

ROMANS 12:9–13: GREEK GRAMMAR AND HOW TO WORSHIP GOD

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Abstract: *Romans 12:9–13 has traditionally been viewed as a discreet unit composed of a series of commands, even though there is no clear discourse boundary at 12:9 and the passage does not contain a single imperative form. Careful attention to the Greek text, however, reveals that 12:9–13 is part of a subunit that begins in 12:6 and that 12:1–13 in its entirety is concerned with how to offer our bodies as living sacrifices in genuine worship that is holy and acceptable to God. Paul conveys this profound message using a cluster of lexical forms in 12:1–2, followed by a conjunction that tells us that 12:3–13 serves to strengthen his statement in 12:1–2. And using a single sentence that includes two rhetorical lists in 12:6–13, Paul makes it clear that the strengthening unit that begins in 12:3 extends all the way to verse 13, rather than stopping at the end of verse 8, as most scholars and English translations suppose.*

Key words: *Romans, Greek grammar, lexical clusters, rhetorical lists, conjunctions, particles, discourse structure, living sacrifices, worship*

At first glance, Romans 12:9–13 looks like a random group of commands¹ or, as the heading in the ESV and NRSV states, a passage that presents the “Marks of the True Christian.” Moo notes the loose structure of 12:9–21, observing that “there are few conjunctions or particles to indicate the flow of thought.” He suggests that “Paul fires off a volley of short, sharp injunctions with little elaboration” and concludes that “the apparently haphazard arrangement makes it especially difficult to pinpoint the theme of the passage.”² In what follows, I will suggest that though the structure of 12:9–13 is unusual, careful attention to detail reveals not only a clearly structured discourse unit, but also a clear theme and consistent flow of thought that is almost entirely absent of explicit injunctions.³ Indeed, we will see that the grammar of this passage necessarily leads to the conclusion that 12:9 does not begin a new part of the discourse and what follows in verses 10–13 actually has nothing to do with setting forth the marks of a true Christian. Instead, 12:6–13 presents a single sentence in which Paul instructs his audience in how to engage in priestly worship that is holy and acceptable to God through the exercise of spiritual gifts that operate within the context of genuine love for one another.

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¹ Cf. James S. Lowry, “The Ethics of Hodgepodge,” *Journal for Preachers* 40.1 (2016): 21.

² Douglas J. Moo, *Romans*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 771.

³ Though I recognize that the whole of Romans 12 forms a coherent subsection of the overall discourse, I have chosen to focus on 12:1–13, given space limitations and the distinctive exegetical challenges in this part of the chapter.

To understand what Paul was doing with this part of Romans we need to consider five factors: (1) the context, (2) a key lexical cluster, (3) Paul's use of connectives in this passage, (4) a distinctive rhetorical tool, and (5) an important syntactic issue that appears to have gone unrecognized in the literature. Considering all this will require that we look carefully at the larger unit of which our passage is a part: Romans 12:1–13.

I. CONTEXTUAL ISSUES

We begin with the contextual issues. In Romans 9–11, Paul addresses the question of where his gospel left the old covenant people of God. After explaining God's plan to ultimately save Israel, Paul concludes those chapters with an outburst of praise to God.

Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! ³⁴For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?" ³⁵Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?" ³⁶For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen (Rom 11:33–36, ESV).

It is not surprising that Paul follows his outburst of praise with an immediate call to worship: "I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship" (Rom 12:1, ESV).

II. A KEY LEXICAL CLUSTER

What is remarkable in Romans 12:1 is the language that Paul uses, as we find repeated use of terms from the same semantic domain: worship. The thematic development that occurs through choosing several terms from the semantic domain of worship in 12:1 sets the direction for what follows. The key question will be how far the theme of worship extends, and to answer that question, we will later consider Paul's use of connectives.

In Judaism, the sole responsibility for presenting sacrifices to God was given to priests. Here, however, that responsibility is given to all Christians, whose bodies are to be presented (*παραστήσαι*) as living sacrifices (*θυσίαν*) that are "holy" (*ἅγιαν*) and "acceptable" or "pleasing" to God (*εὐάρεστον*). And this action is described as their "worship" (*λατρείαν*), using a term that refers to the performance of religious rites as part of worship.⁴ In short, Romans 12:1 is full of language used of carrying out priestly duties in worship, and that language is applied to followers of Jesus.

⁴ See L&N 53.14. We know from elsewhere in Scripture that God rescues sinners to make them a holy and royal priesthood (1 Pet 2:4, 9; Rev 5:9–10). In Romans 12:1, Paul drives that point home. Just as Jesus is presented as a great high priest who offers himself as a sacrifice for sins (e.g., Heb 3:1; 4:14; 9:11; 7:27; 10:12), so here Christians are described as priests who offer themselves as living sacrifices in worship to God.

Romans 12 thus begins by reminding followers of Jesus that the obvious way to respond to the God who has done such glorious things (Rom 1–11) is to carry out our priestly duties and offer up our own bodies as living sacrifices. That is the only way we can bring “spiritual” worship to God that flows out of proper “understanding.”⁵ That, of course, naturally raises questions that Paul anticipates: What practically does it look like to offer our bodies as living sacrifices? What exactly are the priestly duties Christians are supposed to carry out? What constitutes holy and acceptable worship?

