

“Loving Your Enemies” // Romans 12:14–21 // Romans #27

Thought we’d start with some good news: **251 baptized. Amazing stories!**

- **Backstage we prayed...**atheist
- **Muslim guy:** pic
- **So many people’s “1”** --including one of mine and Veronica’s / Several whole families
- At CPC, they **baptized for a full hour** after the last service. A guy was watching the livestream at home with his 3 month old, gets convicted, throws the baby in the car and walks in to be counseled leaving his baby with one of our volunteers. He was our last baptism.

That’s the power of God, and friends, I’m telling you, that’s what happens when a church puts God first--

- BTW, if you’re new around here, **you may have heard us talk about “FIRST.”** FIRST was a two year journey we started last November, in which we are considering what it would like to put Jesus FIRST in all things--our time, our treasure and our talents.
- The **basic idea of FIRST** was that there’s a difference in something being important in your life and something being FIRST.
 - A lot of things can be important but only one thing can be first.
 - **Whatever is first in your life gets your best**, while everything else gets good enough. If what you drive or where you live or the kind of trips you take is first in your life, then **you settle** for “good enough” in other areas, which include the Kingdom of God.
 - **When the Kingdom of God is first**, he gets the best even if that means you settle for good enough in everything .
- **If we want to see God continue to pour out that kind of power** in our midst, he has to be FIRST. Not just important, but FIRST.

- **D.L. Moody said**, “The world has yet to see... “ The world has yet to see what God can do with one congregation totally sold out to him, that gives him the first and the best.”
- May not be the richest, most talented... God doesn’t need that. He uses willingness

ROMANS 12, if you have your Bible—**Page 74** of your journals—**Remember: We’ve rounded the corner** in Romans, moving from gospel instruction to gospel application.

- Nerdy statement: Gospel imperatives always grow out of gospel indicatives.
- Gospel imperatives (what you must do) always grow out of gospel indicatives (what God has done).
- **His done fuels your do.** The fire to do in the Christian life comes from being soaked in the fuel of what has been done.

Paul spent 11 chapters in Romans detailing the glorious things God has done for us in the gospel. Now he spends 5 chapters explaining what that means for how we treat each other.

He starts in chapter 12 with our relationships *inside* the church. Now, in vv. 14, he turns to relationships *outside* the church.

- **Or you might think of it like this: Vv. 9–13 are about how we treat our friends; v. 14–21 are about we treat our enemies;** or, at least people with whom we are in conflict¹

So, the question for the week: How do you react when someone disappoints you, or lets you down, or treats you unfairly? **Are you a ‘fight’ person or a ‘flight’ person?**

- How many would say, “I’m more fight...?”

¹ Alt: vv 9–13 are about how we treat people with whom we are in harmony; vv. 14–21 are about how we should treat people with whom we are in conflict.

- I asked my wife, who has watched me engage in conflict with different friends and staff members over the years, what I was. She said, “You’re sort of a combo--kind of a ‘smack and run’ guy.”

When someone **really offends you**, or lets you down, or does you wrong, how do you respond?

- I told you the other week about eating dinner at **the Muller’s** when they got into a big fight and he asked how she could be so beautiful and so stupid all at the same time, and she said, “Beautiful so/stupid so...”
- **Well, I was with them again the other night** and John said to Ashley, ‘Honey, I’m so sorry I’ve blown up so many times at you over the years. But every time I do, you just stay so calm! How do you do that? To which she replied, ‘**Oh, it’s easy. Whenever you blow up at me I just go and clean bathroom, scrub the toilet.**’ John was like, ‘*And that helps?*’ She said, ‘Oh yes, because I always use your toothbrush.’ (Parts of that story are embellished for dramatic effect, but...)

How do you respond when people treat you unfairly?

I want you to realize that **Paul is writing to people who knew firsthand** what it was like to be treated unfairly.

- (Sometimes it’s **easy to forget these letters** in the NT were written to real people with real problems.)
- First, these people experienced conflicts in their marriages and families and friendship and business associates just like we do. People are the same.
- Second, **Rome was a very hierarchical society**, with clear lines of distinction between the privileged and underprivileged class. There were different standards of justice, different opportunities for progress--
 - And we know from history that **Christianity’s first converts** were people from the lower classes (you can see that in Paul’s letters through this frequent references to working with your

hands),² which means that most of these people dealt with unfair treatment and discrimination on a regular basis.

