

Romans 12:16-21 "Do Not Be Overcome By Evil, But Overcome Evil With Good"

**Romans 12:16-21** <sup>16</sup> 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. <sup>17</sup> Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men. <sup>18</sup> If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men. <sup>19</sup> 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. <sup>20</sup> "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 ON HIS HEAD." <sup>21</sup> Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Earlier in this letter Paul said to the Roman church, "Let love be without hypocrisy." This is the underlying theme to this portion of Paul's letter and what he has shared in verses 9 through the end of this chapter are meant to give some practical ways in which the love of Christ in our lives will demonstrate itself towards others.

One problem in Paul's day, which has persisted to our day, is that there is the temptation to divide ourselves into categories according to social status or according to nationality.

In Paul's day many Jews would not associate with the Gentiles and the Gentiles returned the favor by avoiding the Jews. But in Christ we are one in the Lord. And with the Gentiles coming to Christ all throughout the known world at that time there was bound to be clashes between the two groups.

But this wasn't limited to groups of different nationalities. Within groups of like people there were still divisions according to social status and so Paul gives some practical ways in which the love of Christ goes beyond those artificial barriers.

The NAS conveys verse 16 in this way... "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."

The NIV puts it this way. Rom 12:16 "Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited."

Be of the same mind toward one another or live in harmony with one another. There will always be differences between people in this world. And yet with all of our differences it is possible, in the love of Christ, to come together with a common goal which is to further God's Kingdom in Christ.

In fact, without that attitude it will be next to impossible to do the work of Christ. Paul expands on this attitude later in this letter.

Rom 15:5-7 "May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, 6 so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. 7 Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God."

Nothing will bring praise to God better than our love for one another and our willingness to serve our God as we go forward with His agenda instead of our own. And yet nothing will undermine His work faster than our selfish attitude to have our own way which will affect our ability to be of the same mind toward one another.

Now, being of the same mind does not mean that we all think exactly alike. But it does mean that we will all alike have the same goal which is to glorify God as we live in the love of Christ.

And being of the same mind will have at its root the attitudes that Paul has laid before us in the previous verses which include abhorring what is evil, and clinging to what is good; Being devoted to one another in brotherly love as we give honor to one another; Being fervent in the Spirit serving the Lord; Rejoicing in hope, persevering in tribulation, devoted to prayer, contributing to the needs of the saints, practicing hospitality, blessing those who persecute you, rejoicing with those who rejoice and weeping with those who weep.

Paul says be of the same mind in these areas which have at its heart Christ's love for us and in us. Don't be haughty in mind, he says, but putting others first associate with those who may not be as blessed as you and may not walk in the same social circles as you and may not have the same background as you.

In other words, see people as people who are created in the image of God. Don't discriminate based on your self-imposed standard of

what you think is acceptable. After all Christ has accepted all of us who have placed our faith in Him.

Gal 3:26-29 *"You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus,* 27 for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. 28 There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. 29 If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise."

Paul isn't saying that there aren't distinctions in life and that we're all clones. But, he is saying that despite our differences our Lord sees us, who are in Christ, as His children and so therefore we should see each other through His eyes and treat each other accordingly.

Do not be wise in your own estimation, Paul says. Our worldly wisdom will look at people and circumstances and make judgments which will not be according to God's word. And there's where we get ourselves in trouble.

'But, Lord this person is so rough around the edges and the group of people I associate with are so much more sophisticated. How will he ever fit in?'

No, the perspective should be how could any of us fit in with the Holiness and Righteousness of God. What group deserves to be in His presence?

With that perspective the playing field is leveled and none of us can place ourselves over another whom Christ loved enough to die for. We see this very clearly when Paul wrote to Philemon who was a Christian and who lost a slave by the name of Onesimus.

Onesimus evidently ran away and he ends up with Paul, who is in prison, and in the process Paul leads him to Christ.

PHM 1:10-17 I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains. 11 Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me. 12 I am sending him - who is my very heart -back to you. 13 I would have liked to keep him with me so that he could take your place in helping me while I am in chains for the gospel. 14 But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favor you do will be spontaneous and not forced. 15 Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back for good - 16 no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as

a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a man and as a brother in the Lord. 17 So if you consider me a partner, *welcome him as you would welcome me.*

Do not be wise in your own estimation. Your own wisdom will always get you in trouble. Your own wisdom will always be scheming to try and accomplish what you think God should be doing and yet will most times be that which is contrary to God.

This is why Solomon wrote in Pro 3:5-8 "Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; 6 in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight. 7 Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD and shun evil. 8 This will bring health to your body and nourishment to your bones."

Leaning on our own understanding may produce all sorts of ungodly leanings and this is exactly what Paul addresses in Rom 12:17 "Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody."