The first part of the answer to these questions is given through the imperatives in Romans 12:2, which is closely linked to the exhortation in 12:1 with the conjunction *καί*. For us to offer our bodies to God as living sacrifices in a way that is “holy and acceptable,” we must first make sure that we are not conforming to this age but are instead being transformed by the renewing of our minds. We need to get our thinking right.⁶ And right thinking that leads to right worship is the focus of what follows.

III. PAUL'S USE OF CONNECTIVES

Verse 3 is then introduced with a *γάρ*, signaling that what follows will expand on what has just been said. It tells us that Paul is not developing a new part of his argument, but rather he is fleshing out or strengthening the ideas he has just introduced.⁷ Paul called the Roman Christians to avoid conforming to the thinking of

⁵ Peterson rightly warns, “If Paul’s expression is translated ‘spiritual worship,’ there is a danger of accenting the inwardness of Christian worship and not taking sufficient account of the fact that we are to yield our bodies to God’s service.” David Peterson, “Worship and Ethics in Romans 12,” *TynBul* 44.2 (1993): 275. He notes the common Stoic usage of *λογικὸς* in the first century and goes on to suggest that the likely point of *τὴν λογικὴν λατρείαν* is something like “understanding worship,” or “worship which is consonant with the truth of the gospel” (275). See also Ian W. Scott, “Your Reasoning Worship’: ΛΟΓΙΚΟΣ in Romans 12:1 and Paul’s Ethics of Rational Deliberation,” *JTS* 69.2 (2018): 500–32.

⁶ Within the context of the Jew-Gentile tensions in the church at Rome that are reflected in Paul’s letter, the command to avoid conforming to the pattern of this age likely means rejecting traditional Jewish understandings of worship. See Stanley E. Porter, *The Letter to the Romans: A Linguistic and Literary Commentary*, NTM 37 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2015), 231. This is supported by the abundance of worship language taken from the Old Testament.

⁷ See Stephen H. Levinsohn, *Discourse Features of New Testament Greek: A Coursebook on the Information Structure of New Testament Greek*, 2nd ed. (Dallas: SIL, 2000), 91; Jacob K. Heckert, *Discourse Function of Conjoiners in the Pastoral Epistles* (Dallas: SIL, 1996), 31, 36; Steven E. Runge, *Discourse Grammar of the Greek New Testament: A Practical Introduction for Teaching and Exegesis* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2010), 52; Frank Thielman, *Romans*, ZECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018), 564, 573; Richard N. Longenecker, *Romans*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 928; Richard D. Balge, “Gift, Service, and Function in the New Testament Church: A Study of 1 Corinthians 12 and Romans 12,” *WTLQ* 92.2 (1995): 86. The connection between 12:1–2 and what follows is thus marked grammatically. Though most recognize this connection, most also limit it, at least implicitly, to a connection between 12:3–8 and 12:1–2. As we will see, however, the connection extends to verse 13, with 12:1–13 forming a single coherent part of Paul’s argument that continues in a looser manner in what follows; contra Moo, who claims, “No specific relationship with vv. 1–2 is evident” (*Romans*, 759). Later, though, Moo clarifies his earlier musing: “By connecting this paragraph to vv. 1–2 with a ‘for,’ Paul suggests that the exhortations he now gives are concrete instances of the transformed way of life to which the believer is called” (760).

this age as they offered their bodies as living sacrifices to God, and this most likely especially includes Jewish notions of worship. He is going to explain that presenting our bodies as living sacrifices involves, first, using the spiritual gifts that God has given us (12:6–8), but before he gets to that he addresses a foundational issue. He essentially says in 12:3–5, “The first way to carry out your priestly duties is to stop thinking too highly of yourself.”

God calls us to reject the view that we are the center of the universe. Though verse 4 contains a second *γάρ*, it is clear from the context that what follows is an expansion of the statement in 12:3,⁸ which itself introduces an expansion of the imperatives in 12:1–2. Not thinking too highly of oneself requires recognizing that we are each just one part of Christ’s body. We are not all heads. Every part is necessary, but not every part will be prominent. These verses thus present one of the most consistent themes in the New Testament: Life is not about me, my passions, or my dreams; it is about living a life of holy and acceptable worship toward God.

Not surprisingly, Paul addresses this foundational truth before introducing the first major feature of what it looks like to carry out priestly acts of worship as followers of Jesus. Such priestly worship begins with using one’s spiritual gifts within the context of the life of the local body of Christ, as we see in verses 6–8. If we fail to understand that life is not about us and that we are simply one part of a body carrying out our distinctive role in causing the whole body to function in a healthy and fruitful manner, we end up having churches that look a lot like the church in Corinth, where spiritual *gifts* were in abundance, but spiritual *life* was being destroyed by self-seeking users of those gifts.

