

Genuine Love: Love Your Enemies – Part VI

Romans 12:17-21

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Grace Fellowship Church, Toronto, Ontario

“Delighting in God to the glory of God”

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We have been examining genuine or authentic love here in Romans 12:9-21. In verses 9 to 13 we saw Paul describe love as it is pro-active toward others in the church. In verses 14 to 21 Paul describes authentic love as it responds to the actions of others. Sometimes he is speaking about responding to those within the church and sometimes to those outside of the church. In verse 14, Paul addresses how we are to respond to our persecutors: those who afflict us because of our Christian faith. In verses 15 to 16, Paul talks about how authentic love responds to fellow Believers as they act upon us in three different ways: as their lives are blessed, that is, when they are successful; as they enter into difficulty and sorrow; and as they are insignificant.

In verses 17 to 21, Paul returns to considering how to respond to those who act upon us from outside the church - those who act upon us negatively. In many ways he is picking up where he left off with the persecutor in verse 14. You might even think of verses 15 to 16 as a little excursus. While thinking about how to act toward negative actions, he is drawn to consider how this might play out in the church. Having given that some thought, he now returns to the greater threat: our enemies.

Most of us need very little instruction on how to respond to an enemy. No one has to teach a blowfish to inhale when attacked by a predator. A skunk does need spray lessons, and Mr. Porcupine does not need any instruction on flexing his quills! It is instinct, impulsive. And as humans we have natural instincts and impulses of what to do when attacked.

You can observe this scientifically on any schoolyard. Just wait around long enough for one boy to attack another, and you will see what scientists refer to as a “fight.” Both boys grabbing, swinging, striking, cussing, and doing all that they can to not only pay back the other what they have been given, but to go one further. By nature we know that it is not good enough to repay the one who hits us with an equal blow! If he hits me twice, I had better hit him three - maybe four times! This is how it works in the world and it is hard-wired into our nature to respond to enemies in this way. Even if we are a rather timid person, of the Michael Jackson character - “a lover not a fighter” and not given to actual blows - you can be sure that mentally we are striking them down!

Of course, Jesus threw all of this kind of thing on its head in His Sermon on the Mount. And it is clear that Paul is drawing on the teaching of Jesus throughout this discourse on genuine love. Let me remind you of what Jesus said there, from Luke’s somewhat “abridged version” of that sermon:

(Luke 6:27-36) “But I say to you who hear, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. To one who strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also, and from one who takes away your cloak do not

withhold your tunic either. Give to everyone who begs from you, and from one who takes away your goods do not demand them back. And as you wish that others would do to you, do so to them.

If you love those who love you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who do good to you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. And if you lend to those from whom you expect to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to get back the same amount. But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return, and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, for he is kind to the ungrateful and the evil. Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful.

So, Paul takes teaching such as this and now packages it up for us in this discourse concerning genuine or authentic love. How does genuine love respond to enemies? That is the question. And the answer has three main parts to it.

The person who genuinely loves his enemies...

1. Retaliates with good.
2. Conspires to make peace.
3. Conquers evil.

I. Retaliate against your enemy with good

(Romans 12:17) “Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all.

The thought here progresses quite logically. First it is stated negatively, then positively.

Repay no one evil for evil. This is really quite simple and straightforward. Do not give back to anyone the evil they gave you. Evil in exchange for evil: that is how it works in the world and too often how it works in the church! But our Bibles just eliminate that option altogether.

You know what an exchange is. It may be when you take something back to the store that does not fit right – you want it exchanged. What would you do if they gave you back something worse, perhaps stained, ripped, or broken. You would say that is an unequal exchange! What if you took your new TV with the little scratch back to the store to exchange it, and they gave you a larger, better, more expensive one? You would say that is an unequal exchange, too! But unequal in the Christian direction! Christians are to make unequal exchanges. Do not repay evil with more evil, but rather retaliate with good!

