

Romans 12 Part Five

Romans 12:14-21

In the first eleven chapters of his letter to the Roman church Paul teaches Christians what to believe about God. Beginning in chapter 12 Paul teaches those who love God how to live their' every day life. Paul teaches Christians how to relate to those inside and outside the church.

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

Christians were a very small segment of the Roman population. They were vulnerable to the laws of Rome and often mistreated. Let me give you some background on how Christians came to be mistreated in Rome.

CAESAR WORSHIP

Once a year everyone in the Roman Empire had to appear before government officials to burn a pinch of incense and to say: 'Caesar is Lord.' To refuse to burn the incense and to say: 'Caesar is Lord,' was an act of disloyalty to Rome. And no Christian could give the title Lord to any other than Jesus Christ.

Some of the Roman emperors demanded worship and those who refused were tortured, jailed, and sometimes killed. Here is an overview of some of the most notorious killers of Christians in Rome.

Caligula (AD. 37-41) was a madman. He insisted on having people worship him. In a treaty the Jews were not required to worship Caesar as Lord, but Caligula tried to force both Christians and Jews to call him Lord. Caligula planned to place a statue of himself in the Holy of Holies in the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem. Mercifully he died before he could carry out his plans. **Nero (AD. 54-58)** did not insist on Caesar worship. But he killed many Christians because he had to find scapegoats for the great fire of Rome.

Domitian (AD. 81-96) was one of the first emperors who really believed he was a god. He began to kill all those who would not worship the false gods and emperors of Rome. When the governors read his letters to the people they had to begin with the words: *'Our Lord and God Domitian commands...'* Everyone who spoke or wrote to Domitian had to refer to him as 'Lord and God.'

Even in the face of persecution a Christian can not address another human with the title; Lord, or God. Many Christians refused to address Caesar as Lord. As a result they were killed for sport in Roman Coliseums. They were tortured and crucified and cut down without mercy.

It is in this setting that Paul tells the members of the Roman Church to ***bless those who persecute you, bless and not curse.***

When someone comes at us with hatred or malice it is very tempting to lash out in anger. Paul does not want Christians to roll around in the mud of hatred and bitterness. When we roll in the mud of bitterness and hatred, even when someone deserves it, we look no different than those who mistreat us. Jesus said;

Matthew 5:44 Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.

And here is what Jesus said when he was on the cross.

Luke 23:33-34 ³³When they came to the place called The Skull, there they crucified Him and the criminals, one on the right and the other on the left.

³⁴But Jesus was saying, Father forgive them; they do not know what they are doing.

Jesus mistreated and killed for our sins to provide us forgiveness. When we forgive those who persecute us we point to the heart of Jesus on the cross.

I am not begging for persecution. The apostle Paul used his rights as a citizen of Rome to get fair treatment. But in the end, when persecution happens, or when people mistreat us, we must hate the devil but love and pray for all people. Bitterness and hatred and grudges are a missed opportunity to show the love of Jesus on the cross.

¹⁵Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep.

This is Paul's instruction about how to treat everyone, including those outside the church. Sometimes we are so turned off by the behavior of people that our hearts grow cold toward them. We no longer care about what happens to them. We don't laugh with them and we don't cry with them and we do not enter into their lives and their world.

When we enter into the emotional world of other people we show that we care and we show the love and mercy of Jesus. We can lighten up and laugh and be happy along with others and we can cry with those who are troubled. By doing so we give a picture of a God who cares. Our annoyance over sin must never prevent us from loving people. Religious pride and failing to truly love both Christians and non-Christians is Satanic and was rebuked by Jesus more than anything other sin.

If someone smokes do we hate them and avoid them or are we trying to find ways to offer our friendship support and encouragement? If someone has a problem drinking do we hate them or avoid them, or do we ask them if there is any way we can help them. The best way to help people is not to withhold love but to become a friend and pray for them constantly.

Cry with people who cry. Laugh with those who laugh. That makes us approachable and it gives people the idea that God is approachable.

¹⁶Be of the same mind toward one another; do not be haughty in mind, but associate with the lowly. Do not be wise in your own estimation.

Be of the same mind toward one another. This is for the church. Being of the same mind means that we are all following the Lord together and striving to reach the vision God has given us. We do this as brother and sister in Christ.

My brother is not as educated as me. He has struggled to keep a job and feed his family. But is he still my brother? Do I avoid him because of our differences? No. Being a brother means that you are on equal footing when you get together. The things going on in his life are just as important to him as the things going on in my life. When the family makes a decision he gets just as much input as I do.

Even more so we are on equal footing in the Lord. We must give equal love and respect and honor to rich and poor alike. One of the reasons I dress down and use plain language is so that I am approachable to everyone in our community.

