

Authentic Love: Pray for Your Persecutor

Romans 12:12

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Grace Fellowship Church, Toronto, Ontario

“Delighting in God to the glory of God”

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“The Sons of Thunder.” It was not a bad name for these brothers – James and John. They would later become the first martyr and the last apostle. But these two were privy to much and powerful in their ideas! They left their father in a boat the day Jesus called them; they witnessed Jesus raise a 12 year old girl back to life from the dead; they saw the Transfiguration; they boldly asked Jesus for the two seats of highest honor in heaven; and once, they tried to call fire down from heaven

(Luke 23:51-56) “When the days drew near for [Jesus] to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. And he sent messengers ahead of him, who went and entered a village of the Samaritans, to make preparations for him. But the people did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem. And when his disciples James and John saw it, they said, “Lord, do you want us to tell fire to come down from heaven and consume them?” But he turned and rebuked them. And they went on to another village.”

Jesus, their Lord, had been wronged. And the thunder cracked! Fire from heaven! Consume them! But the Offended One turns and rebukes them... and walks away from those who were cruel to Him.

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

We have been examining authentic love – what it means to genuinely love another. What an amazing portion of God’s Word: so challenging and soul-exposing!

In the first section, verses 9 to 13, Paul showed us how to be pro-active in this love, especially to believers. Now, in verses 14 to 21, he is going to describe for us how authentic love reacts to the stimulus of other peoples’ actions – both believer and non-believer. In other words, what does authentic love look like when we are acted upon by someone else – either Christian or non-Christian. How are we to respond to them in love - especially as they react to our proactive love!

Let’s begin by looking at how we are to love those who persecute us. That question in and of itself may seem like an oxymoron! Love those who persecute us? Absolutely! And here is how! But to keep things clear, I first want to ask three questions of our text this morning:

1. What is “persecution?”
2. How does authentic love react to persecution?
3. How can this be? (Is this just a religious platitude or real life?)

I. What is persecution?

The word Paul uses here is exactly the same word as he used in verse 13. “Earnestly seek after” hospitality. And when we looked at that verse, I showed you how the word can be used as a metaphor of persecution in the sense of chasing someone so that you put them to flight. It does not mean just the idea of chasing, but it is a catch phrase for all the various forms of attack and pressure that come against a Christian because he is a Christian.

We might define persecution, as it used here, as “malicious treatment that is caused by (or in response to) our well-doing.” This definition has two parts.

1) Malicious treatment.

I use this general phrase quite purposefully. Our minds are generally drawn to the most fearful and intense forms of suffering when we hear the word “persecution”: things like physical abuse and murder. We can wrongly define persecution as *only* this. The Bible is quite clear that there is a range to persecution that includes physical treatment, but it is not limited to it. Let me show you this just from the book of Acts.

Disruption and confusion by mistreatment:

(Acts 8:3) “But Saul was ravaging the church...”

Injection of error into our thinking and division into the church by false teachers:

(Acts 20:29-30) “I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them.”

False accusations:

(Acts 6:11-14) “Then they secretly instigated men who said, ‘We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God.’ And they stirred up the people and the elders and the scribes, and they came upon him and seized him and brought him before the council, and they set up false witnesses who said, ‘This man never ceases to speak words against this holy place and the law, for we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and will change the customs that Moses delivered to us.’”

Luke 3:14 – John the Baptist to soldiers...

Threats:

(Acts 9:1-2) “But Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any belonging to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.

(Acts 4:21) “And when they had further threatened them, they let them go, finding no way to punish them, because of the people, for all were praising God for what had happened...”

(Acts 4:29) “And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness...”

Extortion:

(Acts 17:9) “And when they had taken money as security from Jason and the rest, they let them go.”

Mocking and making fun of:

(Acts 17:32) “Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked.”

Driving the Christians away from their city and home:

(Acts 13:48-52) (Pisidian Antioch) “And when the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord, and as many as were appointed to eternal life believed. And the word of the Lord was spreading throughout the whole region. But the Jews incited the devout women of high standing and the leading men of the city, stirred up persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and drove them out of their district. But they shook off the dust from their feet against them and went to Iconium. And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.”

Imprisonment:

(Acts 12:3-5) “...and when he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also. This was during the days of Unleavened Bread. And when he had seized him, he put him in prison, delivering him over to four squads of soldiers to guard him, intending after the Passover to bring him out to the people. So Peter was kept in prison, but earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church.”