IV. A DISTINCTIVE RHETORICAL TOOL

That brings us to verse 6, where the grammar of this passage becomes more complex and has been disputed by scholars. To understand its grammar and argument we first need to recognize that Paul is using a rhetorical tool that has been almost completely ignored by Greek scholars. I will refer to that tool as the “rhetorical list.”⁹ It is quite common for scholars to casually describe what we find in both verses 6–8 and/or verses 9–13 as series of admonitions, injunctions, exhortations, or imperatives.¹⁰ While the broad context is clearly hortatory,¹¹ given the

This is likely what drives Barram to describe 12:1–2 as the “interpretive key” to the entire chapter. Michael Barram, “Romans 12:9–21,” *Int* 57.4 (2003): 424.

⁸ So Thielman, *Romans*, 574; Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 650; Leander E. Keck, *Romans*, ANTC (Nashville: Abingdon, 2005), 297.

⁹ This label merely identifies the lists in this passage as embedded, crucial supporting components of the argument structure as opposed to, say, a shopping list, which we might find in the papyri, or a genealogical list in an Old or New Testament narrative. I am not aware of anything like this being mentioned in ancient rhetorical handbooks or in the work of other modern scholars.

¹⁰ Longenecker, *Romans*, 936, 937; Keck, *Romans*, 304; Porter, *Romans*, 238; Craig S. Keener, *Romans*, NCC (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2009), 147. Porter, at least, grounds his claim in the fact that the immediate context is clearly hortatory. Indeed, it is quite common for scholars to claim that 12:9–13 is the beginning of a section of *parenthesis* or “traditional moral instruction in the form of commands or maxims.”

imperatives in 12:1–2 and the grammatical function of 12:3–13 introduced by *γάρ*, verses 6–13 do not explicitly include imperatives or indeed any other hortatory forms. Instead, this section is made up primarily of two rhetorical lists.

A rhetorical list is typically a series of phrases that functions as a unit, utilizes clear repetition of forms throughout, and may be grammatically connected in a relatively loose way to what precedes. The writer may make use of any number of repeated grammatical forms or lexemes to form the rhetorical list. Rhetorical lists, however, are not typically a series of statements, commands, or even full clauses.¹² Instead, they tend to be a quick series of examples expressed in phrases that flesh out a larger point rather than making new points of their own.¹³ They function much like bullet points in modern English writing. First Corinthians 13:4–7 is atypical but clearly presents a list of sorts:

Ἡ ἀγάπη μακροθυμεῖ, χρηστεύεται ἡ ἀγάπη	Love is patient; love is kind
οὐ ζηλοῖ	It is not envious
οὐ περπερεύεται	It does not brag
οὐ φυσιοῦται	It is not arrogant
⁵ οὐκ ἀσχημονεῖ	It is not shameful
οὐ ζητεῖ τὰ ἑαυτῆς	It does not seek its own things
οὐ παροξύνεται	It is not cantankerous
οὐ λογίζεται τὸ κακόν	It does not keep track of wrongs
⁶ οὐ χαίρει ἐπὶ τῇ ἀδικίᾳ, συγχαίρει δὲ τῇ ἀληθείᾳ	It does not rejoice in injustice, but rejoices in truth
⁷ πάντα στέγει	It bears all things
πάντα πιστεύει	It believes all things
πάντα ἐλπίζει	It hopes all things
πάντα ὑπομένει	It endures all things ¹⁴

The eightfold repetition of *οὐ/οὐκ* followed by present indicative third singular verbs makes it clear that we are dealing with a rhetorical list.¹⁵ As in Romans 12, the shape of the list eventually shifts, and in this case, we find a fourfold repetition of *πάντα* again followed by present indicative third singular verbs. In this list, however, we are dealing with a list of clauses. After the first two clauses, all the subse-

Luke Timothy Johnson, *Reading Romans: A Literary and Theological Commentary* (New York: Crossroad, 1997), 183.

¹¹ So Porter, *Romans*, 238.

¹² Contra, e.g., Johnson, who describes 12:9–13 as part of a larger section (12:9–21) that utilizes sentences that are “short and disconnected.” He gives “avoid evil and pursue good” (12:9) as an example, even though it is not grammatically a sentence. Johnson, *Reading Romans*, 183.

¹³ Longenecker (*Romans*, 937) rightly sees verses 10–13 as an “explication of what it means to love genuinely.”

¹⁴ Author’s translation.

¹⁵ Other rhetorical lists may be found in the New Testament, for example, in Philippians 2:1–4, 3:5–6, and 2 Corinthians 6:4–6.

quent verbs have ἡ ἀγάπη as their implied subject, making the grammar straightforward.

In Romans 12:6–13, however, while the use of lists should be obvious, the way the two rhetorical lists connect to the rest of the passage is less obvious. Standard commentaries give little or no attention to the use of rhetorical lists here, let alone any consideration of how the use of such lists impacts understanding the text. This can be attributed to several factors, including how our Greek New Testaments are formatted, how our English Bibles are translated and formatted, and a lack of careful attention to Greek grammar in this passage. Consider how much grammatical and lexical repetition the two parts of this passage contain.

In verses 6–8, we see a fourfold repetition of εἶτε and a sixfold repetition of prepositional phrases headed by ἐν.