Listen to what James said about favoritism.

James 2:1-9

¹My brethren, do not hold your faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ with an attitude of personal favoritism. ²For if a man comes into your assembly with a gold ring and dressed in fine clothes, and there also comes in a poor man in dirty clothes, ³and you pay special attention to the one who is wearing the fine clothes, and say, "You sit here in a good place," and you say to the poor man, "You stand over there, or sit down by my footstool," ⁴have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil motives? ⁵Listen, my beloved brethren: did not God choose the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him? ⁶But you have dishonored the poor man. Is it not the rich who oppress you and personally drag you into

court? ⁷Do they not blaspheme the fair name by which you have been called?⁸If, however, you are fulfilling the royal law according to the Scripture, "YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF," you are doing well. ⁹But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors.

So how does this apply to us in Radisson and Winter Wisconsin? Well, when is the last time we went out for lunch or dinner with someone who is much poorer than us? When is the last time we made friendships with those who on a different social strata? Are there times where we do not trust people with important jobs in the church because they are poor and without formal education? In Christ we are all on the same level. The poor have different problems than the rich but in Christ we are on the same level. Our relationship with Christ is the strongest binding factor. We are going to be together forever in heaven. So why not practice being a family right now?

17Never pay back evil for evil to anyone Respect what is right in the sight of all men.

If someone slanders us or insults us they are acting like Satan does. But in our response do we want to look like Satan or Jesus.

1 Peter 3:9 ⁹not returning evil for evil or insult for insult, but giving a blessing instead; for you were called for the very purpose that you might inherit a blessing.

One way we can bless those who persecute us is pray that in the end our example of love will lead the sinner to Christ. Hate the devil and love people.

18If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men.

Most of the time it is possible to be a peace with all people. Too often when we are insulted we lash back with hatred. When someone does not do

things our way we begin to cut that person down behind their back. But most of the time if we get our pride out of the way we can put our self in the other person's shoes and see things from their perspective.

There are times when peace is not possible. If someone grabs my wife or daughter or climbs into my window in the middle of night there will be no peace. But in almost every situation we face it is possible to drop our pride and fragile egos and try to understand why the offender did things the way he or she did them.

When I am in a hostile environment I often ask Jesus to give me his love for the person who is acting macho or trying to show off at my expense. And then I am usually able to get rid of my defensive attitude and speak the truth but do it with genuine love.

19Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, "VENGEANCE IS MINE, I WILL REPAY," says the Lord. (Deuteronomy 32:35)

This is a quote from Deuteronomy 32. The truth is that God never forgets sin. All sin will be punished. When someone sins against us we know that unless they are born again and forgiven their sin they are going to come under the wrath of almighty God. If you are tempted to pay someone back, stop and ask yourself this question; "can I spank as hard as God?" If you can't spank as hard as God, then leave it to Him. In the end, no one will get away with anything.

20"BUT IF YOUR ENEMY IS HUNGRY, FEED HIM, AND IF HE IS THIRSTY, GIVE HIM A DRINK; FOR IN SO DOING YOU WILL HEAP BURNING COALS ON HIS HEAD."

This is a quote from **Proverbs 25:21-22**. Let me explain this "burning coal" reference. *Heaping hot coals on the head* is reference to an old

Egyptian custom. In the Egyptian custom when an offender wanted to show that he was sorry for what he did he would balance a pan of hot coals on his head. This is kind of like the Jewish custom of tearing your clothes and sitting in ashes.

By offering help to our enemy we are hoping that God will get a hold of their heart so that in the end they will be ashamed of what they did and perhaps even come to faith in Christ. Our unconditional love will show people that we have the love of Jesus in our heart and some of them will want the same thing.

21 Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Paul summarizes his thoughts that began in verse 9. To hate evil is to overcome it with good. When we hang on for dear life to those things that are good and to God, we will overcome evil.

FORGIVENESS

When someone hurts you deeply, instead of giving him what he deserves, Paul says to try to become his friend. Why does Paul tell us to forgive our enemies?

1. Forgiveness may break a cycle of retaliation and lead to reconciliation.
2. It may make the enemy feel ashamed and change his or her ways.
3. In contrast, repaying evil for evil hurts you just as much as it hurts your enemy. Even if your enemy never repents, forgiving him or her will free you of a heavy load of bitterness.

TAKING IT HOME

1. Do you spend any time with people that are not as well off as you?

2. Are you entering into the emotional world of other people sharing both laughter and tears? If not, would you ask God to help you care about other people more than you do now?
3. How do you respond when you are mistreated? Are you praying for those who seem to be against you? Are you leaving the wrath stuff up to God?