- Finally, we know that **persecution in Rome was picking up**, culminating in the beheading of Paul and the murder (the feeding to the lions) of some of the original recipients of this letter.

So yeah, these people knew conflict. They knew unfair treatment. So what is Paul’s counsel for those **who feel wrongly and unjustly treated?**

Let’s just read the whole thing: ¹⁴ Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. ¹⁵ Rejoice with those who rejoice; weep with those who weep. ¹⁶ Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud; instead, associate with the humble. Do not be wise in your own estimation. ¹⁷ Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Give careful thought to do what is honorable in everyone’s eyes. ¹⁸ If possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. ¹⁹ Friends, do not avenge yourselves; instead, leave room for God’s wrath, because it is written, Vengeance belongs to me; I will repay, says the Lord. ²⁰ But

If your enemy is hungry, feed him.

If he is thirsty, give him something to drink.

For in so doing you will be heaping fiery coals on his head.

And here’s Paul’s summary of the whole matter: ²¹ Do not be **conquered by evil, but conquer evil with good.**

- That word **conquered** is a **military term in Greek**. Some translations say “overcome,” or “overpower.”
- **It shows us that evil is something in the world** we’re in a battle with, and there’s a way to win and a way to lose.

² Which explains in Paul’s letters the frequent references to “working with your hands.” See, for example, 1 Thess 4:11; Acts 20:18:3

- In this passage, Paul recognizes two battlefronts: (1) in the other person who is doing the evil to you; but also (2) in you. The evil done to you can cause evil to grow in you
- When you fight evil with evil, Paul explains, evil wins. In you and in others.

Don't fight evil with evil, conquer it with good. Here's **4 ways you do that**

(4 Ways You Overcome Evil with Good:³)

1. Don't avoid the offender* (vs. 18)

¹⁸ **If possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.**

(With a little star, but it's an important star, which I'll tell you about in a minute)

I want to start here, because for many people, the way to deal with difficult people is just to cut them off.

- Got a friend causing problems in your life? Cut them out.
 - LEGO?
- Someone in your small group says insensitive things? Leave and find a new one.
- Someone at work doesn't understand or respect your faith? Avoid them.
- Tired of being made fun of in the classroom or the public square? Withdraw into your Christian bubble.
- Parents in your kids' class not raising their kids the way you like? Surround yourself with people who feel safe and comfortable.
- **This, btw, is enthroned advice in our society.** I typed in "how to be happy" on our collective consciousness, Google, and one of

the 1st articles was [3 Ways to Be Happy Always](#): This article had several priceless gems, including "**compliment yourself often.**" But another one was this: "Seek out positive relationships with happy, optimistic, and cheerful people. If you're struggling with your current relationships, seek out new ones." IOW, the moment people get difficult, try deleting and replacing them.

And that's what some people do. They cut off those who offend them.

And if you are in a situation where you can't do that--because you are married to the person and don't want to go through the messiness of divorce, or you live in the same house with them, or work with them, or you are part of the same friend group with them, you can cut them off by withdrawing relationship from them. Giving them the silent treatment, so to speak. You may physically still be in their presence, but you have withdrawn relationship from them.

And you might even feel like, then, that you are obeying this passage and living in peace with that person.

But that is **not what Paul is saying here**. This whole passage is about pursuing relationship, and **overcoming evil in them** with your acts of good.

- When you think about it, denying someone your presence is like the ultimate punishment, right?
- Isn't that **God's final judgment**? He says, "Depart from me."
- He turns his face from them.
- That's what Hell is: the total absence of his presence.
- That's what you do when you give someone the silent treatment. "You are not worth a relationship with me."

The gospel, by contrast, sends people into the world to love people as we have been loved. To love people who often make themselves difficult to love.

³ Following the thought here of Tim Keller, *Romans 8–16 for You*, 125.

