

Responding appropriately to conflict

A sermon preached at Poplar Baptist Church,
16th June 2019

Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone (Romans 12.17 – 19).

Introduction

It is a sad fact that probably all of us will experience conflict at some point in our lives. It is part and parcel of living in a fallen world.

Parents may experience conflict with their teenage children, and, for that matter, children may experience conflict with parents whom they consider to be overbearing and controlling. Employees may experience conflict with their employers, and vice versa. Neighbours may fall out with each other. Christians may experience conflict with non-Christian friends and family members. Sometimes, sadly, Christians may experience conflict with other believers.

The verses tell us how we should live when we face conflict.

These verses are found in Romans chapter 12, which is the part of Paul's letter to the Romans which brings out for believers the practical implications of the truth that true believers have been saved from their sins entirely by the undeserved love that is in Christ.

Before we look at the detail of these verses, I want to take a moment to remind us that our salvation is entirely undeserved, and is not brought about by our good works.

We have spent quite a lot of time in recent months thinking about the teaching in this chapter about how we should live. There is always a danger when we think about the moral teaching of Christianity that we will lose sight of the truth that our salvation is all by grace. We can very easily slip back into a sort of "salvation by works" mentality. We can start to think that as long as we keep these rules, we shall make

ourselves good enough for heaven. So it is as well to remind ourselves from time to time of the basis of our salvation.

The truth is that we cannot get to God by trying to live a good life. The only way that we are made fit to know God is through faith in what Jesus has done on the Cross. The apostle states this very clearly in chapter 3 of this letter. Having quoted from the Old Testament numerous verses which speak about our sin, the apostle sums things up by saying, in verse 20, "Therefore no-one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin." But, thanks be to God, there is another way that he has provided, which is through the righteousness that God provides for us, in Christ. "But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe." God provides for us a righteousness that we do not have, his own righteousness. This righteousness does not come through obeying God's law, but through faith in Christ, for all who believe. The apostle explains in verse 23 why we need God's righteousness. We need it because "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." We are all "in the same boat". We have all sinned. None of us can make ourselves good enough for God, because sin has ruined our lives. But, the apostle says in the next verse, God has provided an answer. We "are justified" – declared to be righteous – "freely by his grace" – as a free gift that came about by God's undeserved love – "by the redemption" – by being set free by the payment of a price – "that came by Christ Jesus." This was made possible by the sacrifice that Jesus made for our sins on the Cross. Verse 25: "God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood."

So, our salvation is entirely undeserved. It is free, and not paid for by our good works or religious acts. It is entirely through what Jesus did for us on the Cross. We have received this by faith. And, we learn from Ephesians chapter 2 verse 9 that even the faith by which we received God's salvation was given to us by God. So our salvation is all of God, and nothing of us.

So the moral teaching that we have here in chapter 12 is not given to us to enable us to go to heaven. It is given to us to obey *because* we are going to heaven. We should do the things that the apostle talks about here in this chapter out of gratitude to God for saving us, not in the hope that we will make ourselves worthy of going to heaven.

Before we go any further, let me ask you this question: have you asked Jesus to save you? If you are in any doubt at all, come to him today, and ask him to save you from your sin. If you have not been saved, you are a slave of sin who is on his way to everlasting punishment and torment in hell. Cry out to God to have mercy on you and to give you eternal life.

Now, having reminded us of the basis of what the apostle is saying in Romans 12, let us think about the detail of what he is saying in the verses that we are thinking about today. The apostle gives us a three-fold rule to follow when we find ourselves in conflict with others.

1. We should not repay anyone evil for evil.
2. We should always act in such a way as any reasonable person would consider to be right.
3. We should do all that is in our power, as far as it depends on us, to live at peace with others.

Let us think about these things together now.

1. We should not repay evil for evil

The apostle says, "Do not repay anyone evil for evil."

There are similar commandments in other Scriptures. The book of Proverbs, chapter 20 verse 22 says, "Do not say, "I'll pay you back for this wrong!" Wait for the Lord, and he will deliver you."

Jesus teaches the same thing famously in the Sermon on the Mount, as recorded in Matthew chapter 5 verses 39 to 43,

You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.

