

How Love Treats Others

Romans 12:14-21

Intro

It is estimated that the Christian population in Pakistan is about 2.5% of the total population, an insignificant number compared to the predominate 97% who are Muslims. The Rev. Munawar K. Rumalshah, a Christian leader in the northern city of Peshawar, says that the government has endorsed a "social and economic suffocation of the Christian community" in Pakistan. Pakistan's anti-blasphemy laws pose a constant threat for Christians. In addition, Rumalshah said that in his province alone local mobs have publically urinated on Bibles and closed four churches.

However, despite this overt hatred towards Christians, Rumalshah isn't bitter. Instead, he works for better relationships with his Muslim neighbours. He views the persecution as an opportunity to display Christ's love to others, even militant Muslims like al-Qaeda. Rumalshah summarized how his church responds to persecution and he said the following: "We clean the wounds of those who hate us and those who would kill us."

This is exactly what we read in Romans 12:14.

Verse 14 "Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse."

Basically we are to bless those who hate and despise us as Christians. Christians are to bless people who treat them badly. That's not a new principle; it is common in Scripture. It goes back to the teaching of our Lord Jesus, who said in Matthew 5:44, "*But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them who despitefully use you, and persecute you.*" That verse expresses an important teaching that was commonly given by our Lord.

Perhaps in our western world we may not suffer physical persecution but we may be ridiculed or hated. I heard the story of a Christian fellow who got a job working with a group of rough non-Christian men and was fearful of what they might do to him because he was a believer. After his first day at work he came home and his wife asked him, "How did you get along?" He said, "I got along well with them. They never found out I was a Christian."

You will get along well with the world if they don't know that you are a Christian. But when you live out the true Christian life, you will find that the people of this fallen world will always persecute those born of the Spirit. If you live in direct opposition to Satan and his system you will experience antagonism from people who don't accept Christianity. If you aren't experiencing some form of persecution it's probably because people don't know you are a Christian or because the way you live isn't different enough to be noticeable. But even if you are antagonized and mistreated repay them with a blessing.

Verse 15 "Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn."

Another distinctive Christian response is enjoying someone else's joy or rejoicing in their well-being and happiness. That requires the absence of jealousy or envy. It is also distinctively Christian to be sympathetic, and feel compassion for others. The world is becoming more callous towards what really matters. With the individualistic lifestyle and with people spending so much time alone with their

computers and cell phones has contributed to a social problem. People are not engaging in person to person fellowship and social intimacy – they are primarily connecting through cyber-space. We have become too preoccupied with our own space that we are losing the human spiritual touch with one another. Though we may be connected through the social media network, yet we lack the personal connectedness by the physical presence – by being in someone’s space and face. True fellowship is being together and sharing in the joy and challenges of life.

Dr. Leonard Syme, a professor of epidemiology at the University of California at Berkeley, has found that social ties and social support in relationships are crucial to mortality and disease rates. He believes that the more social ties, the better the health and the lower the death rate. Conversely, he indicates that the more isolated the person is, the poorer the health and the higher the death rate. Syme emphasizes that, “*Social ties and fellowship are good preventative medicine for physical problems and for mental-emotional-behavior problems.*” (Source: Martin & Diedre Bobgan, *How To Counsel From Scripture*, Moody Press).

Illustration

I came across this powerful story and illustration of how we can learn from children. A little girl lost a playmate to terminal illness and one day she told her family that she had gone to comfort the sorrowing mother. “What did you say?” asked the father. “Nothing,” she replied, “I just climbed up on her lap and cried with her.” Wow! We can learn from children.

The fellowship of suffering is the deepest, most intense level of fellowship. It’s where we enter into each other’s pain and grief and carry each other’s burdens. We need each other especially during times of deep crisis, grief, and doubt. When circumstances crush us to the point that our faith falters, that’s when we need believing friends the most. We need a small group of friends to have faith in God for us and to pull us through.

Verse 16 “Live in harmony with one another. Don’t be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Don’t be conceited.”

That’s a very simple thought. It means that we are to treat everyone on the same level. Don’t be a respecter of persons. Don’t play up to certain kinds of people. Don’t plan your strategy to reach only the elite or preferred. Rather, treat everyone equally.

James 2:1-4 teaches this very clearly, “*My brothers and sisters, believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ must not show favoritism.* ² *Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in filthy old clothes also comes in.* ³ *If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, “Here’s a good seat for you,” but say to the poor man, “You stand there” or “Sit on the floor by my feet,”* ⁴ *have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?”*

In the later part of verse 16 it says, “*Don’t be conceited*” or “*Don’t be the big somebody.*” Don’t act as if you know everything, assuming that everything begins and ends with you.

Verse 17 “Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the sight of everybody.”

There is no place for retaliation. Paul is simply saying, “Don’t hit back.” Peter echoes the same truth in nearly the same words: “*Finally, all of you, live in harmony with one another; be sympathetic, love as brothers, be compassionate and humble. Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult, but with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing*” (1 Peter 3:8-9).

Also we are to be careful that our conduct does not betray the high standards of the gospel and in the end discredit the gospel. Give good light and a good testimony to everyone around you.

Colossians 4:5-6 says, “*Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity.*”⁶ *Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.*”

Verse 18 “If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.”