(Acts 16:32) (Paul and Silas in Philippi) “And when they had inflicted many blows upon them, they threw them into prison, ordering the jailer to keep them safely.”

Rioting against Christians:

Acts 19 in Ephesus

Beatings:

(Acts 18:17) “And they all seized Sosthenes, the ruler of the synagogue, and beat him in front of the tribunal. But Gallio paid no attention to any of this.”

Murder plots:

(Acts 23:12-15) “When it was day, the Jews made a plot and bound themselves by an oath neither to eat nor drink till they had killed Paul. There were more than forty who made this conspiracy. They went to the chief priests and elders and said, “We have strictly bound ourselves by an oath to taste no food till we have killed Paul. Now therefore you, along with the council, give notice to the tribune to bring him down to you,

as though you were going to determine his case more exactly. And we are ready to kill him before he comes near.”

Murder/Martyrdom:

(Acts 12:1-2) “About that time Herod the king laid violent hands on some who belonged to the church. He killed James the brother of John with the sword...”

What we see in this short list is a kind of *persecution spectrum* – from the simpler mistreatment and false accusations to the more profound imprisonment, physical abuse and even martyrdom. But all of this qualifies as persecution. As Lloyd-Jones writes:

“Persecution takes many, many different forms. Sometimes it can be open, blatant, physical, even military. At this moment, in different parts of the world there are people in prisons simply because they are Christians. There are people in the modern world who are being killed because they are Christians. But persecution does not always come like that. It can be very subtle indeed. It can just mean people looking at one another when you go into a room or into an office. It can mean people working against you. They may discriminate against you in a profession or in business — a lot of this happens. It can be a sneer or a suggestion, a curl of the lip — all sorts of things. I need not spend time in describing them. Never forget that persecution is not bound to be open or physical. Perhaps it is the subtle and the intellectual and the emotional forms of persecution, that are the most cruel. But in various ways persecution will come...” – MLJ, Romans, Volume 12, 431.

So, persecution is first of all Malicious Treatment of some kind.

2) Caused by our Well-Doing

What you must keep in mind is the *second* part of this definition: “Malicious treatment *that is caused by our well-doing*.” The varied forms of malicious treatment are caused by our doing good. That is what qualifies *negative behavior as persecution*.

If you steal from your boss and he yells at you and calls the police to arrest you – this is not persecution: this is justice. If you don’t clean your room when asked by your mother and she punishes you – same thing. If you travel and someone kidnaps you because you are Westerner – this is unfortunate, but it is not persecution. If people make fun of you at work or school because you are weird – then stop being weird. Still, it is not persecution!

The Bible limits persecution to malicious and negative actions that happen to you *because* you are doing good and living for Christ.

(I Peter 2:18-25) “Servants, be subject to your masters with all respect, not only to the good and gentle but also to the unjust. For this is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly. For what credit is it if, when you sin and are beaten for it, you endure? But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God. 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. [He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. 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. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die

to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.”]

This is crucial to keep in mind. Paul is describing for us Authentic Love. In the first section he showed us how to be pro-active in this love. But recall that here he is describing for us how to be reactive in love: how to respond to others – especially as we proactively love them.

Have you never experienced this? You go out of your way to do good to another and they respond negatively. You serve someone at High School – and they mock you for it. You don’t join in the laughter after a crude joke – and your workmates sneer at you. You tell a neighbour of his need to repent – and he gets angry at you.

How do you respond? If you have a Christian conscience, you are willing to accept rebuke for your sin and error. But it is a much different thing to accept negative words and actions when all you have done or *tried* to do is in love. Argh! Retribution! Anger! Payback! We are far too familiar with these!

That is what takes us to our second question.

II. How does authentic love react to persecution?

The answer to this is so vital that Paul states it in two ways: positively and negatively. I want to deal with the negative way first. Here is what you must NOT do!

1) Negatively: Do not curse

“Do not curse them.”

There it is. The first thing we must *not* do is curse the person who is, by definition, *unjustly* treating us.

