

The Gospel in Romans: Romans 12:17-21

INTRODUCTION

1. Religion in general, and Christianity in particular, is often maligned as the source of human violence and war.
 - While it is true religion has often been the rationale given for war, and remains so in the case of Islamic jihad, this criticism is largely ahistorical, inconsistent with the facts and demonstrably untrue as a general statement.
 - Men fight and kill and wage war not because of their faith but because of their sin and carnal ambition. **Jas. 4:1**
2. Christianity, however, has from its inception included and promoted a robust doctrine of non-retaliation.
 - Jesus' admonition to "turn the other cheek" is often parodied, emptied, or ignored by professing Christians.
 - Nevertheless, the principle of non-retaliation is central to the ethics of the NT and to the Christian faith.
 - The same principle also appears in the OT but is amplified and extended in the NT. (cf. Prov. 17:13; 20:22)
 - The *lex talionis* of the OT was a principle to ensure judicial justice, not a license for personal vengeance.
3. Romans 12-13 unfolds what a consecrated and transformed life looks like, how Christians ought to behave.
 - A commitment to leave vengeance to God is part of that. It is not how the world thinks, but it is how we should.
 - This is one of the areas where our real commitment to having a renewed mind is tested and our faith proved.

I. THE ASPIRATION OF CHRISTIAN NON-RETALIATION (17-18)

A. *Aspire Always to Good (17)*

1. Revenge is not an option for a Christian; if you keep it as a possibility, don't claim to serve Christ.
 - There are four clear prohibitions in this context: Do not curse (14), Do not repay evil with evil (17), Do not take revenge (19), and Do not be overcome by evil (21)
 - Corresponding to these are positive exhortations of duty: Bless enemies (14), Seek peace (17-18), Leave wrath to God (19), and Overcome evil with good (20-21)
2. Whereas we are never to return evil for evil, we are always to seek to provide good in the sight of all.
 - We could easily resign ourselves to the reality of persecution and enemies and simply hold out.
 - But the Bible calls us beyond resignation and patience to actively think, pray, and work for peace.

B. *Aspire to Live in Peace (18)*

1. It will not always be possible to live in peace with others, but that should be because they are unwilling.
 - A faithful confession and principled life will be hated and opposed. **Jn. 15:18-16:4; 2Tim. 3:12**
 - Such persecution is a blessing and privilege of the saints. **Luke 6:22, 26; Matt. 5:10-12; Php. 1:29-30**
 - We can and should rejoice at suffering for Christ's name. **1Pe. 4:12-16; Acts 5:40-42; 2Tim. 1:8-12**
2. If we must be at odds with the world (and we must), let it be because their hearts are hard, not ours.
 - If we are to work for peace, we must first recognize there is a war. Don't be surprised by suffering.
 - Peace must never be bought at the price of purity; we cannot compromise truth to win peace.
 - If Jesus must be surrendered for peace, choose Jesus. If the gospel must be compromised, hold fast.
 - Many are enemies of the cross, and we cannot yield to them. **Gal. 2:4-5; Php. 3:18; Matt. 10:34-39**
 - But not every unbeliever is our personal enemy, and we should pray for God's mercy. **2Ti. 2:24-26**

II. THE BASIS FOR CHRISTIAN NON-RETALIATION (19)

A. *The Propriety of Vengeance (19a)*

1. Never avenge yourselves. Did you hear Paul say that? Never take revenge for the wrongs done to you.
 - But Lord, how can I do that? How can I let injustice go unpunished? How can I deny what was done?
 - The command not to revenge may seem to cheapen hurts and sin, but it is a command nonetheless.
2. But we should understand what God is saying. He is not saying the evil in this world does not matter.
 - God will not allow sin to go unpunished. Every sin is punished, either in Christ or in ourselves.
 - Paul is not saying we should simply dismiss the wrongs done to us or deny they matter at all.
3. Christians are empowered not to retaliate or revenge because we know we cannot really do justice.
 - But justice will be done; there is a proper place for wrath; it is not evil, carnal, or sub-Christian at all.
 - Vengeance is right, it is necessary, and it is good, but it belongs always and only to the Lord God.

