

***Love for Enemies***  
***Romans 12:14-21***

In Romans 12:2 Paul challenged us to “be transformed by the renewing of [our] minds”; as we learn new patterns of thinking our lives are transformed. Over time we become people who become more like Jesus. If you and I aren’t more like Jesus today than we were a year ago or two years ago, something is wrong. The norm in the Christian life is that over time we will be **transformed** by the renewing of our minds.

One of the most radical transformations will involve how we respond to our enemies, the people who oppose us, the people who wrong us with their words and actions. The most natural response is to treat people the way they have treated us. But in today’s passage, Romans 12:14-21, Paul challenges us to treat people better (MUCH better) than they’ve treated us.

What we’re talking about today is easy to understand but very difficult to live out. This passage might actually stir up some painful memories and experiences in your life. You might be reminded of some people who have wronged you in some horrible ways. The idea of blessing such persons might be more than you can handle right now. Some healing might need to take place before this can happen. This passage may surface tensions and issues that can’t be resolved here today; some situations are complex and require great discernment. I mainly want us to **glimpse a vision** of the type of life Paul is describing in this passage. Paul’s teaching here echoes Jesus’ teaching in the Sermon on the Mount, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matthew 5:44).

***Blessing those who persecute us.*** (Romans 12:14) In verse 14 Paul writes:

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

This is one of the most unnatural things that you and I will ever do - unless we are apprenticed to Jesus. As usual, Jesus is the supreme example of One who blessed those who persecuted Him; He blessed and did not curse. As Jesus hung on the cross He didn’t call down curses on the Jewish authorities who accused Him falsely or upon the Roman soldiers who scourged Him and drove the nails through His hands and feet. Instead of cursing He blessed them by praying, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34).

This response was “unprecedented in both the Greek and Jewish worlds” (Moo, p. 781). Jewish rabbis and Greek philosophers simply weren’t teaching their followers to love their enemies and to bless those who curse them. But Jesus did. One of Jesus’ early apprentices was a man named Stephen. When Stephen was being stoned to death for preaching about Jesus, Acts 7 tells us that Stephen fell to his knees and “cried out with a loud voice, ‘Lord, do not hold this sin against them!’” Then we read, “Having said this, he fell asleep. Saul was in hearty agreement with putting him to death” (Acts 8:1).

My point is that Stephen blessed Paul when he persecuted him; he blessed and did not curse. After Paul believed in Jesus he had an intuitive understanding of what he is teaching here in Romans 12:14. Fueled by Jesus' teaching and Stephen's example, Paul writes, "Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse."

Persecution is a term that designates the mistreatment Christians experience **because of their devotion to Christ**. We might be mistreated or insulted for a lot of other reasons; sometimes we offend people and sometimes we simply encounter mean people who mistreat almost everybody. But Paul here has in mind mistreatment because we are representing Christ or seeking to obey Christ in some way. Persecution can be everything from insults and snubs to being ostracized and excluded to being martyred. Jesus warned His disciples that people would treat them the way they treated Him. And Paul wrote that "all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Timothy 3:12). Some of you have family members who ridicule you for your faith; others of you come from countries where it can be dangerous identifying yourself as a Christian. Others of you may one day live and serve in such places in the future. The fact is that none of us knows what type of persecution we will face in the future, even in this country in which basic biblical teachings are increasingly out of step with the rest of culture. Dealing with persecution isn't an hypothetical issue.

As a side note, the Bible doesn't teach that have to passively accept persecution. In Matthew 10 Jesus told His disciples that when they were persecuted in one city they should "flee to the next" (Matthew 10:23). But when we do experience persecution, instead of treating people the way they treat us, we are to treat them the way Jesus treated those who persecuted Him: we are to bless and not curse. If we are apprenticed to Jesus He will teach us how to do this.

Toward the end of this message we'll talk about how we might learn this. But for now I'd have you consider how you normally respond when somebody offends or insults or harms you in some way. Some people respond in anger; other people become passive and just take it. Paul is advocating something very different - that we positively find a way to bless those who persecute us. It could be a prayer or a word of kindness or an act of generosity.

***A common commitment to generosity in the body of Christ (regardless of status and station in life).*** (Romans 12:15-16) In these verses Paul suspends his discussion of how to treat our enemies and challenges us to have a common commitment to enter into each other's lives. Paul doesn't explicitly tie this challenge to loving our enemies. But it seems to me that if we don't live out the challenge in these verses, it's highly unlikely that we'll be generous enough to love our enemies.