εἶτε προφητεῖαν	κατὰ τὴν ἀναλογίαν τῆς πίστεως
εἶτε διακονίαν	ἐν τῇ διακονίᾳ
εἶτε ὁ διδάσκων	ἐν τῇ διδασκαλίᾳ
εἶτε ὁ παρακαλῶν	ἐν τῇ παρακλήσει
(εἶτε) ὁ μεταδιδούς	ἐν ἀπλότητι
(εἶτε) ὁ προϊστάμενος	ἐν σπουδῇ
(εἶτε) ὁ ἐλεῶν	ἐν ἰλαρότητι
whether prophecy	according to the proportion of faith
whether service	in serving
whether the one who teaches	in teaching
whether the one who exhorts	in exhortation
(whether) the one who contributes	in generosity
(whether) the one who leads	in eagerness
(whether) one who shows mercy	in cheerfulness ¹⁶

Though some scholars see a change in grammar at ὁ μεταδιδούς,¹⁷ it is almost certain that εἶτε is simply left implicit in the final three elements for stylistic reasons. We have, then, parallel language in both parts of the structure throughout nearly the entire unit, making the use of a list obvious. The same is true in verses 10–13:

τῇ φιλαδελφίᾳ	εἰς ἀλλήλους	φιλόστοργοι
τῇ τιμῇ	ἀλλήλους	προηγούμενοι
τῇ σπουδῇ		μὴ ὀκνηροί
τῷ πνεύματι		ζέοντες
τῷ κυρίῳ		δουλεύοντες
τῇ ἐλπίδι		χαίροντες
τῇ θλίψει		ὑπομένοντες

¹⁶ Author's translation.

¹⁷ E.g., Schreiner, *Romans*, 658.

τῇ προσευχῇ
ταῖς χρείαις τῶν ἀγίων
τὴν φιλοξενίαν

προσκαρτεροῦντες
κοινωνοῦντες
διώκοντες

in regard to brotherly affection	one another	loving tenderly
in regard to honor	one another	outdoing
in regard to eagerness		not being lazy
in regard to the spirit/Spirit		being fervent
in regard to the Lord		serving
in regard to hope		rejoicing
in regard to tribulation		enduring
in regard to prayer		being devoted
in regard to the needs of the saints,		sharing—pursuing hospitality

Here we find a series of nine dative noun phrases, each of which is modified by a nominative plural adjective or participle. Again, parallel language in both parts of the structure throughout nearly the entire unit marks the presence of a list. As we will see, recognizing the presence of two rhetorical lists in Romans 12:6–13 has major implications for how we understand this passage, including how we understand the structure of this part of Romans 12.

V. AN IMPORTANT SYNTACTIC ISSUE

It is quite common to assume that verse 9 begins a new discourse unit of some sort. This assumption is reflected in most English Bible translations that include a heading before Romans 12:9, and it is commonly expressed in major commentaries. Moo, for example, states that “v. 9, which is not tied syntactically to vv. 3–8, creates a break, both in style and content.”¹⁸ Dunn similarly suggests that “the absence of a joining particle and the change of style probably dictate that the reader should take a pause and so make a new beginning.”¹⁹ That brings us to our fifth area of investigation: an important syntactic issue in this passage.

Many have recognized the challenge in the syntax of verse 6. It begins with a participle and Paul never seems to finish the sentence with a main verb. Dunn, for example, points out that “it is almost universally assumed that v 6 begins a new sentence ... with the second halves of the subsequent phrases filled out with imperatival force—so particularly RSV: ‘Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, *let us use them.*’”²⁰ Dunn appears to go on to argue that ἔχοντες should be connected grammatically to what precedes, with the plural participle being driv-

¹⁸ Moo, *Romans*, 774.

¹⁹ James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 9–16*, WBC 38B (Dallas: Word, 1988), 739.

²⁰ Dunn, *Romans 9–16*, 725; see also Neva F. Miller, “The Imperativals of Romans 12,” in *Linguistics and New Testament Interpretation: Essays on Discourse Analysis*, ed. D. A. Black (Nashville: Broadman, 1992), 173.

en by the fact that the body is made up of multiple “organs and limbs.”²¹ Though some of Dunn’s explanation of what is going on in this passage is helpful, I suggest the vast majority of scholars see a new sentence beginning at verse 6 for good reason. The presence of *δέ* following *ἔχοντες* makes grammatically linking the participle to what precedes untenable.²² In fact, the phrase *ἔχοντες δέ* reflects an extremely common construction that is frequently used to mark a sentence boundary in the New Testament: a nominative participle followed by *δέ* (likely at least 250 times).²³

I am certainly not the first to recognize the grammatical significance of Paul’s use of *ἔχοντες δέ* in verse 6. Most scholars agree that this phrase begins a new sentence.²⁴ What has puzzled scholars in the past, however, is that the sentence-initial participle with *δέ* is normally followed by a main clause, and there is no such clause in Romans 12. Or is there? This is where two things come together: recognizing the presence and rhetorical use of lists, and grappling with the significance of the sentence boundary introduced by a nominative participle followed by *δέ*. Paul does not begin a new sentence and then fail to complete it, as some scholars suppose.²⁵ Instead, Paul begins a new sentence with an extended participial phrase (*ἔχοντες δὲ χαρίσματα κατὰ τὴν χάριν τὴν δοθεῖσαν ἡμῖν διάφορα*),²⁶ but before completing it with a main clause at the beginning of verse 9, he supports this first part of the sentence with an embedded list. There is nothing structurally remarkable about this, since the list functions as a unit, meaning that there is a *single grammatical unit* separating the first and second parts of the sentence:²⁷

²¹ Dunn, *Romans 9–16*, 725; cf. Brendan Byrne, *Romans*, SP 6 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996), 372; Jewett, *Romans*, 744. See also Kenneth Berding, “Romans 12.4–8: One Sentence or Two?,” *NTS* 52.3 (2006): 433–39.

