

XXVIII. Genuine Christianity

January 31 & February 1/2, 2017

Romans 12:9-21

Aim: To practice the Christian virtue of genuine love both within the church and outside the church.

Four features of this passage are particularly noteworthy. 1) Its style. Paul fires off a volley of short, sharp injunctions with little elaboration. The omission of finite verbs in most of these injunctions in the Greek text makes the abruptness of these injunctions even more pronounced. Related to the rapid-fire style of this section is 2) its loose structure. There are few conjunctions or particles to indicate the flow of thought, and it is often not clear on what principle (if any) Paul has organized his various admonitions. And the connections among several of the sayings appear to be verbal rather than logical. The apparently haphazard arrangement makes it especially difficult to pinpoint 3) the theme of the passage. Many commentators content themselves, therefore, with a very general heading: for example, 'Maxims to Guide the Christian Life.' Finally, 4) the text reflects several diverse texts and traditions: the OT (vv. 16c, 19c, 20), the teaching of Jesus (vv. 14, 17, 18, and 21), early Christian instructions to new converts, and various Jewish and even Greek ethical and wisdom sayings.

What is the relationship between these admonitions and the Roman congregation? Paul's selection of material suggests that he may have at least one eye on the situation of the Roman church. But there are no direct allusions; nor does he use the vocabulary characteristic of his discussion of the weak and the strong in 14:1-15:13. Moreover, the parallels between the sequence of exhortations here and in other Pauline texts also suggest that Paul may be rehearsing familiar early Christian teaching. Many of Paul's specific exhortations find parallels in other early Christian material. These parallels do not suggest that Paul has taken over one or more 'blocks' of traditional material but that he is weaving together from many different sources central emphases in the early church's catechetical instruction.

What about the construction of this passage? Many scholars are convinced that the text is not as loosely organized as has been previously thought, particularly when style and not just content is considered. 'Let love be genuine' (v. 9a) is the heading for the entire section. There follows in vv. 9b-13 a chiasmically arranged series of exhortations, in a 2-3-2-3-2 pattern. Verses 14, 15, and 16 each display internal stylistic and verbal unity but are relatively unrelated to each other. The text concludes with another chiasm devoted to the issue of the Christian treatment of enemies. At the extremes of the chiasm are vv. 17a and 21, which share the key word 'evil.' Moving in one step, we find in vv. 17b-18 and v. 20 exhortations about the ways Christians are to treat non-Christians. And at the middle of the chiasm is v. 19, which contains the key prohibition of vengeance.

The above structure highlights the opening call for genuine love in v. 9a as the overall topic of the section. And most scholars would agree that love, which Paul spotlights again in 13:8-10 as the fulfillment of the law, is basic to the section. But it is basic not in the sense that every exhortation is a direct exposition of what love is, but basic in the sense that it is the underlying motif of the section. Paul is not always talking specifically about love, but he keeps coming back to love as the single most important criterion for approved Christian behavior.

Throughout the epistle Paul has given us lengthy, weighty concepts, and he has done so with long sentences and paragraphs. Here, however, Paul writes in staccato shots, giving us

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something almost like bullets in a PowerPoint presentation. In a terse manner Paul sets out ethical injunctions, one after another, which we are to manifest in the Christian life. Paul was not present when Jesus gave His Sermon on the Mount, but much of the information communicated by our Lord there is recapitulated in brief form here.

In these verses we find a series of staccato imperatives similar to those in other letters written by Paul (e.g., 1 Th. 5:14-22; 2 Cor. 13:11-12) as well as in other writers in the New Testament (e.g., Heb. 13:1-17). These imperatives appear scatter-gun in their rapidity and also in their apparently random character. A closer look, however, suggests coherence of subject matter throughout. This coherence is centered on the first exhortation relating to ‘love’ (v. 9a). In turn, this core idea appears to be directed on one hand to insiders and on the other to outsiders.

The thrust of the text in this passage suggests the question, how do we who are committed to Christ and have had our minds renewed love? Specifically, how do we love those in the Church and how do we love those in the world? These important questions must be considered together because we cannot love those in the Church without loving those in the world, and vice versa. The two loves complement and energize each other.

What relationship does this section have to what has come before it? It is best to view vv. 9-21 as a further elaboration of that ‘good’ which the person who is being transformed by the renewing of the mind approves of (v. 2).

