

Responding to Those Who Are Evil

Romans 12:17-21

In our last sermon from Romans, we studied the broad subject of relationships, including the mutual affections we should ordinarily have with one another, as expressed by,

v.15 “Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep.”

We also studied the necessary humility with which we are able to live together as equals,

v.16 “Be of the same mind toward one another. Do not set your mind on high things, but associate with the humble. Do not be wise in your own opinion.”

But we also studied what Paul says about our relationships with those who take the part of enemies, and we return to that subject this morning. Last time, in verse 14, we emphasized the reality of those who would seek to harm you, to persecute you. Surely, sadly, such people exist, and Paul has much more to say about that in our text this morning from verses 17-21. I’ll start with verse 18, which is something of a summary or theme for this whole passage.

v.18

That’s the goal. The objective. That’s our calling as Christians, and even as I get started this morning, let me remind you and reemphasize that this chapter is one of instructions given to Christians. The chapter begins Paul’s lengthy application of the gospel, which he so clearly expounded in chapters 1-11. So I’ll be emphasizing a lot of practical applications to our lives, but I can never ignore the context of those applications, which is the promise of God in the gospel of Jesus Christ. So this is not merely moralism, or some system of moral living in isolation from

the gospel. Rather, all of this today is part of what Paul expresses so broadly in,

Eph. 4:1 “I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called, 2 with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love, 3 endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. 4 There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; 5 one Lord, one faith, one baptism; 6 one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.”

So the context of our study this morning is how we can walk worthy of our calling as Christians. And the main point is expressed by verse 18, “live peaceably with all men.” And so, it is our responsibility as Christians, that...

I. DESPITE THE PRESENCE OF ENEMIES, SEEK TO LIVE AT PEACE WITH EVERYONE.

Let me read several cross references to stress the biblical importance of this pursuit of peace.

Matt. 5:9 “Blessed are the peacemakers, For they shall be called sons of God.”

Mark 9:50 “Salt is good, but if the salt loses its flavor, how will you season it? Have salt in yourselves, and have peace with one another.”

James 3:17 “But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy. 18 Now the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.”

Rom. 14:19 “Therefore let us pursue the things which make for peace and the things by which one may edify another.”

Hebr. 12:14 “Pursue peace with all people, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord.”

With all of that, however, a few necessary introductory thoughts. First, as I stressed two weeks ago, the reality is that there are people who will assume the role of your enemy. There are people who will hate you, who will persecute you. And you don't have the power to change that, to change them. You can't make people be your friends. You can't compel people to treat you well, you can't compel people to live at peace with you nor can you compel them to acknowledge their own sins and offenses against you. You can't impose peace upon others unilaterally, by your own effort. There is a measure of realism there; sadness, to be sure, but certainly a realistic view of life.

So we acknowledge the presence of enemies. There are those who seek to cause you harm, there are people who will abuse you in any number of ways, and that is not your fault nor is it something you have to deny as a Christian. Thus Paul's words in verse 18, “If it is possible...live peaceably with all men.” “As much as it depends on you, live peaceably with all men.” He is not denying the existence or the reality of enemies, nor justifying their evil toward you, for these verses address you as the victim of your enemies. So what does he mean by verse 18? I would answer that question this way,

A. When confronted with enemies, do not add to the conflict.

That is the part that depends upon you! That is the part that you can accomplish. That much is possible, because that relates only to you and your actions. You may well have enemies, even those seeking to persecute you, to harm you, those whom who can't stop. You have no control over them. But you do have control over yourself. So pursue peace by not adding to the

conflict. That is the wisdom from above, which is peaceable. Blessed are you in that circumstance, where you, in your own self-restraint, are not not adding to a conflict by your own actions.

This same advice and wisdom can be applied in relationships that you might not classify as enemies, relationships between husbands and wives, or brothers and sisters. It is certainly the counsel I give to all those with whom I seeking to help resolve conflict. It's simply advice, but so very practical. If you are in a circumstance of conflict, do not add to it, don't add to the enmity. Rather, do whatever is in your power to seek peace.

Now, a couple of additional thoughts in that regard, especially in matters of criminal activity, especially in matters of physical harm or the danger caused by abuse. You don't have to submit to their harm. Living at peace doesn't mean sweeping bad behavior under the rug, especially behavior that is prohibited by the civil authorities which we learn in Romans 13, God has established. So if a woman comes to me under the threat of physical harm by an abusive husband, if she comes to me as a pastor with the wounds of abuse, I will help her file a restraining order and criminal charges, for her protection. Just as I would someone who is a victim of a home invasion robbery or any other crime of assault.