15 Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep. 16 Be 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.

It's important to live out these commands in every relationship in our lives. But Paul is especially concerned here that we have this common commitment in the body of Christ.

Chrysostom (in the 2nd century) pointed out that it's often easier to weep with those who weep than to rejoice with those who rejoice. It's so easy for jealousy to creep into our hearts, isn't it? Instead of being legitimately glad for others' good fortune, we are tempted to think, "Must be nice. . . that sort of thing never happens to me!" If we view ourselves as the body of Christ, we will have joy when others experience joyful things; and we'll express that joy along with them.

And when others in the body of Christ weep, we will shed tears alongside them. Their loss is our loss because we are family.

Verse 16 is yet another warning against pride. Back in verse 3 Paul warned against "thinking more highly of yourself than you ought to think." Here again Paul tells us to "have the same mind toward one another," as opposed to thinking that some people are worth my time and others aren't. No, we shouldn't be "haughty in mind, but associate with the lowly." "Do not be wise in your own estimation" is a warning against sizing up others according to our own standards (as opposed to the realities Paul is explaining). Paul is advocating that **all of us** have a generous attitude toward **everybody else** in the church. If we are prideful toward others in the body of Christ (our own spiritual family), there's little chance we'll be generous toward those outside the body of Christ who slander or persecute us! The type of generosity and acceptance Paul teaches here lays the foundation for a lifestyle of loving even our enemies.

**Overcoming evil with good.** (*Romans 12:17-21*) In these verses Paul returns to his discussion of loving our enemies. He gives at least eight commands that paint a picture of how we should respond when we experience evil at the hands of other people. Twice in these verses Paul gives a rather absolute prohibition against revenge.

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

In the flesh, it's the most natural thing in the world to repay evil for evil and insult for insult (see 1 Peter 3:9). Sometimes I realize that I just spent five minutes rehearsing a conversation I recently had; I've been thinking of insults and comebacks that I wish I'd said. (I'm sure none of you ever do that, right?). That's a very natural way to think. But as followers of Christ we're not supposed to do what's natural. We're supposed to keep in step with the Spirit and learn to respond to evil and insults the way Jesus did. Paul writes, "**Never** pay back evil for evil to anyone."

In the second command in verse 17 Paul urges us to live in a way that others recognize as good and right. The NIV reads, "Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone." Even though some will ridicule you for your devotion to Jesus, there remains a common morality with which almost everyone agrees. Almost everyone sees the goodness of being merciful and generous and kind. Paul reminds us that part of our calling involves living a life that others acknowledge as good. Jesus Himself said, "Let your light shine before others in such a way that that may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:16). A good reputation based on good works is priceless.

I love the wisdom of verse 18:

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

Paul acknowledges that when you're in a relationship with someone else, not everything depends upon you. And he also acknowledges that it's not always possible to be at peace with all people. Some people are mean and vindictive; some people are irreconcilable (see 2 Timothy 3:3). But, if possible, as far as it depends on you, be at peace with everybody. This means that we should avoid provoking people whenever possible. You may not believe this, but I've known Christians who've said, "I could care less what people think about me!" Such persons don't take seriously Scriptures like this one which stress that we should stay in relationship with everybody we possibly can. Otherwise we don't have the opportunity to be used by God in their lives.

19 Never 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.

Notice that in the middle of that sentence Paul calls the Roman Christians "beloved." He reminds them that they are a people deeply loved by God. Instead of experiencing God's wrath, they experienced God's love. Jesus experienced the wrath of God that we deserved. Back in Romans 5:10 Paul wrote that when "we were [God's] enemies" He sent His Son to die for our sins. God loved us when we were His enemies.

Here Paul writes that as God's beloved people, we should **never** take our own revenge. Every single person will answer to God one day. We don't have the right to "play God" and give people what we think they deserve. Vengeance is not ours. We "leave room for the wrath of God" and we believe God when He says, "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay." Interestingly, we'll see next week in chapter 13 that "governing authorities" have a God-given role of "bringing wrath on the one who practices evil." Of course justice isn't always served in this life. One day every single person will stand before his/her Creator. Those who aren't clothed with the righteousness of Christ will experience God's wrath and vengeance.