Paul writes: “give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all.” What does this mean? Right from the get go, Christians are blocked from merely acting on impulse! We understand that instinct is rarely right, so we are told to think. We are to move from *instinct* to *inquisitiveness*. Paul says we are to “give thought” and the idea is that we do this in advance. *Before* we act, we consider what would be good to do. It is interesting how much the Bible tells us to use our minds.

(Romans 12:16) “Live in harmony with one another (be of the same mind). Do not be haughty (think lofty thoughts), but associate with the lowly. Never be conceited (wise in your own eyes).”

Don't we sometimes say things like, "I didn't *think*. I just acted." That is precisely what Paul is forbidding us from doing, at the most intense moment. And what are we to think about? Creative revenge? No, but how to do what is honourable, or good, in the eyes of all who are watching.

Rawlins White was an unlearned fisherman who made sure his son was taught to read. He did that so the boy could read him the Bible. And during King Edward's reign, White came to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ.

When the throne switched over to Bloody Mary, White was soon reported as a heretic, and thrown into prison for one year. He was brought before the bishop, who tried to get White to recant by threats and promises. But as Rawlins would in no wise recant his opinions, the bishop told him plainly that he must proceed against him by law, and condemn him as a heretic.

Before they proceeded to this extremity, the bishop proposed that prayer should be said for White's conversion. "This," said White, "is like a godly bishop, and if your request be godly and right, and you pray as you ought, no doubt God will hear you; pray you, therefore, to your God, and I will pray to my God." After the bishop and his party had done praying, he asked Rawlins if he would now recant. "You find," said the latter, "your prayer is not granted, for I remain the same; and God will strengthen me in support of this truth."

It is not merely wit that is at play here. A Christian is called to stand firm for the Truth, not wavering in conviction, while at the same time doing good to his enemy. When Paul writes that we are to do what is good "in the sight of all men" he is not suggesting that we bend to their evil wishes. Clearly, what we are to do in retaliation is to be *good* as that word is understood in relation to God. But it is the kind of good that all people, sinner and saved alike, will acknowledge as morally upright and beneficial.

So, when a school mate mocks you for your commitment to sexual purity, you could whimper or whine or whack him. Or, you could retaliate with good. "Isn't it better to honour God and avoid disease?" Or, when the guys you work with get mad at you and poke fun at you because you excuse yourself from their coarse jesting, you might smile and say, "I am just guarding my heart, knowing that all of us will one day be called to give an account for every careless word we have spoken." Or, when that driver runs a red light and cuts you off, you could smile and wave.

You need to think of yourself like the dog who liked to visit Mr. Spurgeon's garden. He would dig in his garden nearly every day – just doing what dogs do! It drove Spurgeon nearly mad. One day, the preacher was walking out to his garden, walking stick in hand, and saw the dog. He began to yell and shout, then took his walking stick and flung it at the dog. He missed. The dog then trotted over to the stick, picked it up, brought it back to Spurgeon, and laid it at his feet! Smart dog! He retaliated with good.

II. Conspire for peace

The second way to respond to an enemy's attack is found in verse 18:

"If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all."

Be at peace with everyone. That is the command. But this command comes with two wise conditions: if it is possible, and as far as it depends on you.

Paul is not saying, “As long as you can find it in yourself to do it. Be at peace if it is at all possible for you to do it.” No, not that. Rather, when the situation allows for it. Really, the second condition explains the first: “as far as it depends on you.” In other words, do all that you can to be at peace with everyone. If they are hitting you with sticks, do what you can to be at peace – as far as it depends on you!

This means we must seek to be in harmony with everyone. Of course, you can be at peace and in total disagreement. I have a Sikh neighbour and we speak freely about spiritual matters. He is dead wrong and I am right. But we live in peace!

There are some silly Christians who think *conflict* is a spiritual gift. They go out of their way to stir things up needlessly. They are like the fool in Proverbs who grabs a dog by its ears. They are little Samsons lighting foxes on fire and sending them into their enemy’s fields. There ought to be none of this silliness with us. We are to go out of our way – conspire and plan and work at – being at peace.