B. *The Proprietor of Wrath (19b)*

1. Paul does not say vengeance is wrong; he says vengeance belongs to God, not you or me. **2:5; 5:9; 9:22**
 - You know the anger you feel at injustice, the desire for evil to be punished? God put that there.
 - But like every emotion and impulse in our hearts, what was once good is twisted by sin and the Fall.
 - That does not mean the underlying sense of justice is wrong; it means it must be rightly applied.

2. A day of wrath is coming, a day when every evil will be punished, every wrong put right. God will do it.
 - We should long for Christ's return not only for our own sakes, but for the sake of justice. **2Th. 1:6-10**
 - We want to go to Heaven, but do we not also want persecution and abortion and violence to cease?
3. God's judgment is the context for our commitment to not avenge ourselves. **1Pe. 2:23**

- It is important to note we are not discussing the (legitimate) question of self-defense and just war.
 - There is a fundamental difference between acting to stop an evil act and punishing one afterwards.
 - The Bible provides for the use of force against evil in self-defense and in civil/magisterial contexts. (cf. Exod. 22:2-3; Deut. 22:23-27; Luke 22:36; Rom. 13:1-7)
- Using force to protect someone against an evildoer is different than hunting one down to harm him.
- Violence in the defense of the innocent, which I take to be justified, is a separate issue than revenge.

III. THE CONDUCT OF CHRISTIAN NON-RETALIATION (20-21)

A. Good that is Proactive (20)

1. The above discussion leads directly into the most difficult verse in this section. What does Paul mean?
 - The basic instruction is easy to understand. Do good to your enemies instead of doing them harm.
 - But the rationale and outcome of this behavior is puzzling. What are these "burning coals"?
2. Commentators since the patristic period (early church) have wrestled with what Paul means.
 - Augustine believed it referred to the remorse which the evildoer might feel because of this kindness.
 - We see an example of this remorse more than once in King Saul's life. (e.g. 1Sa. 24:16-21; 26:21)
 - This does not mean our enemy will repent, but kindness may sometimes soften their attitude to us.
 - Recently scholars found an ancient Egyptian rite where coals on the head symbolize repentance.
 - Many are very excited about this possibility, but the evidence for it here is exceptionally weak.
 - It is very unlikely Paul had such a ritual in mind when he wrote, whether he was aware of it at all.
3. Most likely this image refers to the discussion immediately prior of the certainty of God's judgment.
 - This is clearly the OT background and thus the most likely view. **Ps. 18:8, 12; 140:8-10; Job 41:20-21**
 - The statement is a strong allusion to the OT, so we should look there for answers. (cf. Prov. 25:22)
 - It is even found in the Apocrypha, Jewish texts written in Greek, maybe in Paul's day. **2Esdras 16:53**
 - This is the most obvious connection for Paul's readers to make to this type of language about coals.
4. But what does this mean? Is Paul saying, "Be nice so that God will do even worse to them in the end"?
 - No, God's judgment is not the *goal* or *motive* for our well-doing in this case, but it is the *context*.
 - We are enabled to do good by knowing God will avenge the wrongs done to us; we can trust Him.
5. In a certain sense unrepentant evil does exacerbate the fate of the wicked. **Matt. 23:32; Rev. 22:11**
 - By showing kindness to our enemies we demonstrate our holiness and their wretchedness.
 - We do not do good from a desire for their harm, but we hand them over to the judgment of God.

B. Good that Prevails (21)

1. Thus goodness is greater than evil, and God's people triumph not by violence but by kindness.
 - When someone hates or hurts us, the temptation is great to retaliate in kind, to be drawn into sin.
 - But we must be on-guard against it; do not be overcome by evil; overcome evil with good.
2. How can we show kindness to our enemies? How can we seek peace? By committing it all to God.
 - We can do it as we look at our lives and suffering through the lens of eternity. Our future is secure.
 - God's wrath will fall on the wicked, so do not become wicked; overcome wickedness with good.

PRAYER OF REFLECTION

O Lord, You know personally and experientially what it is to bless those who hate You. You bore in Your own body our sins on the cross. You suffered unjustly. You were mistreated, hated, and maligned. Help us, Lord, not to retaliate in kind, not to be drawn into evil by evil. Help us to overcome evil with good. Give us grace to give our suffering and pain to You, O God. Help us to trust and rest in your perfect victory.

We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.