A. Our Duties Toward the Church (Romans 12:9-13)

1. The Overarching Command (12:9a)

⁹*Let love be genuine.*

The opening words are not explicitly linked to anything in the previous context, and there is no verb in the Greek. Paul says, literally, ‘sincere love.’ These words are the heading for what follows, as Paul proceeds in a series of participial clauses to explain just what sincere love really is. Yet the addition of an imperative verb in all major English translations is not off the mark. As in the similar phrases in vv. 6b-8, Paul’s purpose is to exhort, not simply to describe. Love for others, singled out by our Lord Himself as the essence of the OT law (Mk. 12:28-34, etc.) and the central demand of the New Covenant (Jn. 13:31-35), quickly became enshrined as the foundational and characteristic ethical norm of Christianity. The love of Christians for others was grounded in, and enabled by, the love of God expressed in the gift of His Son (see esp. Jn. 13:34 and 1 Jn. 4:9-11). Paul has already in Romans reminded us of this love (see 5:5-8). The early Christians chose a relatively rare term to express the distinctive nature of the love that was to be the foundation of all their relationships: *agapē*. This is the term Paul uses here, the definite article (in the Greek) signifying that he is speaking about a well-known virtue. In fact, so basic does Paul consider love that he does not even exhort us here to love but to make sure that the love he presumes we already have is ‘genuine.’ In urging that our love be genuine, Paul is warning about making our love a mere pretense, an outward display or emotion that does not conform to the nature of the God who is love and who has loved us.

Paul begins with an all-important statement about the quality of the love that is to be in the Church: ‘Let love be genuine.’ The word for ‘love’ here is *agapē*, which to this point had been used in Romans only for divine love (5:5; 8:35, 39), except in 8:29 where it is used for man’s love for God. But here the word is used to indicate the kind of love Christians are to show *to*

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others—a Godlike love that loves regardless of the circumstances, a deliberate love that decides it will keep loving even if it is rebuffed. We are challenged to live out the highest love and to do so with the highest sincerity. Our love is to be genuine, not counterfeit.

The greatest virtue of the Christian life is love. The use of *agapē* ('love') was rare in pagan Greek literature, doubtless because the concept it represented—unselfish, self-giving, willful devotion—was so uncommon in that culture it was even ridiculed and despised as a sign of weakness. But in the New Testament it is proclaimed as the supreme virtue, the virtue under which all others are subsumed. *Agapē* love centers on the needs and welfare of the one loved and will pay whatever personal price is necessary to meet those needs and foster that welfare. 'Hypocrisy' is the antithesis of and completely incompatible with *agapē* love. The two cannot coexist. Hypocrisy is exceeded in evil only by unbelief.

The first injunction is not just part of a loose list of virtues; rather it is the thematic statement for all the responsibilities that follow. Paul begins with love: 'Let love be without hypocrisy.' We are to manifest love that is genuine, sincere, and authentic. When Paul wrote to the Corinthians, he devoted an entire chapter to the meaning of love (1 Corinthians 13). We might consider this Romans passage as a similar exposition. God expects from us authentic love, that which is not mixed with hypocrisy or false sentiment.

This is not the only occasion a New Testament writer calls for 'love' to be 'unhypocritical' (*anupkritos* – see 2 Cor. 6:6; 1 Pe. 1:22). The word 'hypocrite' derives from Greek culture and meant an 'actor,' someone 'playing a part.' Jesus repeatedly condemned the Pharisees for their 'hypocrisy,' for living behind a mask of religious sincerity.

This little statement, so simple and so straightforward—'Let love be genuine'—is foundation to Christian conduct. But despite its simplicity, it is not easy to put into practice because much of our life is shot through with hypocrisy. Most of us can affect civilities that appear to be utterly sincere though they actually cover hostility. We even deceive ourselves into thinking we have love for people we neglect and, in fact, do not even like. Paul tells us that we must get beyond pretense—we must sincerely love. If we claim the commitment of Romans 12:1-2, we must love without hypocrisy (cp. 1 Pe. 4:8; 1 Tim. 1:5; Jn. 13:35). This is not optional! This is a call to honestly examine our own hearts, asking the question, 'Do I love others, especially those in the Church, without hypocrisy?' If the answer is uncertain, we must go to God in prayer, because the Holy Spirit is the only One who can pour love into and through our hearts (5:5).