III. Conquer evil.

So far, we are to retaliate with good, conspire to live peaceably and now we are told to conquer. I have used these descriptions quite purposefully, since our normal reaction to an enemy is to retaliate, conspire and conquer in all the wrong ways.

With verse 19 comes a change. Paul addresses the Romans with the endearing title, “Beloved.” I think Paul might have inserted that here because he is really about to get to the heart of the whole matter of dealing with enemies. And, to be honest, it is not at all easy. So, my loved ones, here is what it really boils down to.

“Never avenge yourself...”

There you have it. There may be times where it is appropriate to defend yourself, or call on local authorities, or invoke the rules of justice (think of Paul in Phillipi or Jerusalem). There are other times it is right, as an agent of the state, to carry out justice or punishment. *But there is never a place for you to avenge yourself personally.*

To avenge is to inflict a punishment or penalty in return; to take revenge. That means hitting your sister because she said something mean, spanking your child because he embarrassed you, or pouring gas on a neighbour’s lawn because he knocked over your fence. Or, as a Christian, paying back the person who persecuted you.

We are to do something else – quite remarkably, “leave it to the wrath of God.” This is not a very accurate translation from the original, for what Paul wrote was more like: “Leave room for the wrath.” What does it mean to “leave it” to the wrath?

(Luke 14:7-11) “Now he told a parable to those who were invited, when he noticed how they chose the places of honour, saying to them, “When you are invited by someone to a wedding feast, do not sit down in a place of honour, lest someone more distinguished than you be invited by him, and he who invited you both will come and say to you, ‘Give your place to this person,’ and then you will begin with shame to take the lowest place. But when you are invited, go and sit in the lowest place, so that when your host comes he

may say to you, 'Friend, move up higher.' Then you will be honoured in the presence of all who sit at table with you. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

Give place to, make room for, leave a wide berth for – the wrath. Obviously, with the definite article "the," Paul is speaking of God's wrath. We saw in Romans 1:18 that God's wrath is already revealed, but there is also a future wrath:

(Romans 2:4-9) "Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed. He will render to each one according to his works: to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; but for those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury. There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek..."

So, when attacked, a Christian stops and reminds himself of reality. Rather than paying back evil with more evil, he looks for ways to do good. And he seeks to be at peace with his enemy. Not only this, but he kills every thought of revenge and takes a step back, acknowledging that only God can rightly execute equitable justice.

To back up this teaching, Paul quotes from Deuteronomy 32:35. This is a verse out of the song that God wrote for Israel, telling them how they would soon rebel against Him and how God Himself would eventually take vengeance upon them – at least upon the rebellious ones in their midst. In that song, God promises to take vengeance, to be the One who will pay back. Of course, God can do this, since there is no capriciousness in Him, His vengeance is entirely just. He metes out His punishments and they perfectly fit the crime. God is just and His judgments are just. "Vengeance is mine, I will repay." That is meant to scare Israel.

God repays sin perfectly, justly, equitably. And here is the real key to the matter: can we punish perfectly? "In your anger do not sin." How rare is that! How much rarer if one of us could hand out just retribution for crimes committed against us! That is not our job and we thank the Lord for it! We back off and give space for God to exercise His wrath – some of it in this life and some of it in the life to come.

What are our actions toward those who persecute us or show us evil?

(Romans 12:20) "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.'"

You are to care for the basic needs of your enemy, food and drink. Administer these to him! This is "bless and curse not" kind of behaviour. But the question we are all asking is, what is with the burning coals? There are three options.

One way of thinking of it is that your kind acts will get back at him good because they will convict him and bring embarrassment and shame – it will be like scooping white coals of fire onto his scalp. That may be true, but that hardly fits with the context of what Paul has just said! We are not seeking revenge but the very opposite of that! We are to do him good, minister to him, not do him good in order to get back at him!