Our natural reaction to people who do evil to us is to do evil to them in return. That's the tendency of the natural man. It seems to fulfill a need that wants justice and fairness. And though justice and fairness is spoken of in the scriptures it is not divorced from the proper channels of justice.

What Paul addresses here is an improper channel. A selfish channel which not only is ungodly, but it is counter-productive to the Kingdom of Christ. Again, it's not as though justice is unimportant, but if we give to people what we think they deserve because of something they did to us, then we run the risk of receiving judgment and discipline ourselves.

And keep in mind too that if we got what we deserved from the hand of God none of us would receive mercy, but instead the justice which God demands because of our sin. Instead the justice which we deserved fell on Christ when He took our place for our penalty and He paid it in full with His life, so that we may have eternal life with Him.

Not paying evil for evil did not originate as a N.T. teaching. In fact the wisest of men gave this exhortation in Pro 20:22 "Do not say, 'I'll pay you back for this wrong!' Wait for the LORD, and he will deliver you."

Waiting for the Lord and His deliverance does not preclude that the normal channels of justice in this world will not play a role. As we'll see next week all authority, which includes the justice systems of the world, are ultimately governed by God. And in God's justice He will often use such systems to deliver and vindicate us if it is so necessary.

In fact, it was the apostle Paul who appealed to the government of his day to be delivered from an injustice on him.

**Acts 25:11-12** <sup>11</sup> "If, then, I am a wrongdoer and have committed anything worthy of death, I do not refuse to die; but if none of those things is *true* of which these men accuse me, no one can hand me over to them. I appeal to Caesar." <sup>12</sup> Then when Festus had conferred with his council, he answered, "You have appealed to Caesar, to Caesar you shall go."

At other times God may use other means. But don't ever think that because someone is, "Getting away with something", that God is unaware of it. That's why we don't take it into our own hands to repay evil for evil. We serve a Sovereign God. And yes, people do get away with things in this world. But don't fall into the enemy's trap of being consumed with ways to make it right when it's beyond your control.

I'll get back to that in a moment. But let's first look at Rom 12:18 "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone."

We are to be peace makers. Now there is the tendency to think that being a peace maker necessarily means that we are these passive little lambs who are looking for all the abuse someone can dish out without making a whimper.

The apostle Paul was a peace maker and yet he never compromised the truth to be such a peace maker. Jesus is known as the Prince of Peace and yet He could boldly something like this in Matthew.

Mat 10:34-39 "Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. 35 For I have come to turn "a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law-- 36 a man's enemies will be the members of his own household.' 37 "Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; 38 and anyone who does not take his cross and follow me

is not worthy of me. 39 Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it."

What Jesus means is that the Peace we find in Him will be the very thing which may bring division among people as some accept Him while others reject Him, dividing households, dividing friends, dividing those who would try to gain life by their own means from those who would find life in Christ.

And yet, in the midst of this we are to be at peace with all men as far as it depends on us. What Paul means by that is that there will be times when we have some control over the situation where strife has entered.

There will be times when we can diffuse a bad situation by walking away, or returning with a soft word. We read in Pro 15:1 "A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger."

There are times when the best course of action may not be to say anything at all. Other times we may simply have to blow the whole thing off and get on with our lives until time allows an opportunity for the hurts to subside which then allows more level heads to deal with the problem.

William Barclay in his commentary on Romans says of this passage: "We are to live at peace with all men. But Paul adds two qualifications."

**A)** "He says, if it be possible. There may come a time when the claims of courtesy have to submit to the claims of principle. Christianity is not an easy going tolerance which will accept anything and shut its eyes to everything. There may come a time when some battle has to be fought, and when it does, the Christian will not shirk it....."

**B)** He also says, as far as it depends on you. Paul knew very well that it is easier for some to live at peace than for others. He knew that one man can be compelled to control as much temper in an hour as another man in a lifetime."

And that may be true, but the exhortation remains the same; be at peace. Peace is what we strive for and if peace does not seem inevitable we are not given the option to take matters into our hands by returning evil for evil.

Rather we must give room for God to work in those situations.

Rom 12:19 "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," [Deut. 32:35] says the Lord."

The problem we sometimes have is that we can't seem to wait for God to take some action and we expect to see the result of the others person's action against us.

There will be times when we get to see God's hand go before us and vindicate us. But even if we don't we're still expected to honor God by trusting that He knows what He's doing. And ultimately God's justice will prevail either on this side or the next. And I know that may not always comfort us, but we should take comfort in knowing that God is just and nothing escapes His notice, including our hurt.

Paul actually goes beyond our accepting that God will deal with the problem in the future by bringing us back into the equation.

Rom 12:20 "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." [Prov. 25:21,22]

'Now, wait a minute Lord. I might be able to deal with the reality that I may never see justice in this case in this world but I certainly can't bring myself to actually help the one who wants to bury me.'