I like that statement - it's practical. Paul wants us to live peaceably, but he prefaces it with the statement, “*If it is possible.*” There are some people you try to make peace with but are unable to. Sometimes you have tried everything you can, yet peace is still not achieved. In those cases, that phrase can be comforting; for even the Holy Spirit knows that making peace isn't always possible.

Furthermore, the phrase “*as far as it depends on you*” indicates that it takes two to make peace. That tells us that we have the responsibility to make sure that our side of the relationship is right, that our inner desire is genuine and wanting to be at peace with everyone, even the meanest and most undeserving people. Not compromising God's truth, we should be willing to go to great lengths to build peaceful relationships with those that differ or dislike us. We should forsake any grudge or bitterness and fully forgive from the heart.

Verse 19 “Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: “It is mine to avenge, I will repay,” says the Lord.”

Don't execute justice yourself. The Greek word for “*avenge*” (*ekdikeo*) means “*to punish.*” Don't punish people for their evil because you are not to judge (Matt. 7:1). Rather, we are to leave retribution to the Lord.

Don't try to take justice into your own hands – let the Lord judge in the end. Leave room for God's wrath, for He is an infinitely just and fair Judge. God's promise is that He will repay: He will deal with evil. Therefore, I don't feel any need to carry out my own personal vengeance. I don't have to retaliate because God does that. In Deut. 32:35 the Lord says, “*It is mine to avenge; I will repay. In due time their foot will slip; their day of disaster is near and their doom rushes upon them.*”

Verse 20 “On the contrary: If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.”

To withhold revenge and retaliation is one thing but to return good for evil is quite another. This goes against our fallen human nature. We are not to pay back the wrong committed against us but we are also told to do good to our enemy. That is very difficult! But you know, if you are filled with the Holy Spirit you can do it. The 5th and 6th fruits of the Spirit is kindness and goodness (Gal. 5:22). The Holy Spirit will give you the power and ability to be kind and good to your enemy or to the person who has wronged you.

That last phrase of ‘heaping coals on his head’ is fascinating. Apparently, it refers to an ancient Egyptian ritual that a man would perform when he wanted to demonstrate his public shame and his spirit of repentance. He would do so by carrying a pan of burning coals on his head, which were supposed to represent the burning pain of shame and guilt. Paul is saying that when you treat an enemy with love by showing kindness to him, you create a burning shame in him for the evil he has done.

Verse 21 “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”

That is a distinctively Christian response. The word "*overcome*" is *nikao*, from which we get words like Nike (maker of athletic goods). It means "victory." Paul is saying, "Be the victor by overcoming evil with good. Don't be a victim; be a victor."

“Do not be overcome by evil” has 2 applications. First, we must not let the evil done against us by others to overcome us or overwhelm us. Secondly and more important, we must not allow ourselves to be overcome by our own evil responses. Did you know that most often our own evil is more detrimental to us than is the evil done against us by others? “*Don’t let evil get the best of you; get the best of evil by doing good*” (The Message).

Conclusion

One Sunday morning, November 8, 1987, Gordon Wilson, an Irishman took his daughter Marie to a parade in the town of Enniskillen, Northern Ireland. As Wilson and his 20 year old daughter stood beside a brick wall waiting for English soldiers and police to come marching by, a bomb planted by IRA terrorists exploded from behind, and the brick wall tumbled on them. The blast instantly killed half a dozen people and pinned Gordon and his daughter beneath several feet of rubble. Gordon’s shoulder and arm were injured. Unable to move, Gordon felt someone take hold of his hand. It was his daughter Marie. “Is that you, Dad?” she asked. “Yes, Marie,” Gordon answered. He heard several people begin screaming. “Are you all right?” Gordon asked his daughter. “Yes,” she said. But then she, too, began to scream. As he held her hand, again and again he asked if she was all right, and each time she said yes. Finally Marie said, “Daddy, I love you very much.”

Those were her last words. Four hours later she died in the hospital of severe spinal and brain injuries. Later that evening, a BBC reporter requested permission to interview Gordon Wilson. After Wilson described what had happened, the reporter asked, “How do you feel about the guys who planted the bomb?” “I bear them no ill will,” Wilson replied. “I bear them no grudge. Bitter talk is not going to bring Marie Wilson back to life. I shall pray tonight and every night that God will forgive them.”

In the months that followed, many people asked Wilson, who later became a senator in the Republic of Ireland, how he could say such a thing, how he could forgive such a monstrous act. Wilson explained, “I was hurt. I had just lost my daughter. But I wasn’t angry. Marie’s last words to me – words of love – had put me on a plane of love. I received God’s grace, through the strength of his love for me, to forgive.” For years after this tragedy, Gordon Wilson continued to work for peace in Northern Ireland.

Because forgiving like loving requires an act of will, it’s not possible to love your enemies unless first, like Gordon Wilson, you’re willing to forgive them. Jesus is the very model of forgiveness. His love, after all, was the reason why He forgave those who put him on the cross. Jesus did not take revenge and he definitely overcame evil with good. Jesus set before us a powerful example. He was abused, mistreated and even put to death yet from the cross he showed kindness and goodness and asked His Father to forgive them because they did not know what they were doing. Folks, we have in Christ the greatest example of how we are to treat others, especially those who done evil and wrong against us.

This is how love treats others!