Alternatively, some have suggested that there is nothing negative in the “burning coals” idea, but it is a statement connected with the customs of the day. When your neighbour’s fire went out, it was an act of kindness for you to scoop up some of your hot coals and carry them in a basket on your head over to his house. That would be a tremendous help in understanding the passage! The trouble is, there is no evidence that anyone ever did that or that it was some social custom of the day. Besides, you may think twice before carrying fire on your head! And the image of “coals of fire” is never used for good: it is always a signal of holiness or punishment.

Thirdly, some think that “coals” refers to God’s wrath. I think to understand this correctly you have to keep two things in mind, two things that are already abundantly clear in this passage. Christians never take revenge, they only retaliate with good. This is following God’s example, especially as we see it in Jesus – in how He relates to sinners today.

“Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all.”

“To the contrary (of taking wrath ourselves upon our enemies), “if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink;”

“never avenge yourselves”

Notice what our attitude is to be throughout. It is the attitude of God toward His enemies while they are on the earth:

(Romans 2:4-5) “Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed.”

Notice, also, how Jesus describes God’s handling of man’s rebellion and enmity in Matthew 5:

(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.”

Therefore our attitude is constant. Bless, pray for, do good to our enemies and persecutors. That being said, we are still mindful of something else. God’s wrath will be justly poured out on sinners.

“leave it (space) to the wrath of God, for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.’”

(then, if he does not repent and keeps up his evil ways) “you will heap burning coals on his head.”

In other words, God’s wrath on an individual will correspond perfectly to his rejection of your kindness to him. As he hurls abuse at you, God counts it up – and one day (either starting now or in that Great Day), he will be shown wrath that fits the crime. In that sense, your good deeds will add to his judgment.

Never is future wrath something we should wish upon our enemies in a specific way. To curse someone, to condemn them, to wish hell upon them – this is vengeance and spite and revenge and... forbidden. But that does not rule out our trust that God will justly punish all those who on this earth spurn His Name and His people. Consider that in heaven, there will be no tears for those who suffer in hell. There will be praise and worship of God for His justice. Not in the sense that we cheer at the pain of the condemned – a horrible caricature made by many today. No, but we rejoice in justice upheld.

Without so much as one ounce of spite, the martyrs in heaven ask, “When will You avenge our blood?”

(Revelation 6:9-11) “When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne. They cried out with a loud voice, ‘O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?’ Then they were each given a white robe and told to rest a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and their brothers should be complete, who were to be killed as they themselves had been.”

But they ask it in heaven – they don’t seek to carry it out while on earth! Here we are given a little glimpse into something David seemed to understand as he wrote what are often called the imprecatory Psalms: a desire for justice... for the glory of God!

(Psalm 52:1-9) “Why do you boast of evil, O mighty man?
The steadfast love of God endures all the day.
Your tongue plots destruction, like a sharp razor, you worker of deceit.
You love evil more than good, and lying more than speaking what is right. *Selah*
You love all words that devour, O deceitful tongue.
But God will break you down forever; he will snatch and tear you from your tent;
he will uproot you from the land of the living. *Selah*
The righteous shall see and fear, and shall laugh at him, saying,
‘See the man who would not make God his refuge,
but trusted in the abundance of his riches
and sought refuge in his own destruction!’
But I am like a green olive tree in the house of God.
I trust in the steadfast love of God forever and ever.
I will thank you forever, because you have done it.
I will wait for your name, for it is good, in the presence of the godly.”

So, you have on the one hand, the wrath of God. On the other hand, you have the mercy and love of God. We are to follow the example of our Lord, seen most vividly in His murder:

(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. 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.”

Beloved, when you follow Your Master in this way – you have overcome evil with good – even if they kill you. Retaliate out of kind – meet evil with good. Conspire ways to bring about peace

however you can without compromising the gospel. Conquer evil by doing good. Let God have the vengeance.

This leads to an obvious question – are you storing up wrath for yourself? Are you Christian? If not, repent and believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved!

By Pastor Paul W. Martin © Grace Fellowship Church

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