

THE LETTER THAT CHANGED THE WORLD - The Biblical Theology of Romans - Part forty-eight
Sunday, December 22nd, 2019 - 5:30 p.m. - Teaching #2179
Pastor Don Horban - Cedarview Community Church, Newmarket, ON

THE RENEWED MIND IN THE FACE OF AN ENEMY

Romans 12:14-21 - “Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. [15] Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. [16] Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be conceited. [17] Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. [18] If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. [19] Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.’ [20] To the contrary, ‘if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.’ [21] Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”

As this whole twelfth chapter of Romans unfolds the nature of the renewed mind it’s natural that Paul saves the most difficult assignment till last. We all **grow** in our shapability to the refining work of the Holy Spirit on our natural inclinations. Hence Paul moves on from the manner of the renewed mind with **hospitality** toward the stranger and the need (12:13) to the **blessing of enemies** (14).

Here is **advanced** discipleship. Here is the path Jesus starts all of us on when He saves us. This is where discipleship and the call of the Spirit always **goes**. If new life is formed in the mind and heart at all, it must manifest itself at this most demanding point. We can’t pick and choose the points at which the call of Jesus needn’t be heeded.

And I say the call of **Jesus** because that is obviously where Paul found the direction for this radical path. The very first word of instruction in verse 14 is “ **bless**” - “ **Bless those who persecute you**; [then Paul repeats it again for emphasis] **bless and do not curse them.**” And the reason Paul chose such a shocking term to frame our behavior is that’s the term Jesus commanded - **Luke 6:28** - “ **...bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.**”

There are Christians who **believe** in Jesus. And there are Christians who say they **love** Jesus. And there are Christians who say Jesus is their **Savior**. But the words in today’s text aren’t for any of these. Today’s text is for those who take Jesus **seriously**. Here are the key thoughts as I see them:

1) **IF WE ARE GOING TO OBEY JESUS AT THIS POINT IT WILL DEMAND AN INTENSIFYING OF DEATH TO SELF**

It requires a radical cross-bearing to **receive** Jesus. It demands a manifest death to self to take **pardon** from His hand. But we must all take ourselves by the scruff of the neck if we would conform to Jesus **here**:

Romans 12:14 - “**Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.**”

The second part of the verse doesn’t say anything new. It adds no new idea. But what it **does** do is explain the **negative** side of obeying the Spirit in this area. Paul is telling us that **this** obedience isn’t just a matter of **doing** the thing commanded - “ **Bless those who persecute you....**” - but it’s also a matter of **not** doing something else first - “ **Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them**”(14).

So nothing is left to chance in this important call to radical discipleship. Paul is telling us - **reminding** us - that this will be a **costly** obedience. It will involve **turning against ourselves**. Everything in us will scream to “**curse**”(14b). And that’s why we’re told to **expect** this natural uprising against the leading of the Holy Spirit. In other words, we can’t **coast** in this obedience like we might coast in some others - attending church, daily readings, singing songs, etc.

The call isn’t just to **tolerate** mistreatment from one whom you considered a brother. And the call isn’t merely to **ignore** such mistreatment. The call is to **bless** the one who injures us - to look for some way to make their joy and happiness deeper than the grief they’ve caused us. And that kind of obedience is like the call to do a hundred push-ups. This is for people who are willing to “**exercise themselves unto godliness.**”

2) **THE CHURCH IS TO BE THE TRAINING GROUND FOR SELF-FORGETFULNESS NOT SELF-FULFILLMENT**

Romans 12:15-16 - “Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. [16] Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be conceited.”

These verses aren't as unrelated as they first seem to Paul's theme of blessing those who bear us nothing but harm and injury in the body of Christ. We begin to see the wisdom of God in placing us in a local body of believers upon our being called and saved. We aren't ready to bless our persecutors. We are all naturally **turned inward** upon ourselves.

Paul has already told us that this is the key issue needing transformation by the Holy Spirit - **Romans 12:3** - "**For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.**"

If all that was required in us was **forgiveness**, then the cross alone is sufficient. But if we need to be **relationally retrained, renewed, and retooled** then congregational life is required.

Fortunately, not everyone in the church will bring you harm. They are not **all** out to persecute you. But even those who are **not** are used by the Holy Spirit to **train** you for those who **are**. Everyone in the church is placed there by the Holy Spirit with all sorts of circumstances - good and bad - to **train me in self-forgetfulness**.

There are people who are **blessed and rejoicing** even though I, myself, may be brokenhearted. And the call of the Spirit to me is to help them in **their** rejoicing even though, in my own self, there is nothing but **sorrow**. And there are others who are **depressed and grieving**, desperately needing empathy and shared tears, even though I, at that very moment, am blessed beyond my ability to contain.

And the training goes even deeper. Paul says we're to "**Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be conceited**"(16). It's the mark of an unrenewed mind to establish relationships created around **my** interests and **my** self-perceived stature. This is what people do when they "**think of themselves more highly than they ought to think**"(12:3).