Paul writes in 1 Thessalonians chapter 5 verse 20, "Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always try to be kind to each other and to everyone else."

Peter writes, in his first letter, chapter 3 verse 9, "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."

Sometimes people object, saying, "Not paying people back for the wrong that they do is an act of weakness." On the contrary, it is the person who does not pay back who is the strong person. He is showing tremendous power over his own natural tendency to want to take vengeance. Proverbs chapter 16 verse 32 says, "Better a patient man than a warrior, a man who controls his temper than one who takes a city." Moreover, not to be vengeful can have an enormous impact upon others for good.

Graham Staines was an Australian Baptist Missionary who worked for a mission that treated those suffering from leprosy, in the state of Orisssa in India. He also went around preaching the Gospel in various villages in that region. On one such mission trip, on 22nd January 1989, he had gone to a village to preach, with his two sons. They slept overnight in their vehicle. A mob surrounded him and his two sons. The mob forced shut the doors of their vehicle, poured in petrol and set it alight. Staines and his two sons were burned to death. His widow, Gladys, sang the song at the funeral, "Because he lives, I can face tomorrow." She said afterwards, "It is far from my mind to punish the persons responsible for the death of my husband and my two children. But it is my hope and prayer that they would repent and be reformed." The forgiveness that Gladys showed towards her attackers had a huge impact upon India, and upon the world. There have been many reports of people having been converted as a result of her testimony.

This teaching that we should not return evil for evil has massively wide application. When your children are rude to you, deal with them kindly, even if you have to be firm. If your spouse is ever unkind to you, answer back with love. If a fellow church member insults you, be loving in return. If your neighbour makes life very difficult for you, be a good neighbour to him. If your non-Christian work colleagues treat you badly, be good back to them.

So here is the first thing: we should not return evil for evil.

2. We should do what is obviously right in the sight of any reasonably minded person

“Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody.”

The word that is translated “Be careful” means literally “think beforehand”. The King James translation translates it “provide”. Paul is saying that we need to think before we act, and think about the effect that what we say or do might have on other people.

The same word is used in 2 Corinthians chapter 8, verse 21. In this passage Paul is explaining about the care that he has taken in handling the money which had been given by predominantly Gentile churches to help support Jewish believers in Jerusalem who were suffering hardship. He had asked for representatives from the Gentile churches to accompany him as he took the gift to Jerusalem, in order to make sure that everything was done correctly, and so that the believers who had given so generously could be assured that the money was handed over. The apostle explains his reason: “For we are taking pains to do what is right, not only in the eyes of the Lord but also in the eyes of men.” He thought in advance, he “provided” for what was right, not just in God’s sight, but in the sight of men as well.

There is a very important truth which lies behind what the apostle says here. If you are in a situation of conflict, people will be looking for every opportunity to find fault with you. They will have a jaundiced outlook, and will be strongly inclined to put a negative construction on the most innocent of actions. We need to think in advance of doing something, “Is what I am thinking of doing liable to be misconstrued? Is it going to make the situation worse, and lead to greater conflict? Is it going to bring the name of Christ into disrepute?”

This is particularly true for those of us who are Christians. We are living our lives before a watching world, which is hostile towards Christianity. People are looking for excuses not to believe in Christ. We must not give them those excuses.

Jesus says to his disciples in Matthew’s Gospel, chapter 5 verses 14 to 16,

You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that

they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.”

Paul writes in Titus chapter 2 verses 4 and 5, that older women are to “train the younger women to love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled and pure, to be busy at home, to be kind, and to be subject to their husbands, so that no-one will malign the word of God.”

Peter writes in his first letter, chapter 2 verse 12: “Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.”

We who are believers must make sure that we do not “let the side down” by behaving in a way which is going to cause needless offence to others. If we do behave a wrong way, then it will no doubt be repeated endlessly by unbelievers, who will add, at the end of the story, “and he calls himself a Christian”.

For example, if you lose your temper when you are provoked and say something that you should not say, then this will be picked up on by others, and will lead to the name of Christ being dishonoured. The way that you were provoked may well not be repeated. The way that you responded to the provocation will be.

