

In Romans 12:1–2 Paul spoke of the impact that the gospel (Ro. 1–11) should have upon us. We are to be so overwhelmed by the mercies of God expressed to us in Christ that we joyfully present ourselves to God as a living sacrifice. The way we do this is by not being conformed to the world, but being transformed by the renewal of our minds so that we may be able to discern God’s good and perfect will (12:2). In verses 3–13 we saw that a transformed life results in a commitment and concern for fellow believers in a local church and the exercise of our spiritual gifts.

In verse 14, the subject expands to include our relationship with unbelievers. The theme of the paragraph is obvious. We are not to curse those who persecute us (12:14), nor pay back evil for evil (12:17), nor take our own revenge (12:19), nor be overcome with evil (12:21). Instead, we are to bless those who persecute us (12:14), be at peace with all men (12:18), feed our enemy (12:20), and overcome evil with good (12:21).

***12:14 Bless those who persecute you; bless and curse not.***

The discharge of love is not limited to the fellow believers; we are to have the same spirit toward all men, even those who persecute us. This is counterintuitive.

In Scripture, “blessing” is typically associated with God who is the source and the dispenser of all blessings. To bless someone, therefore, is to call upon God to bestow His favor upon them. Our prayer is not just that our persecutors will leave us alone, but we are to pray for their good; we are to wish the best for them. This doesn’t mean we desire that their influence increase or their persecution expand, or that they are given material prosperity that could even confirm their resistance to the gospel; rather, our hope is that they come to Christ and experience the joy that we have come to know. “It is not sufficient to avoid returning evil for evil, nor even to banish vindictive feelings; we must be able sincerely to desire their happiness” (Hodge, 398; cf. Matt. 5:44; Lk. 6:27–28).

***12:15 Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep.***

“Love produces not only the forgiveness of enemies, but a general sympathy in the joys and sorrows of our fellow-man, and especially for our fellow-Christian . . . The gospel requires that we should feel and act under the impression that all men are brethren; that we all have a common nature, and common Father, and a common destiny” (Hodge, 398). This attitude should especially be present in the Christian community (cf. 1 Cor. 12:26).

***12:16 Be of the same mind toward one another; do not be haughty in mind, but associate with the lowly. Do not be wise in your own estimation.***

We are not to be of the same mind as the world. In verse 2 Paul had said, “do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” We are, however, to be of the same mind with fellow believers.

Being of the same mind emphasizes harmony among believers (2 Cor. 13:11; Phil. 2:2; Ro. 15:5). The church shares the same Lord and faith. We have the same Head. Thus we are to have a spirit of consensus in our thoughts. Our desire should be to work together for the common good of the body and for the cause of Christ. We should be united in our feelings, interests, and objectives, not aspiring or having an arrogant attitude or condescending spirit toward others. We should exalt Christ and build up His church by being imitators of Him (Phil. 2:1–8). Therefore, we do not relate to each other in terms of social class or race, and we should not be haughty in mind; instead we should associate with the lowly.

“Associate with the lowly” means literally, “be carried away with the lowly.” It can mean associate with humble people or be engaged in humble tasks. “There is no aristocracy in the church, no cliques of the wealthy as over against the poor, no pedestals of unapproachable dignity for those on the higher social or economic strata or for those who are in office in the church” (Murray, 137).

This humility should extend beyond the Christian community to all men. Christians should display the same attitude toward all people without regard to their social, ethnic, or economic status.

The biggest barrier toward accepting all men equally is pride. That is, “being wise in our own estimation.” “Overly exulted opinion of ourselves, leading us to think that we are always right and others wrong and that our opinions matter more than others, often prevents the church from exhibiting the unity to which God calls her. The positive antidote to such pride, Paul says, is in association with ‘the lowly’” (Moo, 783).