²² Far too many scholars seem to have fallen into the trap of thinking that since *δέ* and other connectives and particles are often not translated in English, they may be ignored if translating them does not make ready sense in English.

²³ Cf. Thielman, *Romans*, 575; John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959, 1965), 121.

²⁴ For one of the more compelling arguments to the contrary, see Berding, “Romans 12.4–8,” 433–39.

²⁵ Contra, e.g., Keck, *Romans*, 299.

²⁶ Contra, e.g., Schreiner (*Romans*, 654), who is half right in maintaining that “verse 6 is a new sentence, and an implied verb such as ‘use’ should be inserted.” Grammatically, verse 6 is indeed a new sentence, but the implicit verb does not come until the main clause in verse 9. Most commentators, like Schreiner, argue for a series of implied imperative verbs in this section or assume that the participles function imperatively. See, e.g., Moo, *Romans*, 764; William Sanday and Arthur C. Headlam, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1902), 356; C. K. Barrett, *The Epistle to the Romans*, BNTC (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991), 218; C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, 2 vols., ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1975, 1979), 618; Murray, *Romans*, 121; Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 439. Cf. D. A. Black, “The Pauline Love Command: Structure, Style, and Ethics in Romans 12:9–21,” *FNT* 2 (1989): 6; Seyoon Kim, “Paul’s Common Paraenesis (1 Thess. 4–5; Phil. 2–4; and Rom. 12–13): The Correspondence between Romans 1:18–32 and 12:1–2, and the Unity of Romans 12–13,” *TynBul* 62.1 (2011): 113–15.

²⁷ This same phenomenon occurs in a narrative text in Luke 6:13–17, where two conjoined participles (*ἐκλεξαμένους ... καὶ καταβάς*) are separated by the extended list in 6:14–16.

ἔχοντες δὲ χαρίσματα κατὰ τὴν χάριν τὴν δοθεῖσαν ἡμῖν διάφορα ...
 εἴτε προφητεῖαν κατὰ τὴν ἀναλογίαν τῆς πίστεως,
 εἴτε διακονίαν ἐν τῇ διακονίᾳ,
 εἴτε ὁ διδάσκων ἐν τῇ διδασκαλίᾳ,
 εἴτε ὁ παρακαλῶν ἐν τῇ παρακλήσει.²⁸
 (εἴτε) ὁ μεταδιδούς ἐν ἀπλότῃτι,
 (εἴτε) ὁ προϊστάμενος ἐν σπουδῇ,
 (εἴτε) ὁ ἐλεῶν ἐν ἰλαρότῃτι.
 ... ἡ ἀγάπη ἀνυπόκριτος,²⁹ ἀποστυγούντες τὸ πονηρόν, κολλώμενοι τῷ ἀγαθῷ,
 τῇ φιλαδελφίᾳ εἰς ἀλλήλους φιλόστοργοι,
 τῇ τιμῇ ἀλλήλους προηγούμενοι,
 τῇ σπουδῇ μὴ ὀκνηροί,
 τῷ πνεύματι ζέοντες,
 τῷ κυρίῳ δουλεύοντες,
 τῇ ἐλπίδι χαίροντες,
 τῇ θλίψει ὑπομένοντες,
 τῇ προσευχῇ προσκαρτεροῦντες,
 ταῖς χρείαις τῶν ἁγίων κοινωνοῦντες,
 τὴν φιλοξενίαν.³⁰ διώκοντες.

The traditional reading of Romans 12:9–13 maintains that verse 9 begins a new unit in the discourse, with some scholars pointing to the use of asyndeton in verse 9 to achieve this rhetorical effect.³¹ Disregarding the credibility of arguments regarding the rhetorical effects of asyndeton in this context, our analysis explains the lack of any conjunction in a far more satisfying manner. Paul does not use a connective at the beginning of verse 9 because ἡ ἀγάπη ἀνυπόκριτος is the main clause of a sentence that he began in verse 6.

Greek scholars will quickly notice some grammatical incongruity in this analysis. We would expect a genitive absolute rather than ἔχοντες because the main clause, ἡ ἀγάπη ἀνυπόκριτος, has a different subject than the participle.³² I would suggest, though, that given the intervening list—and the distance it creates between the participle and the main clause—and, more importantly, the lack of an overt verb in the main clause, such incongruity would have posed no processing difficulty

²⁸ The UBS⁵/NA²⁸ editors fail to recognize the ellipsis of εἴτε and thus use a semicolon rather than a comma here.

²⁹ Contrary to the UBS⁵/NA²⁸ text, there should be a comma here rather than a period.