- In fact, **here's one of the most important marriage lessons** you'll learn: **One of God's primary purposes in marriage is to teach you to love difficult people.**
- And newsflash: God's primary purpose for your spouse in marriage was to teach them to love a difficult person and that person was you.
- **Before we got married**, I thought my wife was perfect in literally every way--I believe in total depravity, but doesn't apply to her. Now... there is no one whose sin I see more clearly now than hers. **And, I'm not throwing her under the bus**, there is no one whose sin she sees more clearly than mine, and there's a lot more of that to deal with. (Y'all see me up here preaching sermons, but I can be difficult to live with.)
- **Early on we realized God's design in our marriage was not just to make us happy** by giving us a great companion in one another--and she is that; his **primary purpose was to make us holy** by giving us a chance to love as we had been loved.

So, Paul's first point: **Don't avoid the offender**

Now, two caveats: The first is, I'm not saying there's never a time to regulate your relationships.

- If you and a person get along like oil and water, I'm not saying you have to make them your BFF.
- Paul's point is that you not avoid relationships with difficult people, and not try to pursue peace and *harmony by withdrawing yourself from anyone who bothers or offends you.*

Second caveat, and even more importantly (the *), this does not mean you are to stay in an abusive relationship or some relationship where you are criminally taken advantage of.

- **Sometimes people assume it is Christlike** to stay in a situation like that, or that is what Romans 12 is telling you to do.
- But **Paul's going to follow this passage up with Romans 13** (which we won't get to today), which explains the role the civil governments play in keeping justice. They are God's instruments

of justice and peace, and they are established by God to give protection we are supposed to rely on.

- And so **if you are in a relationship that is abusive**, particularly criminally abusive, you are supposed to turn to them and rely on them.

Furthermore, Paul includes two phrases in this passage that show you he's not talking about staying in an abusive relationship.

- The first is vs. 18: **"If possible..."** 'If possible' implies that there are situations where it is *not possible*.
 - Hear me clearly: It is not God's intention for you to remain in an unsafe situation or a situation where you're being exploited.
- The other phrase that shows you Paul is not talking about staying in an abusive relationship is in vs. **vs. 9** when Paul says, **"Detest what is evil, cling to what is good."**
 - True love, we said, desires the spiritual health of the other person; it desires them to be rid of evil.
 - Staying in a relationship where you allow someone to abuse or exploit you is not helping them get rid of evil.
- **Tim Keller: "Enemies (or abusers) may be so dangerous that to have anything to do with them is to invite them to sin. In that case, the 'good' you can do them is to stay away from them."**⁴
- (Of course, we need to discern, he says, our motive for our staying away--**is our staying away a form of payback**, or a measured response aimed at blessing them?)
- These are **difficult situations** and almost impossible for me to address in general ways from the stage--so let me just say **if you have questions about this**, or **if you are in a relationship like this**, let me encourage you to reach out for some help. You could start with our counseling ministry, Bridgehaven, and go from there.
- **Or call the DV hotline.**⁵ **1-800-799-7233**

⁴ TK, 124.

⁵ 1-800-799-7233

I've always thought that one of **Jesus's most recognized teachings** is particularly helpful here. It's **one a lot of people recognize as being from Jesus**, but very few people really understand: **Matthew 5:39: "If someone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other one also."**

- People ask, "What does that mean, someone is physically attacking you and so you stand there and just keep taking it? **Turned both cheeks... now what? Find something else to hit?**
- **A couple of things:** The person hitting your cheek is not trying to kill you. No school of martial arts tells you to go for the cheek. This is not really about physical violence at all.
- **In Jewish thought, the face signifies relationship.** For a Jew, slapping the cheek is insulting the relationship. We're not talking about a physical power relationship where someone is attacking or abusing you.
- **When someone sins against the relationship**, you have three choices: **1. You can strike back, go for their cheek. 2. You can offer them the same cheek.** Keep taking it and never confront it. What will happen is eventually you will lose control. Or you'll lose all affection for them. **3. Turn the other cheek: turn to them the other side of your face, in an attempt to re-establish the relationship.** I want to have a relationship with you, and I'm ready to forget about your insult and not back you back, and we can have a new relationship, but not with you smacking my cheek all the time.

So, I know it's easier, but don't avoid the offender...