Now, to curse here does not mean “to cuss.” We use the word “curse” to mean “cuss,” but Paul has something much more specific in mind. If you cuss at people, that is another problem altogether! Christians must not cuss at others! There is never a time it is appropriate for us to use vulgar and offensive language! Normally I would not stress this, but you would be surprised at the trend within broader evangelicalism toward cussing. There is even a very popular preacher known as “the cussing pastor” – a label he appears to wear with some amount of pride! Within emergent circles, it is often a supposed demonstration of your Christian maturity if you are able to drop a few choice cuss words without blushing! Of course, this is nothing new – I can recall long debates in my Christian college about whether cussing was a sin or not. But this debate ends with passages like these:

(Colossians 3:8) “But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and *obscene talk* from your mouth.”

(Ephesians 4:31) “Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all *malice*.”

(Ephesians 5:4) “Let there be no filthiness nor *foolish talk* nor *crude joking*, which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving. For you may be sure of this, that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure, or who is covetous (that is, an idolater), has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God.”

Clearly the majority of “cuss words” are sexually immoral or impure – that is what makes them what they are! So, there is no room in the Christian’s life for cussing. This is not to suggest that a Christian may not at times feel the *desire* to cuss.

As an unbeliever I worked very hard at my cussing, and although it was fairly simple to stop using the words (most unbelievers can turn off their swearing in certain company), it was a much longer battle to put to death that vocabulary in my head. Someone would cut me off, or unjustly accuse me or violate my rights and boom! There was an assortment of vile words pressing against my lips for escape. This might be you and you think to yourself, “Yes, but for the most part, those words never get out anymore! Aren’t I making real progress in the Lord?!” To which I would say, “Yes, that is something... but there is further to go!”

As an aside: Have you noticed this about cussing and swearing: it is very God-centric. Of all the things in the world to say, unbelievers almost daily speak of God and hell. Not in the terms they should be spoken of, but in derision and cursing and blaspheming. More and more this becomes one of the most persuasive proofs to me of the truth and reality of Jesus Christ – in all tongues and tribes, men curse God and one another. What else can explain this!?

Remember, it is not “cussing” that Paul is addressing here. It is something much more encompassing and comprehensive than that! When Paul says, “Do not curse” he means “do not invoke God’s wrath upon.” You say, “I have never done that in my life, nor have I heard anyone do that!” I think you have. Any time anyone utters the phrase, “Go to hell” they are invoking God’s wrath on another. So, when Paul says “do not curse” he is telling us not to look to God to hurt or do evil toward the person that is hurting and/or doing evil toward us. He is not speaking here of using bad language, although, as I have shown, other parts of the Bible take care of that sin for us too.

Secondly, notice that it is not the mere restraining of cursing that Paul argues for as the demonstration of authentic love. Just “keeping it in” is insufficient. This cursing in our heart must be replaced by something. And that takes us to the positive.

2) Positively: Bless your persecutor

“Bless.” This is stunning. Paul says that instead of invoking the God of Justice’s wrath on those who are malicious toward us because of the good we are doing them, we are to bless them.

What is blessing? When we bless *God* we extol Him or recount to Him His attributes and greatness. It is a form of praise. When God blesses *us*, He gives us what we do not deserve – as Paul calls them, “All the spiritual blessings that are ours in Christ Jesus.” But here we are to bless *other humans*, in particular, the humans that are doing us harm.

In its simplest definition, “to bless” means “to speak well of.” So, to bless is to invoke good on them, which we can really only do by prayer. There is no question this is precisely what Jesus meant when he preached:

(Matthew 5:44-45) “But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.”

It is not good enough to merely not retaliate, or to exercise verbal restraint while allowing for mental cursing and hating. The heart of the matter is that the Christian must bless the one who is maliciously harming him. Instead of invoking God’s wrath on the head of the persecutor, he is to invoke God’s goodness on him. This is authentic love toward the person who persecutes you. Malicious treatment that is provoked by our well-doing ought to increase our pity and our prayers.

III. How can this be?

We might be tempted to ask “Is this possible?” I mean, is it really possible to look at a person who is beating me with a stick because I did good to him, and then to pray for God to be good to them? Of course, our minds immediately turn to Jesus as Roman soldiers nailed Him to a cross.

(Luke 23:33-34) “And when they came to the place that is called The Skull, there they crucified him, and the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. And Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

Even then, we might read that and say, “Well, that was Jesus, the Son of God. Surely you can’t expect just a normal Christian to respond that way!?” To which we answer with Acts 7 and the stoning of Stephen. Stephen was falsely accused, maliciously treated, condemned to die for preaching the Good News of Jesus Christ to sinful men! And here are his last words as they hurl large stones down on his head and body:

(Acts 7:57-60) “But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him. Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, ‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.’ And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, ‘Lord, do not hold this sin against them.’ And when he had said this, he fell asleep.” (The Christian euphemism for physical death.)