But we are forbidden to do is to add to the conflict ourselves, breaching the peace by our own actions. And too often, we are prone to do just that. When we are sinned against, too often we respond with sin of our own. And so what Paul emphasizes is that,

B. When confronted with enemies, do not respond with evil.

v.17

Peter teaches the same thing.

1 Peter 3:8 “Finally, all of you be of one mind, having compassion for one another; love as brothers, be tenderhearted, be courteous; 9 not returning evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary blessing, knowing that you were called to this, that you may inherit a blessing.”

The familiar proverb, though not found in the Bible, is certainly true, “two wrongs do not make a right.”

Scripture isn’t advocating that you leave yourself vulnerable to harm others would inflict upon you, especially in the civil or criminal realm. Our constitutional right of self-defense isn’t prohibited, but doing evil is. And our flesh, the remnants of our fallen nature, is certainly prone to repay evil for evil. To justify our own evil on the basis of the evil committed by others.

Specifically, vengeance. Therefore, Paul is teaching that,

II. DESPITE THE PRESENCE OF ENEMIES, DO NOT PURSUE YOUR OWN PERSONAL VENGEANCE.

v.19

This is,

A. A prohibition for true believers.

This is the law of love, actually, as we read in,

Lev. 19:18 “You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the children of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.”

Jesus, of course, quotes that as the second great commandment. Love your neighbor as yourself. So getting even is what is forbidden, for that is the opposite of love. Exacting your own retribution is what is forbidden. Getting revenge, getting

payback, that’s what is so expressly forbidden. If someone does you evil, you are not given the freedom to exact revenge or, for that matter, to exercise your own definition of justice.

I will stress again the propriety of appealing to the civil authorities when appropriate, the civil governments instituted by God. Their responsibility, biblically, is to provide protection to the nation. So if you are in danger, call the police. That’s how God had established civil societies to function and survive. But don’t seek justice for yourself. That is not your right nor your responsibility. That is the prohibition, the pursuit of your own retribution. “Beloved, do not avenge yourselves.”

On a personal level, I believe that is the foundation for Jesus’ words,

Mat. 5:38 “You have heard that it was said, An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ 39 But I tell you not to resist an evil person. But whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also. 40 If anyone wants to sue you and take away your tunic, let him have your cloak also. 41 And whoever compels you to go one mile, go with him two. 42 Give to him who asks you, and from him who wants to borrow from you do not turn away.”

Those words refer to personal relationships. Those words are to guard your own heart from responding to those who sin against you with retaliation and the pursuit of vengeance. On a personal level, in terms of personal relationship, that pursuit is not rightly ours. It belongs to God. Justice belongs to God. And Paul is quite clear about the necessity of,

B. A recognition of the sufficiency of God’s justice.

v.19

Notice how this principle of God’s justice is built into the

ethical commands of the New Testament for the true Christian believe.

1 Thes. 4:3 “For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you should abstain from sexual immorality; 4 that each of you should know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor, 5 not in passion of lust, like the Gentiles who do not know God; 6 that no one should take advantage of and defraud his brother in this matter, because the Lord is the avenger of all such, as we also forewarned you and testified. 7 For God did not call us to uncleanness, but in holiness. 8 Therefore he who rejects this does not reject man, but God, who has also given us His Holy Spirit.”

Taking advantage of people is a sin, identified here in parallel with sexual immorality. Taking advantage of people, what we typically identify as abuse today, is cause of God to avenge the guilty. So we are warned against such sins ourselves, and then given the encouragement, the promise, that God himself will bring his own justice, his own vengeance.

The writer of Hebrews is very blunt, very direct.

Heb. 10:30 “For we know Him who said, “Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,” says the Lord. And again, “The LORD will judge His people.” 31 It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.”

The quote there is from Deuteronomy 32, God’s condemnation upon unfaithful and rebellious Israel. We read of that nation in,

Deut. 32:5 “They have corrupted themselves; They are not His children, Because of their blemish: A perverse and crooked generation. 6 Do you thus deal with the LORD, O foolish and unwise people? Is He not your Father, who bought you? Has He not made you and established you?”