2. Stay out of the Judge's Chair (vv. 17, 19)

¹⁷ Do not repay anyone evil for evil. ¹⁹ Friends⁶, do not (some translations say 'never') avenge yourselves; instead, leave room for God's wrath, because it is written, Vengeance belongs to me; I will repay, says the Lord.

⁶ "Beloved." Paul speaks with a great deal of tenderness because he realizes how difficult these things can be for those who really have been wronged

- *Never, ever to take vengeance unto yourself.* Never get up into the Judge's chair.
 - **Not against your spouse** who was insensitive and uncaring after you'd had a hard day.
 - Not against **your sister who borrowed your favorite pair of jeans again** without asking.
 - Not against **that guy at work** who spread **untrue gossip** about you.
 - Not against the **parent who has disrespected you again** or the child that has made your life unfairly hard
 - Not even **against that person** that committed a crime against you.
- Why? Because vengeance belongs to me, says God. "I will repay," Paul quotes God saying in Deut 32:35.
- **And God means that:** God will bring into account every sin ever committed. **Not one sin will go unrequited! Every single one, he says.**
 - Every sin ever committed will be paid for by the person in hell or Jesus on the cross. Thus, your vengeance against evil is not required.
- Now, another caveat: **Does this mean that we're wrong to support a civil justice system?**
 - No, **as I've told you**, In the next chapter, chapter 13, Paul will explain that God has appointed government authorities as his instrument of justice on earth.
 - It doesn't mean that their justice is perfect--not even close.
 - Or that their judgment is final. It is not.
 - Just that government is one of his gifts to mankind to keep the peace and reveal himself.
 - **When they execute justice, even if they are not Christians**, they are representing him.
- **Romans 13 is about the government. Romans 12 is about you.**
- **And it means a couple of things, practically speaking: FIRST, WE never take on ourselves** the responsibility to get personal justice;

- and, **SECOND**, even when we look to the government to restore justice, we do so with love and a desire for restoration in our hearts for those who wronged us.
 - **And that's hard. Because when someone has wronged you**, few things feel like they would be more satisfying than to see them pay.
 - It's like a **divine tuning fork...** nigh unto deity.
 - **(You see the judgment seat and you are ready to assume it.** But Paul is saying don't. Even as that person is being judged, you are hoping for their redemption and restoration.)
 - **One of the most beautiful displays** we've seen of this in modern times came in the aftermath of the terrible shooting in Emanuel A.M.E. Church in Charleston, SC. One of the men whose wife was killed by Dylann Roof told him in the courtroom that day, "I forgive you, son. And my family forgives you. But we would like you to take this opportunity to repent. Repent. Confess. Give your life to the One who matters the most: Jesus Christ, so that He can change it and change your attitude."
 - I read an article this week in which this man was **asked if, four years later, he had any second thoughts**. He said, "I always get asked that. And people want to know why, even if he did repent, why I would ever forgive the man who murdered my wife?" He said: "My answer to them is always the same. I chose to forgive the racist killer because I believe and trust God's Word when he tells me that vengeance is his to repay, not mine (Deuteronomy 32:35). I need not avenge the vile deeds of Dylann Roof myself. 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' Scripture promises me."⁷
 - **SO YOU STAY, OUT OF THE JUDGE'S CHAIR.** And, btw, this is as much about your own heart as it is the other person. That Judge's chair is **TOO BIG** for you, and will corrupt you if you try and sit in it. For **a number of reasons**:

- First, you don't know everything about the situation. You don't know that person's motives. And it's almost impossible to do it rightly.
 - I was **listening to a Christian counselor** talk about anger and he told a true story of one of his clients who... **(Zipper)** You don't want that to happen.
 - Second, you have **sin of your own to deal with** and it's almost impossible for you to execute justice in a way that avoids selfish anger.
- Taking upon yourself the responsibility for getting justice is like putting on **Gollum's ring in LOTR**. It's an incredible power that darkens the soul of all who try to wear it.
- **Better to leave judgment to God**, who will certainly execute justice perfectly:
- Listen: ***Every sin committed is either paid for in full by that person in hell or by Jesus on the cross.*** Thus, your vengeance is not required.
- In the meantime, **you can rest in the promises of a God who promises to turn all things**, even the bad actions of others, for good!

