

# Second Sunday of Advent, Epistle, Year A

SOUNDS LIKE A PLAN

Romans 15:4-13

Second Sunday of Advent

Analysis by Timothy Hoyer

4For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope.

5May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, 6so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

7Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. 8For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the circumcised on behalf of the truth of God in order that he might confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, 9and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written, "Therefore I will confess you among the Gentiles, and sing praises to your name"; 10and again he says, "Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people"; 11and again, "Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and let all the peoples praise him"; 12and again Isaiah says, "The root of Jesse shall come, the one who rises to rule the Gentiles; in him the Gentiles shall hope."

13May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

DIAGNOSIS: There Is No Leaving the Bad Situation

### Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): The Bad Situation Is Seen as Normal

When a bad day at work approaches its end, one may look forward to the end, to the leaving of the bad situation, and going home away from the problem. But when one lives in a bad situation, such as when one lives under constant demands that are wearying; when one lives under a system that threatens punishment for every mistake and wrong move and impatient word, then one can become very tired, or one hardens oneself to the demands and threats, even becoming a person who makes demands of others and who corrects their misbehavior. One can become so hardened that such a way of living becomes so normal that one does not even notice that one lives by demands and threats of retribution.

### Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): We Trust Retribution as Normal

But when one lives a life where demands and retribution are normal, then one also depends on demands and retribution for how life works. One depends on retribution for rewards and for the worth of one's actions. One's hope is in getting praise for doing deeds others deem deserving of such reward. When one's hope is in getting praise, the positive side of retribution, one is also subject to the negative side of retribution, to its accusations and condemnations, its pointing out one's mistakes and failures.

### Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): But Normal Cannot Be Used To Make Us Right with God

God's use of rewards and punishments is to speak to those who are under that system of retribution, so that "all mouths are silenced, and everyone is held accountable to God. For no human being will be justified in God's sight by works prescribed by the law. For through the law comes knowledge of sin" (Romans 3:19-20). We cannot use the system of retribution to make ourselves look good to God or to earn praise from God. The only

thing God uses the law for is to show us that we have not depended upon God, that we have not feared, loved, and trusted God above everything else. This is a very bad situation with no escape except by death, by becoming completely nothing and fully forgotten.

#### PROGNOSIS: Jesus Got Out Of a Bad Situation

##### Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): Jesus' Death and Resurrection Is the New Situation

Whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, namely, as Jesus said, that the law and prophets testify to him, that the Son of Man was to suffer and on the third day rise again, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name (Luke 24:46-47). What is written for us is the eyewitness accounts of Jesus dying and rising from the dead, and Jesus promising that he died and rose for us to give us forgiveness, his goodness, and eternal life. Those are not rewards, so not a part of the old system of retribution. They are gifts, grace, and mercy. They are Jesus' new way. In his death and resurrection he now silences the law, silences the law's demand for our deaths, silences the law's accusations of us, and declares that we are justified by grace, as a gift, apart from works prescribed by the law. Jesus declares that his resurrection will be ours, and until then we live under his mercy.

##### Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (External Solution): The Spirit Gives Us Trust in Jesus

That story of Jesus encourages us and gives us trust in Jesus' promises of mercy and life. That story of Jesus gives us hope. Hearing that Jesus dies and rises for us enables the Spirit to give us faith in the midst of those bad days and bad situations, that accusations and condemnation and death are not all there is nor the end. Now we have his mercy, his love, his Spirit and the

Spirit's gifts of peace and joy and patience and kindness.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): We Live by Faith to Make Mercy the New Normal

So every day we look forward to Jesus coming to us with his mercy, with his forgiveness, with his death and resurrection. Every day we hear his promise to come toward us with life with him. We now live in the Spirit and are guided by the Spirit. (Notice how Paul exhorts the Romans with Christ, as in, "live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus." He encourages them with Christ as the means to live in harmony. He exhorts the Romans to welcome each just as Jesus welcomed them. Jesus' welcome gives them the power to welcome, just as Jesus' love enables them to love one another. Paul does not make demands, does not threaten, does not bribe with praise if the Romans do the right thing. He uses Jesus, he uses faith in Jesus, he uses the Spirit, to give them new hearts, a new faith to live by; he gives them his mercy as the new way to live.) Jesus' mercy is our hope in all things—in death, in aging, in any challenging situation.