³⁰ We expect a dative here. The shift to accusative may be intended to help mark the end of a very long list. Alternatively, it may signal that the final participial phrase (τὴν φιλοξενίαν διώκοντες) modifies the previous one: “in regard to the needs of the saints, sharing, i.e., pursuing hospitality.”

³¹ See, e.g., Black, “The Love Command,” 6.

³² This issue is compounded by the resumption of plural nominative participles in verse 9 (ἀποστυγούντες and κολλώμενοι).

to first-century Greek readers and would have been a very natural way for Paul to express his thought.³³

Why is recognizing Paul's use of rhetorical lists and a superficially discontinuous sentence in verses 6 and 9 important? First, it helps us see how the argument in this part of Romans develops. Reading English Bibles, we would likely miss the fact that 12:9–13 is a continuation of 12:1–8. There is no grammatical break. Paul is not starting a new section that is about the “Marks of a True Christian” (ESV, NRSV). The point is not to give us a discourse on “Christian Ethics” (HCSB) or “Rules of the Christian Life” (UBS⁵).³⁴ Nor is the point simply to show us “Love in Action” (NIV). Instead, Paul is expanding on what it looks like for Christians to worship God by presenting their bodies to him as living sacrifices in an appropriate manner.

Second, recognizing the presence and nature of the rhetorical lists in this passage along with the integrity of 12:6–13, which is held together by the single sentence formed by verses 6 and 9, should lead us to correct a problematic tendency among scholars and translators. The consensus view has long been that this passage is an extended series of admonitions with implied imperative verbs.³⁵ The passage is typically, therefore, translated and formatted as simple prose:

Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. ¹⁰ Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. ¹¹ Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. ¹² Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. ¹³ Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality (Rom 12:9–13, ESV).

We can easily see how the exegetical and translation decisions that have been made here lead readers to think that Paul is outlining the “Marks of a True Christian” (ESV, NRSV), elucidating “Christian Ethics” (HCSB), or illustrating “Love in Action” (NIV).³⁶ There is no question that the broad context is hortatory (see 12:1–2), but by portraying 12:9–13 as a series of commands, English Bible translations have changed the focus of the passage. When we recognize that we are dealing with rhetorical lists, on the other hand, and we keep in mind how the discourse of 12:1–13 is structured and how the argument develops, a somewhat different

³³ We find a similar construction in Acts 19:34, for example, where the subject of the nominative participial clause is third plural (ἐπιγινόντες) followed by an overt main verb (ἐγένετο) with a third singular subject (φωνή ... μία). In this case, “the conceptual link between those who ‘knew’ and those who shouted may account for the use of the nominative rather than the genitive absolute.” Martin M. Culy and Mikeal C. Parsons, *Acts: A Handbook on the Greek Text*, BHGNT (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2003), 378.

³⁴ This is a good example of why headings have no place in Greek New Testaments.

³⁵ Whether one argues that the participles themselves are imperatival (many scholars argue for this questionable syntactic category) or that the participles modify an implied imperatival copula (so Lamp), the end result is a putative list of formal exhortations. Jeffrey Lamp, “An Alternative Explanation for Alleged ‘Imperatival’ Participles of Romans 12:9–21,” *TynBul* 61.2 (2010): 311–16.

³⁶ The God's Word translation, like some other idiomatic translations, more appropriately uses a single heading for the entire chapter: “Dedicate Your Lives to God.” What these headings fail to do, however, is to identify for the reader that the chapter is about proper worship or the appropriate carrying out of our priestly duties. The only translation that does this effectively is the NLT, which uses “A Living Sacrifice to God” as the heading for the entire chapter.

picture emerges. Let me suggest a translation, that follows the Greek more closely and clearly identifies the rhetorical lists that are involved.³⁷ I will avoid bullet points, since they do not make for a very pleasing format in a Bible translation:

I appeal to you therefore, fellow believers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your genuine worship,² and do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

³ For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. ⁴ For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, ⁵ so we who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.

⁶ Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us ...

whether³⁸ prophecy according to the proportion of faith;

⁷ whether service in serving;

whether one who teaches in teaching;

⁸ whether one who exhorts in exhortation;

one who contributes in generosity;³⁹

one who leads in eagerness;

(or) one who shows mercy in cheerfulness,

⁹ ... let love be genuine,⁴⁰ despising⁴¹ what is evil, clinging to what is good—

¹⁰ in regard to brotherly affection, loving one another tenderly;

in regard to honor, outdoing one another;

¹¹ in regard to eagerness, not being lazy;

in regard to the spirit/Spirit, fervent⁴²;

in regard to the Lord, serving;

¹² in regard to hope, rejoicing;

in regard to tribulation, enduring;

in regard to prayer, being devoted;

¹³ in regard to the needs of the saints, sharing—pursuing hospitality.

³⁷ One of the primary values of so-called literal translations (or an “essentially literal translation” like the ESV) is their attempt to maintain verbal consistency, consistently translating a particular Greek form in the same way. This allows readers of the translation to see patterns that are in the original. Sometimes those patterns relate to structure, as here. Given the lack of verbal consistency in most English translations (including the ESV), however, and the unfortunate use of headings, we completely miss the point of what Paul is saying because we cannot see the structure that he used.