So, I answer that this kind of response is not only *possible*, it is absolutely *required* of Christians. This is the command we are given that renews our mind, and we are to test it, and prove it be good, well-pleasing and perfect! And we might even be called to test it by the presentation of our physical bodies as a living sacrifice. How can we ensure that this is our response when persecution comes? Much of it comes down to what we have already learned in Romans 1 through 11.

I was interested to read the manuscript of Julian’s sermon on Matthew 5 from last week, for the identical theme is found in the verses he so ably covered. Something he said there struck a chord. In a section where he was demonstrating the need for us to love indiscriminately (that is, to love all people, friend or enemy, alike), he said this: “We love indiscriminately because God has loved indiscriminately. If there was ever a case to be made for not loving, the Father had every right to *not love* us. No matter what someone has done to us that makes us think they are unworthy of our love, we must remember that before that person ever sinned against us they sinned against God even more and he still loves them—sends sun and rain on them.”

You see, the real Christian knows these things to be true: He was dead in sin; he was incapable of saving himself; God mercifully invaded his life and caused him to be born again. The only thing that keeps him a Christian is Christ! If it were not for all this divine intervention in his life, the Christian would be just like the one persecuting him... only worse.

This is one reason why we must come to understand Romans 1-11! We have to know what justification is and what motivates sanctification if we are going to be able to bless those who persecute us – whether that is a curled lip or a literal cross.

All of this takes us back to Romans 12:3:

“...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 we are thinking of ourselves the way we ought, then when persecution comes, our mind will not be consumed with self-preservation, or despair for our stuff, or anger at the injustice of it all. Our minds will be praying, “Lord, show this poor lost sinner the grace that you showed me. Do good to them and open their eyes so they can see you are the Way and the Truth and the Life. Forgive them for their sin against me: they are held captive by their lusts, they are dead in their sins, are following Satan and carrying out every evil inclination of their hearts. They need You – Your intervention – Your grace. Save them, Lord, to Your great glory!”

John Rogers was educated at the University of Cambridge, then served as chaplain to the English merchants living in Antwerp, The Netherlands. There he met William Tyndale and Miles Coverdale, both of whom had previously fled England. Converted to Protestantism, Rogers aided the two in translating the Bible into English, married, and moved to Wittenberg, where he was given a congregation of his own. Rogers served his congregation for many years before returning to England during the reign of King Edward VI, who had banished Catholicism and made Protestantism the state religion. He served in St. Paul’s until Queen Mary took the throne, banished the gospel, and brought Catholicism back to England.

Even then, Rogers continued to preach against the queen’s proclamation until the council ordered him to remain under house arrest in his own home, which he did, even though he could easily have left the country. Protestantism was not going to flourish under Queen Mary; Rogers knew he could find work in Germany; and he did have a wife and ten children to think of, but he refused to abandon his cause to save his life. He remained a prisoner in his own house for a long time, but eventually Bonner, Bishop of London, had Rogers imprisoned in Newgate with thieves and murderers and Winchester condemned him to death.

Early on the morning of Monday, February 4, 1555, the jailer’s wife woke Rogers and told him to hurry and dress; this was the day he was to burn. His wife and eleven children met him on the way to Smithfield, but Rogers still refused to recant. Arriving at Smithfield, he was given one more chance by Sheriff Woodroofe.

“That which I have preached I will seal with my blood,” Rogers replied.

“Then,” said Woodroofe, “you are a heretic.”

“That will be known on the day of judgment.”

“Well, I’ll never pray for you!” [replied the sheriff]

“But I will pray for you.” said Rogers.

A little before the burning a pardon arrived, but Rogers refused to recant and accept it, becoming the first martyr to suffer death during the reign of Queen Mary. (Foxe's Christian Martyrs of the World, pg 90-91)

(Romans 12:14) "Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them."

This is the normal Christian response to persecution. What will you purpose in your heart from this time forward? To call down fire or blessing?

"Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them."

This is authentic love for those who harm us because of Christ. May God give us much grace to live it to His glory!

By Pastor Paul W. Martin © Grace Fellowship Church

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