

Romans

I. Living Godly In The World & Church

A. Romans 12:17-21 . . . Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men. [18] If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men. [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. [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 on his head." [21] Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

B. Review

1. As I pointed out last Sunday, the standards for godly living taught in Romans 12:14-21 are some of the most challenging standards in the NT.
2. And the reason they are so challenging is because the kinds of people and circumstances referred to in these verses are often seen as a threat to our well-being, or as a never ending trial or tribulation. And so out of fear, frustration, anger, discouragement, or despair, we are easily moved to question the trustworthiness of God, to set aside the uncompromising standard of love, and to take matters into our own hands – for the purpose of protecting ourselves or getting relief.
3. We ended last Sunday's teaching with vs 17 . . . Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men.

C. Prayer

II. Living Godly In The World & Church

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

1. The "If possible" at the beginning of this exhortation makes it clear that it is not always possible to be at peace with everyone. However, ongoing conflict is never to be because we are unwilling to do all we can to resolve the conflict and live in peace. Now there is only one restriction to doing all we can, and that one restriction is 'remaining faithful to God, the word of God, and the standard of love.'
 - a. In other words, when it comes to our part in any conflict, there is only one justifiable reason for not resolving the conflict, and that reason is God. We must never agree to any resolution or form

any bond of peace that requires us to compromise our allegiance to God, disobey God – in thought, word, or deed, or lower the standard of love toward anyone affected by the resolution.

- b. However, even though we may do all we can to resolve the conflict, it may still remain unresolved because the other party refuses to cooperate. For example, they may refuse to negotiate, or refuse to look for a resolution that is in the interests of both sides, or make agreements but not keep them.
2. An example of refusing to resolve a conflict because of God comes from Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. They were in a life or death conflict with the King of Babylon. However, because of their allegiance to God, and their commitment to obey God and honor God, they refused to participate in the king's offered solution.
 - a. But before getting to this specific conflict, I want to point out that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego had done what they could to be at peace with this king. And when I say they did what they could, let me remind you of their situation. This king was a foreign invader who had conquered their nation, slaughtered some of their people, and carried away the best of those who were left. And yet, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego – who were among those carried away – were such loyal subjects that the king trusted them enough to place them in positions of authority in his kingdom.
 - b. In other words, in spite of the vast differences that existed between these three Jewish men and the Babylonian king, they fulfilled Paul's exhortation: "If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men."
 - c. However, when the King made a golden image and decreed that they must bow before it and worship it, they refused on the grounds that to obey the King would require disloyalty to God and disobedience to God's commands.
 - d. It is possible some will say Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were the sole impasse in resolving this conflict. However, the King could have relented and excused them from obeying his decree on the grounds of their religious beliefs. But he didn't. Instead of seeking a resolution, he got mad, made the fiery furnace even hotter, and threw them in.
 - e. Now it is true that Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego had the freedom of will to remain at peace with the king, but to them, there never would be or could be a compelling reason to turn against God and disobey His commands, so they didn't.

3. When in conflict, you may be tempted to be like the king – so blinded by your power or position or the need to look good in the eyes of others that you refuse to find a way to resolve the conflict.
 - a. Or you may be like the king in that you know your rights, and you are not going to give up any of them up the sake of conflict resolution.
 - b. Or you may be like the king in that you are convinced you are right – which means all you can see or are willing to consider is that the other side is wrong – so they need to move your way.
4. So don't be like the king. Rather, follow the example of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who did what they could as long as they could to be at peace with their enemy.
5. The point here is that we are never to be the reason for unresolved conflict, unless resolving the conflict requires being disloyal to God and disobeying His word. When that is the case, we are to stand our ground – whatever the cost.