³⁸ The repeated use of εἴτε in this passage functions as a “multiple marker of condition” (L&N 89.69). Though it is equivalent in function to εἰ (Louw and Nida), the combination of εἰ with τε may make this compound lexeme more suitable for lists.

³⁹ At this point in the list, Paul begins to anticipate his focus on the way Christians exercise their gifts, which becomes central beginning in verse 9.

⁴⁰ Recognizing that Ἡ ἀγάπη ἀνυπόκριτος is the main clause, which follows ἔχοντες δὲ χαρίσματα, actually supports the view that the implicit verb carries hortatory force: “Let love be genuine.” Having spiritual gifts serves as some sort of ground for the proposition Ἡ ἀγάπη ἀνυπόκριτος (“This being true, this must also be true”), which would make little or no sense as an indicative statement.

⁴¹ Paul could have made this and the following phrase distinct parts of the list, as English versions tend to imply, by writing: τῷ πονηρῷ ἀποστυγοῦντες, τῷ ἀγαθῷ κολλώμενοι. But he did not, because he wanted to quickly qualify necessary prerequisites to sincere love.

⁴² “Boiling in the spirit/Spirit” likely is an idiom for being very enthusiastic in serving God.

The overall statement or implicit exhortation that is made in 12:6–13 is something like: “Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let love be genuine.” That statement or implied exhortation is then fleshed out with two rhetorical lists (sample lists) that illustrate how the exercise of spiritual gifts and genuine love might be realized.

While there is no question that the overarching force of the passage is hortatory, we skew the sense of this portion of the passage if we supply imperative verbs within the two rhetorical lists. Most scholars simply assume that 12:9–13 represents a series of exhortations,⁴³ perhaps driven by familiarity with English translations. One scholar, for example, playing off the debate over whether the participles in this passage function imperatively,⁴⁴ states: “the technical discussion on the use of participles does not change the meaning of the text, for it is clear that Paul is giving commands.”⁴⁵ Such a claim, of course, raises the question: What makes it clear that Paul is giving commands when he does not use any of the grammatical tools at his disposal to express commands? The lack of any clause structure in the rhetorical lists and the nature of the lists themselves in fact indicate that both lists are formally descriptive rather than prescriptive. Recognizing that we are dealing with rhetorical lists helps us see that we are not dealing with a text in which “the author repeatedly stabs the ears of his audience with a rapid barrage of ethical injunctions.”⁴⁶ So, what are we dealing with?

VI. IMPLICATIONS

That brings us to some final exegetical and practical implications of our analysis, including how Greek exegesis of this passage should inform our worship. Our passage begins with a call to genuine worship and a reminder that for worship to be holy and acceptable to God it must begin with minds that are renewed rather than conformed to this age (12:1–2). This call to worship out of transformed minds and nonconformed lives is then fleshed out in 12:3–13. That is obvious in verses 3–5 and now should be obvious in verses 6–13 as well. There is clear topic continuity between verses 3–5 and verses 6–8, as virtually all scholars acknowledge, with the continued focus on spiritual gifts. Once we recognize that verses 6–13 contain a

⁴³ One scholar goes so far as to claim that “with the exception of the three verbs in the quotation in verses 19 and 20, every verbal or adjectival form is to be construed as imperative.” Roy A. Harrisville, “Do Not Repay Evil with Evil”: Preaching Romans 12:9–21,” *WW* 28.1 (2008): 88. So also Miller, “The Imperatives of Romans 12,” 167–71. She maintains that “the verbal system of Romans 12 includes two performative verbs, seventeen imperatival participles, three adjectives with imperatival function, two imperatival infinitives, and eleven imperatives” (168). In other words, just about everything except conjunctions apparently functions imperatively in this passage! See also Philip Kanjuparambil, “Imperatival Participles in Rom 12:9–21,” *JBL* 102.2 (1983): 285–88.

⁴⁴ Those assuming that the participles function imperatively typically claim that they somehow depend on another verb in the context, reflect the use of participles in Tannaitic Hebrew to convey admonitions, or represent a developing usage of Greek participles. See Moo, *Romans*, 776.

⁴⁵ Schreiner, *Romans*, 664. Such claims are quite common, typically citing the broad hortatory context. See Lamp, “An Alternative Explanation,” 313.

⁴⁶ Black, “Pauline Love Command,” 6.

single sentence with two embedded rhetorical lists, we are forced to the conclusion that the *γάρ* at the beginning of verse 3 marks 12:3–13 in its entirety as an expansion of what Paul stated in 12:1–2. In other words, Romans 12:1–13 is concerned with how to offer our bodies as living sacrifices in genuine worship that is “holy and acceptable to God.”⁴⁷

Thus, after introducing the foundational feature of transformed thinking in 12:3–6a, in the first rhetorical list in 12:6b–8 Paul provides a series of examples of what it might look like to worship God (“present your bodies as living sacrifices”) by utilizing our spiritual gifts for the good of the body (rather than for our own honor) when the church is gathered for corporate worship.⁴⁸ If your gift is serving, it will look like worshipping God in your serving. If your gift is teaching, it will look like worshipping God in your teaching. If your gift is exhorting, it will look like worshipping God in your exhortation. If your gift is contributing, it will look like worshipping God in your generosity.