The warning continues,

Deut. 32:15 “But Jeshurun grew fat and kicked; You grew fat, you grew thick, You are obese! Then he forsook God who made him, And scornfully esteemed the Rock of his salvation. 16 They provoked Him to jealousy with foreign gods; With abominations they provoked Him to anger. 17 They sacrificed to demons, not to God, To gods they did not know, To new gods, new arrivals That your fathers did not fear. 18 Of the Rock who begot you, you are unmindful, And have forgotten the God who fathered you.”

God’s response reaches a climax in,

Deut. 32:34 ‘Is this not laid up in store with Me, Sealed up among My treasures? 35 Vengeance is Mine, and recompense; Their foot shall slip in due time; For the day of their calamity is at hand, And the things to come hasten upon them.’ 36 “For the LORD will judge His people And have compassion on His servants, When He sees that their power is gone, And there is no one remaining, bond or free...39 ‘Now see that I, even I, am He, And there is no God besides Me; I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; Nor is there any who can deliver from My hand. 40 For I raise My hand to heaven, And say, “As I live forever, 41 If I whet My glittering sword, And My hand takes hold on judgment, I will render vengeance to My enemies, And repay those who hate Me.”

I read all of that to emphasize the significance of the words Paul quotes. “Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,” says the Lord.” And you and I, in the pursuit of godliness, must learn to recognize the sufficiency of that vengeance, rather than seeking it for ourselves.

There are those who will remain our enemies, who will not be willing to live at peace with us, not willing to reconcile, not willing to repent of the sin and harm they do to us. But as for you...

v.18 “If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men. 19 Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, “Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,” says the Lord.”

To express that in positive terms, Paul continues in, v.20-21

III. DESPITE THE PRESENCE OF ENEMIES, DEVOTE YOURSELF TO THE PURSUIT OF WHAT IS GOOD.

It’s not just the prohibition. God’s law is never that way, restricted to a prohibition. There is the positive element of that command, which is showing goodness.

A. Goodness should be expressed even to your enemies.

If your enemy is hungry, feed him.

That doesn’t necessarily mean you will be best friends. If there is no repentance or no expression to seek forgiveness, this might not even include the granting of forgiveness. This doesn’t mean that you take down any necessary boundaries in terms of personal relationships, or even outward barriers you might erect for your own protection. That doesn’t mean that you won’t call the police if someone assaults you or seek restitution from the civil courts if someone steals from you. None of those things are evil.

But beyond that, personally, even in the presence of your enemy, you are not free from the law of kindness. If he is hungry, feed him.

And then notice what Paul quotes next in verse 20, “For in so doing you will heap coals of fire on his head.” Now, there are all sorts of things written about what this verse means. What does it mean to “heap coals of fire on his head?” Does it mean that we

will heap upon his head burning coals of judgment? Or does it mean that the burning coals of our kindness will bring him to repentance.

I’ll try to simplify all the explanations. Actually, I’ll quote John Calvin, who doesn’t choose between those two, but accepts them both. He writes, “I take the simpler view. [Speaking of our enemy, Calvin says that] his mind will be torn in one of two ways. Either our enemy will be softened by kindness, or, if he is so ferocious that nothing may assuage him, he will be stung and tormented by the testimony of his conscience, which will feel itself overwhelmed by our kindness.”

In other words, the heaping coals of fire upon the head of our enemy can mean the same thing that Paul says in the very next verse, “overcome evil with good.”

B. Goodness can overcome the evil of your enemies.

Many people have, indeed, been brought to repentance out of evil, by acts of kindness. And yet, coals of fire is a symbol of judgment, and our kindness, if it doesn’t bring about repentance, will add fuel to the fires of God’s judgment upon those who have been evil to us.

So the exhortation for us is clear and consistent. We are called to do whatever we can possibly do to live at peace with all men, even getting along with difficult people as far as it depends upon us. To do that, you must restrain your own sense of personal retaliation, and replace it with acts of kindness.

That’s how you live out and apply the truth of the gospel in your life. That is how you live a life worthy of the calling with which you were called. That is how you live in the fallen world, in which you will have enemies, even as you long for the perfect

vengeance which God himself will bring about at the end of this age.

Let me assure you, that is an impossible task for anyone who does not have Christ, who does not love Jesus. These exhortations are given to those who have received the Lord Jesus Christ personally and who rest in him alone for salvation. Only God's strength in you can accomplish these things. But with God's strength, hear the word of God for the people of God,

Rom. 12:18 "If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men."