B. Romans 12:19a . . . Never take your own revenge, beloved,

1. Revenge is driven by a strong, bitter and malicious desire to injure or kill the person, or persons, who did something evil to you or to someone you love.
 - a. Unlike God's vengeance, human vengeance is typically fueled by ungodly anger, bitterness, hate, pride, a driving desire to get even, and a demand for justice.
 - b. And even though there are certain areas of the world where revenge is culturally approved, it is always a form of vigilante justice where civilians take matters into their own hands, act as judge and jury, and then dispense their own brand of punishment.
2. Now you may be wondering what the difference is between returning evil for evil and revenge.
 - a. Revenge is the result of acting – on your own – as judge, jury, and executioner.
 - b. Returning evil for evil is most often a spontaneous reaction to mistreatment. It is often an impulsive response to someone being unkind, mean, hurtful, or cruel to you. Returning evil for evil is rarely for the purpose of seeking justice. Its purpose is to send a message – a message that says, "Stop treating me this way."
 - c. In other words, returning evil for evil is a circumstance driven response for the purpose of deterrence, whereas revenge is a bitter and planned response for the purpose of righting a wrong.

3. I believe it is important for us to note that the first word in this exhortation is the same as in the exhortation about returning evil for evil – and that word is NEVER – NEVER take your own revenge. Why? Why are we to never take our own revenge on an evil person who has done us or those we love great harm? Here are four reasons.
 - a. First, God commands us to NEVER seek our own revenge, but rather to leave vengeance to Him. Therefore, NEVER taking your own revenge is, first and foremost, an issue of trusting God enough in these kinds of situations to obey Him.
 - b. Second, it is impossible to take your own revenge without sinning in thought, word, and deed – which means you have become evil yourself, and that means you have set yourself up to deserve some level of vengeance for the evil you have done.
 - c. Third, Jesus said: “In the way you judge, you will be judged; and by your standard of measure, it will be measured to you” (Matthew 7:2).
 - (1) In other words, when you act as judge, jury, and executioner, you are setting a standard for judging that God says He will use when judging you.
 - (2) Therefore, taking your own revenge is exceedingly foolish in that it sets you up for a stricter judgement from God than He would use against you otherwise.
 - d. Fourth, Jesus also said: “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy” (Matthew 5:7). Therefore, if you want God to throw in an extra amount of mercy when judging you, be merciful yourself. And if you are unsure how to be merciful to someone who is mistreating you, follow the teachings of God’s word.
 - (1) Love your enemy and seek what is best for him – including giving aid to your enemy if he has a basic, life-sustaining need.
 - (2) Bless your enemy and pray for him – including wanting him to come to repentance, faith in Christ, and a sanctified life.
 4. Therefore, to protect yourself from doing what is evil, and to protect yourself from harsher judgment or being given less mercy by God, NEVER take your own revenge – regardless of what anyone does to you or to someone you love.
- C. But what are we to do when it appears evil people are getting away with having done or continuing to do evil things to us or those we love?
1. The answer is clearly stated in Romans 12:19b . . . “leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, ‘vengeance is mine, I will repay,’

says the Lord.” From our side, that is, from our human perspective, this answer has three parts.

2. First, we are to stay within the boundaries of godliness and love as laid out in Romans and the rest of God’s word. This includes keeping love free of hypocrisy, blessing those who persecute us, never returning evil for evil, and if possible, so far as it depends on us, being at peace with all men.
3. Second, we are to trust God to do what He says He will do in relation to bringing justice to an unjust situation and to an evil person either has done or is continuing to do us harm.
 - a. And though God’s justice may not be seen or even experienced in this life, we are assured it will be seen and experienced at the Judgment Seat, and in the life to come.
 - b. One scripture that affirms this is Psalm 37:1-3 . . . Do not fret because of evildoers, be not envious [of what wrongdoers gain or get away with]. [2] For they will wither quickly like the grass and fade like the green herb. [3] Trust in the LORD and do good; dwell in the land and cultivate faithfulness.
4. Third, we are to step aside and patiently wait for our all-powerful, all-knowing, all-wise, impartial, merciful, and loving God to bring about His justice.
 - a. Here again, the scripture affirms God will avenge all who suffer unjustly, and especially those who suffer for righteousness sake, because we read in –
 - b. Psalm 37:7-10 . . . Rest in the LORD and wait patiently for Him; do not fret because of him who prospers in his way, because of the man who carries out wicked schemes. [8] Cease from anger and forsake wrath; do not fret; it leads only to evildoing. [9] For evildoers will be cut off, but those who wait for the LORD, they will inherit the land. [10] Yet a little while and the wicked man will be no more; and you will look carefully for his place and he will not be there.
5. Before moving on to vs 20, there is one more thing I want us to look at. When Paul says, “Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,” he is quoting Deuteronomy 32:35, which says, “Vengeance is Mine, and retribution.” Retribution speaks of being paid according to what you have done.
 - a. Interestingly, Deuteronomy 32:1-43 contains the words to the Song of Moses – a song God had Moses write and teach to the people to help them remember God’s ways – and especially His ways of blessing the righteous and punishing the wicked. And

