

Seven Principles on Interpersonal Relations

By Father Alexander

Romans Chapter 12

The Apostle Paul thought it necessary to include instruction on what counts as proper conduct among Christians. As the church in Rome consisted of both, Jews and Gentiles, instruction was imperative. An example of the problems that might arise was the early Church in Antioch, where the unity was easily cancelled when representatives of the Church of Jerusalem were present, and Barnabas too had a part in the dissimulation.

In this article, Paul's advice is reviewed as consisting of principles because their violation does away with the role of the Christian church, whereas their observance brings health, salvation, and promotes the goals of the church.

First Principle

The first lesson from the Apostle Paul is expressed in 12:9: Love must be without dissimulation. In order to be fair to the Apostle, he does not advise an attempt, or a willingness to get along. The Christian cannot simply decide to be nice to his neighbor. The Greek word *anhypocritos* means “without hypocrisy.” This love is either genuine or it does not exist. That requirement becomes a considerable challenge, in any group of human beings.

One can easily imagine situations in which two members of the church have differences over a long period of time and are not naturally drawn together. Their love for each other is still binding; therefore, they must find a way to set differences aside and ensure that the interest they show is genuine and sincere. The choice open before them is between hypocrisy and a heart-felt love. They simply must change.

Second Principle

The second principle pushes the first into insignificance. In verse 10, Paul rises to new heights when he says that Christians must “prefer” one another! Today, we connect preference with incidental matters. One prefers tea to coffee, or may be inclined to throw less salt on an egg than another. These are matters of preference, in the modern sense.

The Greek term *proegoumemei* means “leading ahead”; in terms of the verb *prefer*, the “pre” mean before, and “fer” means to carry. Each Christian is to place his neighbor's welfare ahead of his own. A good turn is to be met with one that excels. Such an approach leads to new levels of closeness. In such a church, a hypocritical approach on the part of anyone stands out as inappropriate and spiritually ugly.

Third Principle

The third principle is built on the second. Verse 11 says, *pneumati zeontes* (in spirit, fervent). This term means being on fire, boiling, not lukewarm.

The Greek verbs are all in the continuous tense. A Christian is fervent, full of life. It was easy, in Rome, to be in conflict with magistrates or other men of rank, as Christians did not observe Roman days, parades, or religious events. Even so, in spirit, they had to be fervent.

Fourth Principle

Verse 12 adds hope. “Because you have a hope, you must be rejoicing.” This hope will help you face difficulties in life, even lead you to prayer. The person that has hope is also patient. These are gifts of the Holy Spirit. They enable the Christian to continue steadily on the Christian path. The person that has these gifts does not neglect the body of Christ. The church relied heavily on mutual help, distribution of goods, and hospitality.

Notice that Paul says, “pursuing hospitality.” The word “pursuing” announces that this also is genuine. It is not imposed. It is not requested. It is pursued. One is not to forget the Jew/Gentile structure of the Roman church. Does a Jew invite a Christian to his house? If a Christian invited a Jew, would the Jew go? Remember that the centurion said, “Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter my house” (Matthew 8:8). Peter also, said something similar, in Acts 10:28.

Fifth Principle

Verse 16 picks, out a fundamental problem of a person, whether Jew or Gentile. No one should think more highly of his or her own standing or state. Self-importance, riches, affluence, social position, etc. can be destructive in a church, because they destroy the unity of the church.

In his first letter to the Corinthians (Chapter 1:26-28), Paul wrote that the Corinthians, despite their low social status, were chosen by God for a purpose; so that the weak would confound the strong, to bring down all the mighty works of man. In their calling, the important consideration was not to find out who is greater, but whether they would yield to the will of God and become his instruments – the highest possible calling.

Sixth Principle

In verse 19, Paul tells the Romans to beware of anger. It can only be destructive. Anger only increases evil. One acts in anger and then regrets the result.

According to Paul, only God has the ability to be corrective in punishment. Isaiah 19:22 states that God can smite and heal. Through chastisement, he reforms man. He made the Israelites go through the desert first, to ensure they learnt obedience. God chastises and reforms. He can make Saul (who became Paul) evaluate his past and dedicate himself to the very gospel that he once persecuted.

Seventh Principle

The last principle that the Apostle advocates is found in 12:18. “In so far as it is lies with you, live peaceably with all men.” There are instances in which people are slaves to evil (Romans 12:21). In so far as we are able, we should be willing to help. The Christian can feed his or her enemy, return a lost animal, and do more. If matters are worse, the Christian is not obligated. For this reason, the Apostle Paul found it necessary to “appeal to Caesar” (Act 25:11).

In Paul's mind, a Christian never ceases to be a man of God. In this life, he reflects the mind of Christ and follows the path of mercy towards his fellow man. This is the meaning of being in Christ, of being a member of God's church. If the Romans understood these principles, the Jew-Gentile differences would be resolved.

The very fact that Paul sent them such advice showed clearly that, in his visit to Rome, he would teach them more. Whether they were Jews or Gentiles, their interpersonal relationships determined their standing as men and women of God.