2. Expressions of Love (12:9b-13)

Having established that love is the foundation for Christian action, Paul now advances his thought in verses 9-13 with several challenging specifics.

a) *Love Good (12:9b)*

Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good.

First, we see *love's morality*. Some might suppose that love is soft on evil. Not so! Evil is to be hated. Sincere love demands God-honoring moral resolve regarding good and evil.

Paul's call to 'hate evil and cling to the good' is in line with his rejection of the 'hypocritical.' Hypocrisy pretends to be good while being something else; if not evil, then at least having less than decent intentions. 'Un-hypocrisy' does, indeed, 'hate evil and cling to the good.' Taken

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together, the three exhortations in verse 9 call for transparent living, for genuineness in loving others, and a firm rejection of evil and a commitment to goodness.

In the second part of v. 9, we find two more exhortations, each put in the form of a participial clause. ‘Genuine love,’ Paul is saying, will ‘abhor what is evil’ and ‘cling to what is good.’ Both verbs are very strong: ‘abhor’ (*αποστνγουντες, apostugoutēs*) could also be translated ‘hate exceedingly,’ and ‘cling’ (*κολλαομαι, kollaomai*) can be used to refer to the intimate union that is to be characterized in the marriage relationship. ‘Genuine’ Christian love, Paul is suggesting, is not a directionless emotion or something that can be only felt and not expressed. Love is not genuine when it leads a person to do something evil or to avoid doing what is right – as defined by God in His Word. Genuine love, ‘the real thing,’ will lead the Christian to that ‘good’ which is the result of the transformed heart and mind (v. 2).

Paul makes immediate application with two strong statements. We are to hate one thing and to love something else. The hatred about which Paul writes is hatred of the highest dimension. He uses one of the strongest words for hatred found anywhere in the Bible. Paul is commanding in the name of the Lord that we loathe evil. We are to see evil as an unveiled assault on the character of God and on His sovereignty. Hatred is one of the strongest emotions that can inhabit the heart of a human being. Hatred is destructive and demeaning, but not when it is directed against evil. As we are to despise what is evil, we are to cling to what is good. Paul uses intense language here. This term translated ‘cling’ is the root of the Greek word *glue*. We are to hang on tightly to that which is good, allowing it to be cemented to our souls so that we do not drop or lose it with the next wind of cultural fantasy that comes our way.

The verb *kollaō* (‘to cling’) is from *kolla* (‘glue’) and came to be used of any bond—physical, emotional, or spiritual. As servants of Jesus Christ, we are to bind ourselves ‘to what is good’ (*agathos*), that which is inherently right and worthy.

b) Love One Another (12:10)

Next, Paul mentions *love’s commitment in the Church*. The two exhortations in this verse share a focus on the relations of Christians to ‘one another,’ which points to the close mutual relationship that should characterize Christian faith but which appears to have been lacking in Rome. They also share a similar structure: each begins with a reference to the virtue about which Paul gives instructions – ‘with reference to brotherly love,’ ‘with reference to honor’ – moves on to the reciprocal emphasis (‘one another’), and concludes with the imperatival element.

(1) Brotherly Affection (12:10a)

¹⁰*Love one another with brotherly affection.*

After introducing all the exhortations in vv. 9-21 with a call for sincere love, Paul now narrows his focus, admonishing Christians to be ‘devoted’ (*philostorgoi*) to one another in ‘brotherly love’ (*philadelphia*). Both key terms in this exhortation, which share the *philo-* stem, convey the sense of family relationships. Paul here reflects the early Christian understanding of the church as an extended family, whose members, bound together in intimate fellowship, should exhibit toward one another a heartfelt and consistent concern.

Paul’s word for ‘love’ (*philostorgoi*) means ‘loving dearly’ which he reinforces by ‘in brotherly love’ (*philadelphia*). Jesus created this kind of community among His disciples, a fellowship

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that continued into the church in Jerusalem, and beyond there into the mission churches of the New Testament.