One of the most beautiful stories of forgiveness in the Bible takes place at the end of Genesis, Joseph's brothers stood in front of him. These were the **brothers that betrayed him**, sold him into slavery, lied to their dad about his death.

- Think about how much they had taken from him he could never get back.
- **Did he go for vengeance? No, he forgave.** And what he said was so key: *"You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good."*
- Don't miss the connection between that phrase and Joseph's ability to forgive. Believing God is working good in your life even through other people's bad actions is what *enables* you to forgive.
- Reading in the good sovereignty of God frees you to forgive
- Note: He wasn't saying they were innocent or God would hold them innocent. Just that he recognized even in their evil plans God was using it for God's good purposes in their lives.

⁷ <https://www.foxnews.com/opinion/thompson-george-forgiveness-change>

- **Sometimes an obstacle to forgiving people**, even after we've confronted them, is we feel like **they haven't** felt the sting of what they did. "You don't realize how much your words or actions harmed me!" "You don't realize how much it set me back and how much it troubles me even today!" "I don't feel like I can forgive you until you feel what I've felt!"
- **Question:** Did Joseph's brothers fully understand what they had done to Joseph, or fully feel the pain they had caused him? I doubt it. But they didn't have to for Joseph to forgive.
- **Joseph was freed to forgive only by recognizing the larger and better plan of God** in all things.

Belief in the ultimate vengeance of God and the good sovereignty of God gives you an **incredible freedom**.

- **John Perkins**, an AA who suffered a lot during the CR Movement, and who has spoken here at our church, wrote a book called *One Blood* that our staff is reading together, explains that forgiveness is as much about you as it is about the person: "**Until forgiveness is given, the victim is literally tethered to their abusers.**"⁸
- Forgiveness releases you from bondage in multiple ways. It **releases you from the bitterness of the burden of vengeance**, and, by recognizing the good plan of God in it all, releases you from the bitterness and bondage of thinking that person ruined your life.

There's more. Not only should you not sit in the Judge's chair...

3. Repay evil with good (vv. 14–15, 20)

¹⁴ **Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse.**

⁸ John Perkins, *One Blood*, 103–105

When somebody persecutes you, bless them! And, when someone curses you, rather than curse them back, speak a word of blessing over them! **This just comes so natural, doesn't it?**

- You know when someone does something rude to you in traffic and then somehow acts like it is your fault, curses you, lays on the horn, and drives by giving you the one-finger-salute, I just instinctively roll down the window and yell, "Bless you friend, in Jesus' name!" **Actually, I do that sometimes** but it's usually sarcastic.

¹⁵ **Rejoice with those who rejoice; weep with those who weep.**

- You may not see how that connects to forgiveness, but **think about your usual attitude toward your enemy?**
- You weep at your enemy's rejoicing, and rejoice at their weeping! Right?
 - Nothing thrills the heart of the NC State fan more than those **pictures on ESPN of the UNC cheerleader** with tears running down her face blurring her little Tarheel painting on her cheek with the scoreboard in the background saying, **Wofford 79, UNC 75**.
 - That loss did not help NC State's record, they just love it that their enemy is weeping.
 - **Some of our BRC is getting a smile on their face** even now, bless their corrupt little hearts. That's not because they are especially mean, but because that's what you do to an enemy.

And that's all play. But In real life, though, for the believer, the way you know you've really been released from bitterness is you weep in your enemy's pain and rejoice in their rejoicing.

- **Even when they experience some of the painful consequences of their sin**--Your heart breaks and weeps with them in the pain of their actions and pray that God will use this pain to bring them to forgiveness.
- **You don't sit back with a sense of satisfaction** and say, "It serves them right. They got what is coming to them."

- **Isn't that what Jesus did for us?** In the midst of our sin against him, our crucifixion of him, he wept for us and prayed for our forgiveness.

Paul goes on, quoting a poem from Proverbs 25:⁹

And if your enemy is hungry, feed him.
If he is thirsty, give him something to drink,
For in so doing, you will be heaping fiery coals on his head. (vs. 20)

You say, "Well, **that's more like it.** That's exactly what I feel like doing to my enemy. Where can I get these hot coals?"