How we exercise those gifts, however, is critical. Paul has already made it clear that we must not think more highly of ourselves than we should. After all, we each have gifts “according to the grace given to us” (v. 6). Though scholars typically view verse 9 as a heading of sorts for what follows,⁴⁹ once we recognize that verse 9 actually completes the sentence that began in verse 6, a different interpretation emerges. Paul is telling us that spiritual gifts must operate out of genuine love.⁵⁰ In other words, he is helping readers understand what makes worship “holy and acceptable to God.” Rather than serving as a heading for what follows, verse 9 explains how the rhetorical list that precedes is to be worked out. “Whether you prophesy, serve, teach, exhort, give, lead, or show mercy, make sure that the love to which we are called is always genuine!” Gifts cannot be exercised for personal gain or personal glory; they must be exercised as acts of love for God and others.

The different nature of the two rhetorical lists in this passage is also important. The second rhetorical list is included to remind us that to offer our bodies as living sacrifices and thus carry out our priestly duty of “genuine worship” we must not only be careful to use our spiritual gifts for the good of the body when we gather together for worship, but we must also live a life of love toward God and neighbor throughout the week, with the reference to genuine love in verse 9 carrying both vertical and horizontal implications. Thus, in the second rhetorical list, Paul makes it clear that there is more to worship than exercising our spiritual gifts. Hating what is evil and clinging to what is good entails worshipping God in the

⁴⁷ Pate, for example, recognizes the continuity between 12:1–8 and 12:9–13. C. Marvin Pate, *Romans, Teaching the Text* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013), 248. Peterson notes that “the function of the worship terminology in Romans 12:1 is to proclaim the possibility of a new kind of service to God and to summon believers to respond to God’s gracious initiative by the daily offering of themselves, in a whole-person commitment.” Peterson, “Worship and Ethics,” 281.

⁴⁸ Cf. Pate, *Romans*, 240.

⁴⁹ On the view that *Ἡ ἀγάπη ἀνυπόκριτος* functions as a heading for what follows, see esp. Black, “The Pauline Love Command”; see also Moo, *Romans*, 774.

⁵⁰ He, of course, makes a similar point in 1 Corinthians 13.

realm of everyday life, where there are trials, needy people, and opportunities to serve the Lord in other ways.

Finally, if the use of rhetorical lists in verses 6–8 and 10–13 should not be understood or translated as a series of commands, what rhetorical force do they carry? If we read typical English translations, when we come to Romans 12:9–13 we can easily become depressed. We may see the heading in our NRSV or ESV (“Marks of the True Christian”) and think, “I don’t measure up. I guess I’m not a true Christian.” Our experience of this passage through the medium of English Bibles becomes similar to the experience of reading the typical job posting for a senior pastor position, seeing all the things expected of the person the church wishes to hire and thinking, “Impossible! It would take three people to do all that they are asking!”

Such a reading, however, ignores the force of the rhetorical list in 12:9–13. This whole portion of Romans 12 is about how to offer proper worship to God. And the rapid-fire list of activities presents many different opportunities to do that.⁵¹ Just as Aaron and his sons needed the proper robe, turban, breast piece, sash, and even the right undergarments to carry out their priestly duties in a manner that was holy and acceptable to God, so Christians are to clothe themselves with genuine love for God and others in all the ways described in 12:9–13 in order to carry out their priestly duties in a manner that is holy and acceptable to God.⁵² Paul conveys this profound message using a cluster of lexical forms in 12:1–2, followed by a conjunction that tells us that the verses that follow function to strengthen his statement. And using a single sentence that includes two rhetorical lists in 12:6–13, Paul makes it clear that the strengthening unit that begins in 12:3 extends all the way to verse 13, rather than stopping at the end of verse 8, as most scholars and English translations suppose.

As Black, following Louw, rightly points out, we must “embrace a method of analysis which encompasses both the content and the form of the text, not merely the former. Both aspects, the semantic and the structural, are indispensable in any theory of how a text is to be described and understood.”⁵³ In my view, the form of the Greek text of Romans 12:1–13 has not been adequately considered. Scholars and translators have tended to assume imperatival functions for nonimperatival forms without adequately establishing such functions in this context. And they have almost universally treated 12:9 as the start of a new discourse unit. If the analysis above is correct, such a practice effectively places a discourse break in the middle of a sentence and obscures the profound and practical point Paul is making about how to worship God.

⁵¹ I thus agree with Black’s assessment (“The Pauline Love Command,” 6) of the “quick-fire” nature of the language here but would argue that the “injunctions” that Black points to are better viewed as “mitigated exhortations.” On mitigated exhortations, see Robert E. Longacre, “Exhortation and Mitigation in First John,” *START* 9 (1983): 3–44; see also Martin M. Culy, 1, 2, 3 *John: A Handbook on the Greek Text*, BHGNT (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2004, 2011), xxv–xxvii.

⁵² As Talbert says, “The true worship for which the apostle called embraces the whole of believers’ lives from day to day.” Charles H. Talbert, *Romans*, SHBC (Macon, GA: Smith and Helwys, 2002), 285.

⁵³ Black, “The Pauline Love Command,” 3.