This exhortation is actually quoted by Paul from Proverbs.

Pro 25:21-22 "If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat; if he is thirsty, give him water to drink. 22 In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head, and the LORD will reward you."

This may seem like an odd way of responding to an enemy, and yet it is consistent with the way God deals with all of us.

Rom 5:8-11 "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. 9 Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! 10 For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! 11 Not only is this so, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation."

Again, it's not as though Paul gives us this "pie in the sky" command which is somehow irrelevant with our relationship with

God through Christ. Paul is reminding us that we must love our enemies because Christ loved us, even while we were His enemies. And if we are to imitators of Christ then this aspect of His love must be working in us and through us.

But I must remind you that the flesh or the natural man, which still persists, does not want to respond in this love which is why it's essential we walk in the Spirit. We are new creatures and we now possess the power and the ability in the Spirit to walk in a way that will please the Lord and accomplish the work He has for us, even in these types of situations. This is why we must constantly seek for the Spirit's filling.

If your enemy is hungry, feed him. If he is thirsty give him a drink. The idea here is that your enemy is in need. And for all you know this may be the Lord's hand dealing with his sin against you.

And now the Lord calls upon you to extend a hand of peace which may be the very thing which softens his heart towards the God who brings reconciliation.

From a practical stand point you may not always be aware of his need. He or she may live in another state or city. You may have no dealings with this person. But the implication is that if you are given an opportunity to help then you can be an instrument used in the hand of God to do one of two things: **1) Show God's mercy and compassion with the love of Christ. 2) Be the instrument which brings that person to the end of themselves so they look up to the One who can save.**

Again, each situation will be different. Each person must seek God for guidance. You may find as you go to meet such a need that they want nothing to do with you. But, at least you honored God with your obedience.

And, in obeying God, you may be used to heap burning coals on this person's head. Now that may sound cruel, but we must understand what this phrase means in the context.

There are those who suggest that this means that our motivation should be to do good so that the other person's judgment from God will be greater. The idea is that, 'I'm gonna be kind to you so that God will get you, and get you good.'

They may quote such passages as Psa 140:10 "Let burning coals fall upon them; may they be thrown into the fire, into miry pits, never to rise."



Or if that one doesn't get to the heart of your intentions how about Psa 11:6 "On the wicked he will rain fiery coals and burning sulfur; a scorching wind will be their lot."

Now in the context of those psalms those warnings have a very true meaning with real consequences for evil. But here in Romans Paul is clearly teaching that our motive is not to be one of pure retaliation, but rather one of love and compassion.

But, he doesn't deny that sin has consequences or that sin should simply be over-looked. If we are not to take vengeance, but rather allow God to do His work, we must keep in mind what His work is. And that work is to draw men to Himself that they might find forgiveness of their sin and humble themselves before Christ as they turn from their sin and embrace the Savior by faith.

And you may be used in that process as you extend kindness instead of wrath. Charles Hodge puts this verse into perspective. He says, [By treating your enemy kindly] "you will take the most effectual method of subduing him. To heap coals of fire on anyone is a punishment which no one can bear; he must yield to it....

.... The true and Christian method, therefore, to subdue an enemy is to overcome evil with good. This interpretation which suits so well the whole context, seems to be rendered necessary by the following verse, which is a repetition of the previous injunctions in plainer and more general terms. The sentiment which the verse thus explained expresses, is also more in harmony with the spirit of the gospel."

The spirit of the gospel is not to destroy people but to see people saved and reconciled. This is why Paul ends this portion with Rom 12:21 "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

To be overcome with anything, in a sense, places us in bondage to that thing. And believe me, to be put into bondage to that which is evil, be it an attitude toward someone, or actions we may want to take towards someone, will only cripple our ability to walk with Christ and honor Him.

Instead of being put into bondage by evil we have the opportunity of not only walking in Christ's freedom but we have the opportunity to bring freedom to those who are themselves in bondage because of their own evil, as we submit to the love of Christ who works in and through us for His honor and glory.

Overcome evil with good. When you're tempted to be bound with feelings and emotions that want to lash out in anger towards anyone, be they believers or unbelievers, be they a mate or a friend, consider your role in being Christ's representative and a peace maker who can bring peace to a bad situation.

Don't ever underestimate how God can use you to bring His love in the middle of a bad situation. But to do that you need to be willing to lay aside self as you abhor evil and cling to what is good.

That does not mean we excuse sin, it simply means that we can identify with sinners because we know where we would be outside of Christ forgiving our sins and giving the hope of glory found in Him alone.

That's the message of love we need to bring to the world. And that's a message we need to show to the world as we rely on the power of the Spirit to be used of Christ who came to die for the ungodly which included you and me.

Praise God for His amazing grace!