‘Be devoted to’ and ‘brotherly love’ carry synonymous ideas. ‘Devoted’ translates *philostorgos*, a compound of *philos* (friend, friendly; friendship love) and *storgē* (natural family love, which is not based on personal attraction or desirability). ‘Brotherly love’ translates *philadelphia*, another compound—*phileō* (to have tender affection) and *adelphos* (‘brother’). We are to have a loving, filial affection for ‘one another’ in the family of God. ‘Devoted...brotherly love’ is one of the marks by which the world will know that we belong to Christ.

We find here the idea of *philadelphia*, brotherly love. It is love among those who share a common family. The love we have for one another in the church is to be the same kind of love we experience in our families between parents and children and between siblings. We are to imitate that kind of love—brotherly affection—in a spirit of kindness toward one another. Kindness is one of the most important virtues in the Bible. It is a fruit of the Spirit.

The word ‘love’ is a translation of a Greek word that combines the words for friendship love and family love. A more helpful translation is, ‘Be devoted with warm family affection to one another in brotherly love.’ Family-type devotion to one another is more than friendship. Such love involves commitment like that experienced in good families.

(2) Showing Honor (12:10b)

Outdo one another in showing honor.

The general meaning of the second exhortation in this verse is clear enough. Christians are to be anxious to recognize and give credit to other believers. But its exact meaning is debated. The verb Paul uses here (*προηγouομαι, proēgouomai*) means ‘go before,’ often with the additional nuance that one goes before to show the way to someone else. Taking the verb in this basic sense, many early translations and commentators as well as more recent ones think Paul means something like ‘surpassing one another in showing honor.’ Paul is then calling on Christians to outdo each other in bestowing honor on one another; for example, to recognize and praise one another’s accomplishments and to defer to one another.

The virtue here is humility, not thinking more highly of ourselves than we ought to think (12:3). *Proēgeomai* (‘give preference’) has the basic meaning of going before, or leading. But the idea here is not that of putting ourselves before others in regard to importance or worth but the very opposite idea of giving ‘honor’ to fellow believers by putting them first. To ‘honor’ is not to flatter, to give hypocritical praise in hope of having the compliment returned or of gaining favor with the one honored. Again, the very opposite is in mind. To ‘honor’ is to show genuine appreciation and admiration for ‘one another’ in the family of God. We are to be quick to show respect, quick to acknowledge the accomplishments of others, quick to demonstrate genuine love by *not* being jealous or envious, which have no part in love, whether *agapē* or *philadelphia*.

There is some ambiguity in this statement, so it has been translated in various ways. The text is generally thought to be saying that we ought to prefer each other for honor. We are not to seek honor for ourselves but rather to reflect or deflect honor to others. In other words, it is a call for humility. Paul’s basic thrust, however, is that believers are to be leaders in establishing the principle of honor among one another. Even if no one in the congregation is manifesting respect and honor, then we must demonstrate a spirit of humility. That is the heart of a servant, and it is to be the heart of the Christian.

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c) Love the Lord (12:11)

(1) Zeal (12:11a)

¹¹*Do not be slothful in zeal...*

As the verse division suggests, the first exhortation in this verse, ‘in zeal, do not be lazy,’ could well be taken with the exhortation that follows, ‘be set on fire by the Spirit.’ But the style of this exhortation has more in common with the exhortations in v. 10. Probably, then, we should relate Paul’s warning about laziness in zeal to his call for us to love and esteem one another in v. 10.

This could be translated as ‘not lagging in diligence;’ the older KJV reads ‘not slothful in business.’ We are not to be lazy in business; however, Paul is not talking about commercial enterprise. The word *business* comes from the term *busy-ness*, which means we should be busy people, busy with the things of God. Those who have come to Christ have been born again and given a spirit of zeal to pursue the things of God with a sense of urgency and with hunger and passion. Therefore, it is the duty of every Christian to press into the kingdom of God, making that the main business of life. The kingdom of God cannot be a secondary interest for a true Christian. We are to be diligent and active in the things of God.

‘Not lagging behind in diligence’ could be rendered, ‘not lazy in zeal and intensity.’ In the context of Romans 12, ‘diligence’ refers to whatever believers do in their supernatural living. Whatever is worth doing in the Lord’s service is worth doing with enthusiasm and care. There is no room for sloth and indolence in the Lord’s work.