As people loved by God, we shouldn't want that for our enemies. And so in verses 20 and 21 Paul tells us treat our enemies in a way that invites them to repentance and faith. In verse 20 Paul gives specific ways to "bless and not curse" our enemies.

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."

Instead of taking revenge, we are to take opportunities to meet our enemies' needs. We are to give food and drink to people who would expect us to delight in their misfortune. Doing so will "heap burning coals on [their] head[s]." It's difficult to say with certainty what Paul means by this imagery. Given the whole flow of this passage he probably **isn't** saying that our generosity has the effect of destroying our enemies or bringing greater condemnation to them. Most modern commentators take the image of "heaping

burning coals on their heads” to mean that our acts of kindness cause our enemies to blush with shame because they’ve been treated so much better than they deserve. Some will even respond in repentance that leads to salvation in Jesus. This interpretation fits well with verse 21 which says:

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

If we take revenge on our enemies we are overcome **by** evil; we become like those who have done evil to us. In doing so there is little or no possibility that their hearts will be softened. They will have fresh reasons to hate us. If we bless those who persecute us and give food and drink to our enemies, there’s the possibility that we “overcome evil with good.” There obviously aren’t any guarantees, but there’s that possibility.

***Learning this Way of Life: A Model of Spiritual Transformation - VIM*** Dallas Willard has developed a model of spiritual transformation he calls “VIM” - Vision, Intention, Means. These three things are necessary for almost any type of personal transformation. To master some skill or cultivate a new way of living, you need VIM. You need a **vision** for what your life would be like. You need the **intention** to pursue it. And you need the **means** to make it happen. If any one of these things is missing, it probably won’t happen. If we want to live our lives the way Paul describes in our passage today, we will need Vision, Intention, and Means. Let’s consider each of them briefly.

**Vision.** Can you envision what your life might be like if you routinely blessed those who persecute (or wrong) you, if you never took your own revenge, and if you sought to overcome evil with good? In today’s passage Paul wasn’t describing someone who was outwardly kind to everybody but inwardly seething in rage and resentment. He was describing someone who really wants the best for everybody, even his/her enemies, even those who cause them great pain.

Can you imagine being a person who honestly wants the best for every single person you encounter? You would have an inner peace that would have a calming effect on your family, your coworkers, your brothers and sisters in Christ. If you positively blessed those who insult you, you might gain the respect of all sorts of people who are currently far from God.

**Intention.** You and I need to get to the place where we actually **intend** to pursue this vision for a life without revenge, a life of blessing our enemies. Instead of thinking, “Yeah, that would be a nice way to live my life,” to saying, “God, by your grace I actually intend to become a person who can bless his/her enemies. I intend to spend the time and energy needed to be transformed in this area of my life.” You may or may not be able to get to that place here today. You might need some time with God where you settle the issue.

**Means.** You can use your imagination to find ways to cultivate love for enemies. Of course internalizing Scripture is one of the core “means” of becoming like Jesus. Easter is four weeks from today. Perhaps between now and then you could spend significant

time reading in the gospels and pondering the last week of Jesus' life. Fix your eyes on Jesus and notice how He responded to the evil He experienced. Notice how He responded to insults and persecution during His arrest, trial, and crucifixion. If we care to notice, we can become convinced on a heart level that loving our enemies is a beautiful and Christlike way to live our lives.

Another means you can employ is simply practicing in everyday life the habit of treating others better than they treat you. This week people **will** irritate and/or insult you - in conversation, in traffic, on FB, in the media, etc. When this happens, you have the opportunity to practice not returning "evil for evil or insult for insult but giving a blessing instead" (1 Peter 3:9). When somebody cuts you off in traffic, you don't have to be enraged that they are going to get to the stoplight 3 seconds before you do. You can breathe a prayer, "Lord, that lady in the blue car must be dealing with some difficult issues to drive that way; please give her grace this day."

I'll mention one final means: We can learn from the persecuted church around the world how to love our enemies. We are going to play a three-minute video produced by a ministry that broadcasts satellite TV into the Middle East and North Africa. In this video a man interviews some Christian kids in Iraq whose families fled from ISIS. These kids have learned to love their enemies and to bless and not curse those who persecute them. May we "become like little children." Watch video here: <https://www.facebook.com/SAT7Network/videos/10152627003054147/>