Another example would be if you were to respond in a vindictive and unpleasant way to bad behaviour by one of your children. If unbelievers were to hear about it, the naughtiness of the child is not the thing that would be repeated. It would be your wrong reaction to that naughtiness that would be spoken about.

We need to think about what we do, before we do it, and we need ask ourselves, “How would this look to others? Would any reasonably minded person think that I had acted in a right and fair way, or would such a person be shocked by my actions? If a tabloid newspaper were to report what I had done, would I have reason to be embarrassed, or could I hold my head up without shame?”

3. We should do all that is possible from our side to live at peace with others.

The apostle says, “If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.”

The overarching aim that we should have is to be at peace with all people, whether they are believers or not.

We should especially aim to be at peace with other believers. Jesus said, as recorded in Mark's Gospel, chapter 9, verse 50, "Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can you make it salty again? Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with each other."

Paul says later in this letter, chapter 14, verse 9, "Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification." He writes in his second letter to the Corinthians chapter 13, verse 11, "Finally, brothers, good-bye. Aim for perfection, listen to my appeal, be of one mind, live in peace." He says in Ephesians chapter 4 verse 3 that we should "Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace."

Therefore we should do all we can to live at peace with other believers. If you hear that another believer is offended with you, as Jesus taught, you should go and be reconciled to this believer.

Not only should we make it our aim to live at peace with believers, we should also aim to live at peace with unbelievers as well. Hebrews chapter 12 verse 14 says, "Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy."

This will not always be possible. We live in a world which is hostile to Christ. Some people are implacable. Whatever you say, and whatever you do, they will always find fault. Jesus said, as recorded in Matthew chapter 10, verses 34 to 36,

Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. 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 – a man's enemies will be the members of his own household.'

The Gospel has the effect of dividing people. It brings out people's hostility to God, and leads them to be hostile towards believers.

For some people, the only way that you would be able to be at peace with them would be through compromising what you believe about Christ and the way of salvation, or by denying what the Bible says about how we should live, which you know that you cannot do in good conscience. With such people, peace will be impossible, and we will just have to resign ourselves to the fact that they will be hostile towards us.

But we need to try very hard to ensure that any offence we cause is the offence of the Gospel, and because of the moral standards of God, and

is not because we have been obnoxious and caused offence for no reason.

For example, in the current climate that we live in, a Christian who stands for the Biblical teaching about sex, and in particular who says that sexual activity between two people of the same biological gender is sinful, is liable to find himself vilified and attacked. There is nothing that we can do about that. But if we were to use derogatory and insulting terms for those who practice homosexuality, or, worse still, we were to call for them to be attacked physically, then we would cause unnecessary offence and bring the cause of Christ into disrepute.

Similarly, if you have a dispute with someone, and the person is rude to you, if you answer back with rudeness, then you are going to add to the ill feeling between you. You have a responsibility to act in such a way as to make it abundantly clear that if there is a breakdown in the relationship, the reason for the break is the behaviour of the other person, not your behaviour.

Conclusion

We have been learning today about how we are to behave in situations of conflict. We have learned three things:

1. We should not repay anyone evil for evil.
2. We should always act in such a way as any reasonable person would consider to be right.
3. We should do all that is possible from our side to live at peace with others.

As we finish, I need to stress that we can only do these things by the power of the Holy Spirit. It is vitally important to come to Christ and receive his salvation. I say again, are you a Christian? Have you asked to be saved? If the answer is “no”, or “not sure”, then come to Christ and ask him to save you.

For those of us who are Christians, it is essential, if we are to obey these exhortations, that we have a living relationship with God. It is only as we dwell on the love of Christ for us, and remember all the blessings that we have in him, that we will be enabled to love our enemies as we should. So I say to those of us who are believers, how is your relationship with the Lord today? Have you allowed your heart to grow cold? Are you clinging on to ugly heart sins like bitterness, resentment,

self-pity, lust, greed and idolatry? Has your desire for God all but dried up? Repent! Come to the Lord. Confess your sins to him. Call upon him to fill you with his Spirit, that you might have a genuinely loving heart towards all, even towards your enemies.

This booklet contains the edited notes of a sermon which was preached by Henry Dixon. A recording of the actual sermon that was preached may be found at

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