‘Zeal’ here is the zeal of Christian conversion, arising from the Word and the Spirit. Most likely, this leading injunction is now applied to the five subsidiary expressions of the Christian life (vv. 11-12).

Paul does not specify the object of the unflagging zeal that he calls for, but we should perhaps think of the ‘rational worship’ to which we are called. The temptation to ‘lose steam’ in our lifelong responsibility to reverence God in every aspect of our lives, to become lazy and complacent in our pursuit of what is ‘good, well pleasing to God, and perfect,’ is a natural one – but it must be strenuously resisted.

(2) Fervent (12:11b)

...be fervent in spirit...

The idea of ‘zeal’ is continued in the image of ‘being set on fire’ in the second exhortation. Paul might here be urging Christians to maintain a strong and emotional commitment to the Lord in their own spirits. But the spirit to which Paul refers is more likely, in light of the parallel reference to the Lord in v. 11c, the Holy Spirit. On this view, Paul is exhorting us to allow the Holy Spirit to ‘set us on fire’: to open ourselves to the Spirit as He speaks to excite us about the ‘rational worship’ to which the Lord has called us.

Whereas diligence pertains mainly to action being ‘fervent in spirit’ pertains to attitude. Literally, *zeō* means to boil and metaphorically to be ‘fervent.’ The idea here is not of being overheated to the point of boiling over and out of control but, like a steam engine, of having sufficient heat to produce the energy necessary to get the work done. Fervency requires resolve and persistence, not mere good intention.

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‘Be fervent [literally, ‘boiling for’ or ‘seething’] in the Holy Spirit,’ says Paul, insisting that dramatic spiritual change comes only from the presence and the power of the indwelling Spirit.

The word ‘fervent’ carries the idea of burning; we are to ‘*be aglow* with the Spirit.’ Our love is to be dispensed with burning energy toward those around us!

(3) Serve (12:11c)

...serve the Lord.

Like fervency in spirit, ‘serving the Lord’ has to do with perspective and priority. Everything we do should, first of all, be consistent with God’s Word and, second, be truly in His service and to His glory. Strict devotion to the Lord would eliminate a great deal of fruitless church activity. In Romans 12, Paul uses three different words to describe Christian service. In verse 1 he uses *latreia*, which is translated ‘service of worship,’ and emphasizes reverential awe. The second word is *diakonia*, which pertains to practical service. In verse 11, he uses *douleuō*, which refers to the service of a bond-slave, whose very reason for existence is to do his master’s will.

The exhortation to ‘serve the Lord’ might at first sight seem like an anticlimax, too obvious and too broad to have any real application. But a closer look at the context suggests otherwise. The encouragement to be ‘set on fire by the Spirit’ is, as church history and current experience amply attest, open to abuse. Christians have often been so carried away by enthusiasm for spiritual things that they have left behind those objective standards of Christian living that the Scriptures set forth. This, it seems is Paul’s concern; and he seeks to cut off any such abuse by reminding us that being set on fire by the Spirit must lead to, and be directly by, our service of the Lord. It is not the ‘enthusiasm’ of self-centered display (such as characterized the Corinthians) but the enthusiasm of humble service of the Master who bought us that the Spirit creates within us.

Being ‘fervent in the Spirit’ is not mere religious excitement, but rather a focused ‘serving [literally, ‘being enslaved to’] the Lord,’ that is the ascended Lord Jesus Christ. Such ‘serving’ is total, being expressed in Jesus-centered attitudes, speech and action, both to insiders and to outsiders.

d) *Love Spiritual Disciplines (12:12)*

¹²*Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer.*

Christianity can be reduced to three dimensions. First is the dimension of joy, which we should manifest at all times. We are called to rejoice in hope. The biblical concept of hope differs from the common meaning of the term in our language today. We hope that certain things will come to pass, even if we doubt they will, but the biblical concept of hope has nothing to do with such uncertainty. The New Testament concept of hope has to do with the absolute certainty that the promises of God for the future will come to pass. Faith looks backward, trusting in and relying on what God has done in the past, but faith also looks forward and finds its anchor for the soul in the future promises of God. That is the foundation for our joy. No matter how painful the present moment may be, we can still have joy because we know that the pain and suffering and tribulation we endure now is but for a moment. God has laid up for us such treasures in heaven that the brief moments of pain and suffering we have to endure now are not worthy to be compared to them. No matter how bad things are in this life, we can still be happy. We can still have joy because we have this hope of which we will never be ashamed.

