
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Sept. 16, 2020  
Christ Episcopal Church  
Cape Girardeau, MO

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Opening Question: What are the ethical/moral consequences of God's grace?

### Romans 12: Moral Behavior Appropriate to the Grace of God in Christ

- “I appeal to you, therefore...” (12:1)
  - Signals the beginning of the Moral Exhortation (*Parenesis*) section of the letter
  - Indicates that what follows is directly tied to what Paul has just spent the last 11 chapters clarifying
- “Present your bodies...”
  - Two kinds of “bodies”:
    - σῶμα (*sōma*) = “whole body”
    - σὰρξ (*sarx*) = “flesh”
  - In Rom. 12:1, Paul uses *sōma* = not just physical flesh, but whole body
    - So: “Present your very selves entirely”
    - Or: “Throw your bodies in the offering plate” (Beverly Roberts Gaventa)
- NOT “spiritual worship” (as in the NRSV)
  - Rather: λογικὴν (*logikēn*) = “reasonable” worship
- The gist: For Paul, given what God has done for us in and through Christ, it is therefore *reasonable* to respond to God's grace with appropriate gratitude by presenting our entire selves in faithful service to God's kingdom.
  - This idea is reflected in the General Thanksgiving:
    - “...And, we beseech thee, give us that due sense of all thy mercies, that our hearts may be unfeignedly thankful; and **that we show forth thy praise, not only with our lips, but in our lives, by giving up our selves to thy service**, and by walking before thee in holiness and righteousness all our days...” (BCP 1979, pp.71–72).
- “By the grace given to me...do not think more highly of yourself than you ought to think...” (12:3–8)
  - God's grace undermines the absolute claim of either Jews or gentiles to the title “the People of God,” so that (to use Paul's phrasing) “no one may boast”
  - This applies not only to Jews and gentiles, but also to the diverse roles within the Body of Christ (12:4–8)
- Conclusion: A series of Christian ethical teachings (12:9–21)

### Romans 13: The Body of Christ vs. the Empire of Caesar

- Regarding obedience to the imperial authorities (13:1–7)

- Wait...Does Paul really mean what it sounds like he means?
- Neil Elliott, *The Arrogance of Nations: Reading Romans in the Shadow of Empire*:
  - “If we do not immediately hear the counter-imperial aspects of Paul’s letter, perhaps it is because we are predisposed, by the constricted, privatized, and domesticated contexts in which Paul’s letters are most usually read, to perceive in them only a narrow bandwidth of what we consider religious discourse...” (p.9).
- [Stanley Hauerwas on Romans 13](#)
  - “[You should] never read Rom. 13 without reading [Rom. 12:14–21](#). Because then you begin to see that applies also to Caesar — “Do not avenge.” And then you’ll begin to get a sense of how Christians in America have failed to read Paul well, because they want to read Paul as underwriting democratic presuppositions of government that assume somebody’s gotta kill somebody in the name of Jesus.”
- Paul’s language here doesn’t make much sense, given the antagonism he sees among the [principalities and powers](#) elsewhere: [1 Cor. 2:6–8](#); [Rom. 8:38–39](#); [Eph. 6:12](#).
- Elliott, *The Arrogance of Nations*, suggests three possible readings (pp.152–161):
  - 1) Perhaps a reference to contemporary tax “riots” in the vicinity of Rome that took place in 49 CE?
    - In this reading, Paul would be encouraging the (likely gentile) Christians not to stir up political dissent that might attract unwanted imperial attention.
  - 2) Jewett: No distinction between “classes” of citizens, so Rom. 12–13 applies just as much to Caesar as to Roman Christians.
  - 3) T. L. Carter: Rom. 13:1–7 so out-of-step with his own rhetoric that ought to be read ironically.
  - Elliott concludes: “It is impossible to read a single coherent posture in Rom. 13:1–7. The text is an instance neither of straightforward endorsement of Roman power nor of an ironic subversion of imperial claims. Rather...we are in touch here with the constraining force of ideology, with ‘voice under domination.’” (p.156).
- The only thing Christians owe to one another is love, “for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law” ([13:8–10](#); see also [Matt. 22:34–40](#))
- The *Parousia* (the royal return of the Lord Jesus) is near, and calls for sober discernment ([13:11–14](#))
  - Lends credibility to Carter’s theory: “The eschatological references to ‘this age’ (12:2) and to the coming ‘hour’ and ‘day’ of reversal (13:11–14) inevitably would have subverted the ‘apparent’ commendation of the authorities in 13:1–7: ‘Paul only *seems* to grant the authorities an unconditional status: in reality they belong to the present age of darkness which is passing away” (Carter, “The Irony of Romans 13,” cited in Elliott, *Arrogance of Nations*, p.155).