- But it **seems out of character** with the rest of the passage, right?

Heaping fiery coals on someone's head is a Jewish metaphor. It will do **1 of 2 things** to the person:

- It will either **wake them up** to the injustice of what they are doing to you (**like cold water**)
- Or, it will **increase God's judgment on them** in the day he brings vengeance. God will say to them on judgment day: "**After kindness upon kindness that they showed you**, this was how you treated them?" And **God's judgment** will be worse on them. Your kindness will literally heap hot coals on them.
- **Your preference is for it to wake them up.** But either way, your response to their evil is to bless.
- **In so doing, you will conquer evil.** For sure, you will stop its spread in yourselves. Plus, by responding with grace, you have a 50% chance of curing it in the offender!
- What changes someone's **heart is not an eye for an eye, it's grace**
- Isn't this **how Jesus woke us up?**
- It's like MLK famously said: "Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that."

⁹ Prov 25:21–22

Yes, so **where do you get the power to do this? Only from Jesus.**

So, *Paul's final admonition,*

4. Remember the gospel (vs. 16)

- ¹⁶ ...Do not be proud; instead, associate with the humble. Do not be wise in your own estimation.
- This is not a random command to be humble. It's how you live in harmony with others.
- Approach **every situation in which you are wronged** with the awareness of what the gospel teaches you about you!
 - If God gave you what you deserved, you'd have been condemned.
 - And you have no right to be in the chair of justice. It's too big for you.
 - You are a forgiven sinner deeply grateful for the mercy shown to you.

Be humble. You have a lot more in common with the sinner harming you than you might want to admit

- **Miraslov Volf** has this statement I've always loved: "**Forgiveness flounders when I exclude the enemy from the community of humans even as I exclude myself from the community of sinners.**"
- They are a human like me and I am a sinner like them.
- **Nobody is all good or all bad.** We're all mixed.
- And **often times those who hurt others** do so because they were deeply hurt in their past, and I realize that if I'd been hurt like they were in the past I may have ended up the same way.
- So much of my life is dependent on graces God put in my life I had no part of.
- That doesn't **excuse their actions**, or release them from responsibility, it should just give me a profound sense of humility and compassion as you approach them.

Above all: **Remember Jesus**. Remember the greatness of God's mercy to you. That's what Paul started this section with! (v. 1).

- **Remember Jesus**—the only one who had the right to sit in Judgment came down to sit under it instead.
- **Remember his patience** toward you. How he suffered silently and always returned blessing for cursing.
- **Remember his good** plan for you

Remember him--that's what gives you the ability to forgive.

- **You don't learn to love by trying**--nobody learns to love that way. Babies learn to love by experiencing love. That's how we continue to learn to love, by experiencing it in Christ.¹⁰
- Before forgiveness is *something* you do, it's *Someone* you meet.
- **Meeting the embodiment of God's mercy toward you** will produce it in you toward others.
- Tim Keller says, "The greatness of God's mercy means that there is "no persecution so great that Paul makes an exception to this rule, no hurt so deep that Paul excuses us from living this way.""¹¹

Remember Jesus!

- Remember **his sovereignty** over all things;
- Remember **his sacrifice**;
- Remember **his sufficiency**.

In so doing, you will actually CONQUER evil. Both in yourself and in others!

FRIEND: It's time to let bitterness go. To stop its growth in your heart. I was reading some diet article that was trying to get me to drink only water and it said that if you kept Coke in your stomach for like 36 hours it would eat through the lining. I thought, "Well, I don't plan to

keep it in me that long." But I did think it was a good illustration of what happens when you hold bitterness in. It eats away at the lining of your heart.

- It's time for many of you to release it. **Nursing bitterness does nothing but damage your heart** and allow evil to grow in you. And you can do it through embracing the ultimate vengeance of God and the good sovereignty of God.

PRAYER

OFFERING

¹⁰ Tim Keller, "Love and Forgiveness," from the series What We Are Becoming: Transforming Love, preached at Redeemer Presbyterian Church on May 8, 2016.

¹¹ TK, *R8-16FY*, 125.