But to do this is to miss the Holy Spirit's **training agenda** for my development in the congregational life of the church. Hear me - it is easy - **painfully easy** - to **attend** church all your life without ever being **trained** and **grown** in the image of Christ through that congregational experience. I can be "**haughty**" in church (16b) without ever uttering what anyone would perceive as a proud word. Obeying the Spirit's instruction in **verses 15-16** will keep us from a stilted Christian experience. We'll be better prepared to obey what comes next in our text:

3) **VENGEANCE FREQUENTLY ARISES FROM WOUNDED PRIDE RATHER THEN A DESIRE FOR JUSTICE**

I had never seen this link in the text before. Notice how these words about **not** taking repayment for an evil received follow hard on the heels of the previous verse:

Romans 12:16b-17-19 - "**.... Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be conceited. [17] Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. [18] If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. [19] Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.'**"

Did you see it? "**Never be conceited - Repay no one evil for evil.**" It's very hard for people like I to be trusted to draw the line between a desire for justice and a wounded pride that feels I **deserved** better treatment than I received. That's why we're all safer when we are fighting for injustice done to **others** than to **ourselves**. We are rarely pursuing pure justice when our own egos are involved. Hence, "**....never avenge yourselves**"(19).

Now we see it all coming together. Behold the wisdom of God. Such strong medicine is demanded - "**Bless those who persecute you**"(14). And the reason, not obvious to us when we've been wronged, is we will be tempted to **avenge** ourselves. And we will tell ourselves our desire is motivated by pure **justice**. Really, the Holy Spirit knows my fury is the flexing of my wounded **pride**. This is the Fall rearing its stubborn head against the work of the Spirit in the renewing of my mind. And the Spirit pleads - "**Don't think of yourselves more highly than you ought to think**" (12:3).

O, this pride dies hard in all of us. We hate its dying. So God pulls out all the stops. Right at the point where we feel the most **righteous** in our pride, he calls for that which is most **humbling** - "**Bless those who persecute you!**"(14). The hard assignment is the painful scalpel of divine love.

But what about evil? And what about sin? What if someone has genuinely **wronged** me. Not just hurt my feelings, but **committed sin** against me. Where is the holiness of God? Where is justice meted out, if not from me?

No question about it, evil **ought** to be punished. And that's the reason for Paul's strong words in **verse 19** - **"Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.'"** God won't ignore the sin. Wrong never has the final word - never.

This is so important. We err in vengeance when we rush to take it into our own hands. And we rush because, in our pride, we can't stand the thought of the wrongdoer escaping unpunished with his guilt. But sin - **all** sin - is punished. Either people repent and their sin is punished on the cross of Christ, or they don't and they will be punished when Jesus comes again, if not sooner at God's providence. But **no** sin is ignored in God's universe. O, how we all fight unbelief at this point!

But sometimes I don't **want** my enemy forgiven. I don't want his sin atoned for in Christ's death. I want him or her to **suffer** for what they've done to me. And Jesus told a parable to confront this vengeful streak in my heart:

Matthew 18:23-35 - **"Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. [24] When he began to settle, one was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents. [25] And since he could not pay, his master ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made. [26] So the servant fell on his knees, imploring him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.' [27] And out of pity for him, the master of that servant released him and forgave him the debt. [28] But when that same servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii, and seizing him, he began to choke him, saying, 'Pay what you owe.' [29] So his fellow servant fell down and pleaded with him, 'Have patience with me, and I will pay you.' [30] He refused and went and put him in prison until he should pay the debt. [31] When his fellow servants saw what had taken place, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their master all that had taken place. [32] Then his master summoned him and said to him, 'You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. [33] And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?' [34] And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. [35] So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart."**

How this parable searches our hearts? Ask yourself this question: "Would I really prefer God's free, loving grace to my enemy or my own revenge?" No question should expose our motives and drive us to our knees faster than this one.

Notice Jesus' own example of this truth in the face of the most unjust treatment any being could ever receive: **1 Peter 2:21-23** - **"For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. [22] He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. [23] When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly."**

His own death - the very death his enemies inflicted upon Him, would pay for the wrong they committed **against** Him. And if they didn't repent and believe, then Father God could be trusted to deal with their wicked deeds. Either way, vengeance wasn't necessary in the Son's holy hands.

4) **RESTORING LOVE - THE ULTIMATE DESIRE OF A RENEWED HEART IN THE FACE OF INJUSTICE**

Romans 12:20-21 - **"To the contrary, 'if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.' [21] Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."**

This is profound. There are different ways of manifesting a fallen heart in the face of injustice. To have an opportunity to do something **good** for the one who injures me and **not** to take it is nothing more than a **quiet** revenge. Ignoring my enemy is still the act of a self-centered, proud heart.

Paul is clear, if there is some way - if you can **find** some way - to be a blessing to the one who wrongs you, **seize it**. Don't let yourself sleep through a chance to walk in the Spirit. Don't ignore the one way to be the **most** like Jesus Christ. Good deeds done by surprise can stun the most careless wrongdoer. The Holy Spirit knows the wounded are the surest way to bring repentance to the one who assaults.

Don't just **tolerate** the evil. If it is really true - if you **hate** evil - then don't just **ignore** it. Eradicate it. And do it with love - love when it's least deserved. Because that's the kind of love Jesus extended to **you**.