***12:17 Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men.***

Paul, having exhorted the believer to show love, humility, and kindness in the preceding verses, turns for a moment to contrary dispositions. The first half of verse 17 is a prohibition against retaliation (1 Thess. 5:15; 1 Pet. 3:9). There is *never* a reason to pay back evil with evil. Instead of taking revenge, we should act in such a way that commends ourselves to all men. The idea is like that of II Corinthians 8:21; “for we have regard for what is honorable, not only in the sight of the Lord, but also in the sight of men” (cf. 2 Cor. 4:2; 1 Tim. 3:7). Because the Christian is under the scrutiny of both believers and unbelievers, he must be careful that his actions do not betray the high calling of the gospel.

Secondly, the Christian gives thought to honorable things. The word *καλὰ* (*kala*) means good, morally beautiful, proper, honorable, and therefore it speaks of that which is right. Christians have a public reputation that either magnifies or disgraces the gospel. Paul is not saying do what all people think is right; rather, we are to do what is right and do it in the sight of all men so that they can observe us doing it. We honor and do that which is right, and we do so in public view.

***12:18 If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men.***

Some people refuse to forgive and make peace no matter what we do. We are not responsible for their actions and attitudes (Jn. 16:33). We are, however, under obligation to do whatever we can to be at peace with others. There are no circumstances in which our efforts to make peace are suspended. No matter how innocent in the conflict we have been, no matter how victimized we feel, no matter how many times our efforts to make reconciliation have failed, we are to do all that we can to make peace. Christians should be agents of peace.

***12:19 Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay," says the Lord.***

In a practical sense, this means laying down your anger and the practice of nursing your hurt feelings of being wronged. It does not mean that you were not wronged. It does not mean there is no justice. It does not mean you will not be vindicated. "It means, when you lay down the burden of vengeance, God will pick it up. This is not a subtle way of getting revenge. This is a way of giving vengeance to the one to whom it belongs"

(sermon by John Piper, Ro 12:16-20, Feb 20, 2005 - John Piper. © Desiring God. Website: [desiringGod.org](http://desiringGod.org)).

God will make all things right. He will see that justice is met. We have no grounds, as sinners saved by grace, to execute God's justice. Only God does. We leave that in His hands.

***12:20 "But if your enemy is hungry, feed him, and if he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in so doing you will heap burning coals upon his head." (Cf. Deut. 32:35; Pro. 25:21-22)***

***12:21 Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.***

Verses 20 and 21 are an expansion of the command not to return evil for evil (12:17). The believer should not attempt to avenge himself but should leave the matter to God. He is to stand out of the way and allow God to do as He sees fit. It is God's prerogative to punish if He desires to do so.

Instead of avenging our enemies, we should return good for evil, "for in so doing you will heap burning coals on his head." The last expression is difficult to understand and there are numerous interpretations of it. The closest OT passages are Psalm 11:6 and

Ezekiel 10:2. The former says, "Upon the wicked He will rain snares; Fire and brimstone and burning wind will be the portion of their cup." In Ezekiel 10:2, God tells a man clothed in linen to fill his hands with coals of fire and scatter them over the city. Both passages refer to judgment.

There are three leading interpretations:

1. Paul is saying that our enemies will be much more severely punished if we leave them in the hands of God. The more good we do to them, the more deserving of wrath they will be, which will result in a more severe judgment. The problem with this view is that it makes doing good to our enemies the means of inflicting greater wrath. This seemingly contradicts Paul's earlier comments against harboring a spirit of retaliation altogether (12:19). Even if Paul is only stating the *natural result* of doing good, and is not saying that we should desire greater wrath to fall upon our enemies, the problem remains.

2. The second interpretation is that by doing good the believer will cause his enemy pain (i.e. guilt and remorse).

3. The third view which seems to be the least problematic is that by doing kindness we will overcome evil. This is substantiated by the next verse; "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (12:21). When we allow hostile feelings to control our actions we become evil doers ourselves, and evil grows. The only way to triumph over evil is by doing good in accordance to our new nature in Christ. In this way, we prevent evil from corrupting us and we display Christ-like character before an unbelieving world. Therefore, "heaping coals on our enemy's heads" by doing good means that we subdue our enemies by doing good to them. "Subdue your enemies by kindness, not injuries (Hodge, 402).

Chapters 12–15 discuss how a Christian should walk. Chapter 12 has dealt with the believer's relationship to others. Chapter 13 will address the believer's relationship to the government.