one of the things God wanted Israel to remember is that vengeance and repayment belonged to Him, not to them.

- b. The writer of Hebrews uses this same quote in Hebrews 10:30 . . . For we know Him who said, "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay."
 - c. And we read in Galatians 6:7-8 that we will reap what we have sown. In other words, whether we do good or evil, God will pay us or recompense us according to our deeds.
 - d. Now my purpose in pointing out these scriptures about vengeance and repayment is to bring us to 1 Thessalonians 4:3-7, which speaks of God's vengeance on an area of sin that few in our world today take seriously. Listen carefully to 1 Thessalonians 4:3-7, "For this is the will of God, your sanctification; that is, that you abstain from sexual immorality; [4] that each of you know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor, [5] not in lustful passion, like the Gentiles who do not know God; [6] and that no man transgress and defraud his brother in this matter (i.e., do not get involved with another man's wife) because the Lord is the avenger in all these things, just as we also told you before and solemnly warned you. [7] For God has not called us for the purpose of impurity, but in sanctification.
- D. Romans 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 on his head."
1. This is a quote from Proverbs 25:21-22 . . . If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat; and if he is thirsty, give him water to drink; [22] for you will heap burning coals on his head, and the LORD will reward you.
 - a. It is important to keep this command in proper perspective. The requirement here is not that of giving whatever the evil person may desire, but rather what the evil person needs to sustain his life – such as food and water.
 - b. Our premier example of this is God, for we read in Matthew 5:45, that God causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.
 2. Now there are those who read Romans 12:20 with a measure of pleasure – because they believe it gives them an opportunity to at least do something that makes the one mistreating them experience some measure of retribution for what they have done. They are hoping their enemy will at least squirm or feel some pang of conscience.

3. However, seeing this verse in that light neglects the context, which clearly speaks of a different attitude and response than wanting some measure of pleasure over the evil doer getting at least something of what he deserves.
4. For example,
 - a. The context teaches that we are to resist being conformed to this world, and focus on being transformed by the renewing of our mind so that we will live in a way that proves God's will is good and acceptable and perfect (Romans 12:2).
 - b. The context teaches that we are to turn away from thinking more highly of ourselves than we ought, and using sound judgment, we are to be humble in thought, word, and deed (Romans 12:3).
 - c. The context teaches that we are to protect the purity of love so that it is always loving (Romans 12:9).
 - d. The context teaches that we are to bless rather than curse those who persecute us (Romans 12:14).
 - e. The context teaches that we are to never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Rather, when possible, so far as it depends on us, we are to be at peace with everyone (Romans 12:17-18).
 - f. And last but not least, we are to never take our own revenge (Romans 12:19).
5. Clearly, heaping burning coals upon the heads of those mistreating us has nothing to do with getting even. Rather, it has everything to do with seeking their good – just as God works tirelessly for our good.
 - a. And as I already said, seeking the good of those who mistreat you requires doing your part to give them what they need if they have need of the basics to live another day.
 - b. But beyond giving what is needed to survive physically, Christian love compels us to want and work toward all people – including our worst enemies – coming to repentance, saving faith, and a godly, sanctified life.

III. Conclusion

- A. Paul concludes this section of Romans with “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Romans 12:21). Surely this means we are to overcome the temptation to be evil ourselves by doing good. But it also means, that in praying for and working for the conversion and eternal salvation of our enemies, we are joining with God and the rest of the church to overcome evil with good.