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The second dimension of the Christian life is patience. Paul is writing about patience here, the virtue of forbearance, of hanging in when things are tough. We are to remember the patience of Job, who cried out in the midst of his agony, “Though He slay me, yet will I trust Him” (Job 13:15). That is the kind of patience that gives perseverance and the ability to endure in the midst of difficulty.

The glue that brings those dimensions together is the third one: continuing steadfastly in prayer. The Christian life is one of prayer, but not simply prayer offered at certain hours or appointed times. There is to be an ongoing dialogue between our hearts and God all the time. We are to be always conscious of God’s presence, relying on Him and communicating with the Father in our thoughts.

The three admonitions in this verse are closely related in both style and content. For hope, endurance, and prayer are natural partners. Even as we ‘rejoice in hope,’ gaining confidence from God’s promise that we will share the glory of God, we recognize the ‘downside’—the path to the culmination of hope is strewn with tribulations. Paul, ever the realist, knows this; and so here, as he does elsewhere, he quickly moves from hope to the need for endurance. At the same time, we realize that our ability to continue to rejoice and to ‘bear up under’ our tribulations is dependent on the degree to which we heed Paul’s challenge to ‘persist in prayer.’ (Note that Paul moves from hope to endurance to prayer also in 8:24-27).

These three expressions are likewise connected, but they also flow on from the previous two. ‘Rejoice in hope,’ that is, the hope to be with the Lord whom we serve is due to the Spirit who inspires this ‘hope.’ Such hope is intensified because of the ‘hardship’ (*thlipsis* is suffering due to persecution) on account of which Paul appeals for ‘patience.’ Finally, ‘devotion in prayer’ derives from the Spirit, is directed to the Lord, and is conditioned by the grim reality of ‘hardship’ on the one hand and bright ‘hope’ on the other.

Living the supernatural life inevitably brings opposition from the world and sometimes even sparks resentment by fellow Christians. Even after years of faithful service to the Lord, some see few, if any, apparent results from their labors. Without ‘hope’ we could never survive (cp. 8:24-25). It is because we can rejoice in hope that we can also persevere ‘in tribulation,’ whatever its form or severity. Because we have perfect assurance concerning the ultimate outcome of our lives, we are able to persist against any obstacle and endure any suffering. The believer who has the strength to persevere in trials, afflictions, adversity, and misfortune—sometimes even deprivation and destitution—will pray more than occasionally. He will be ‘devoted to prayer,’ in communion with his Lord as a constant part of his life. *Proskartereō*, (‘devoted’) means literally to be strong toward something, and it also carries the ideas of steadfast and unwavering. ‘Devoted,’ steadfast prayer should be as continual a part of a Christian’s spiritual life as breathing is a part of his physical life.

e) *Love the Saints (12:13)*

Lastly, there is *love’s care*. In verse 13 Paul gives two concrete examples of ‘unhypocritical love’ and warm ‘family affection’ (vv. 9 and 10). These next two principles Paul mentions in this list seem rather mundane. But they are qualities that the Lord personified during his earthly ministry and for which Paul himself was lovingly known. The flow of the supernatural life is outward, not inward, and meeting the needs of fellow believers is more important than meeting our own.

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(1) Be Generous (12:13a)

¹³*Contribute to the needs of the saints...*

Paul concludes his first series of exhortations with a call for Christians to put into practice the love and concern for one another that he has mentioned earlier (v. 10). In the first exhortation Paul uses the verbal form of the very familiar NT *koinōnia*, ‘fellowship.’ Paul, however, is not urging us to have fellowship with the saints, but to have fellowship with, to participate in, the ‘needs’ of the saints. These ‘needs’ are material ones: food, clothing, and shelter. Therefore, the fellowship we are called to here is the sharing of our material goods with Christians who are less well-off.

‘Contributing’ is from *koinōneō*, which means to share in, or share with, and the noun *koinōnia* is often translated ‘fellowship’ or ‘communion.’ The basic meaning is that of commonality or partnership, which involves mutual sharing. But because of the emphasis in the present text is on the giving side of sharing, the term is here rendered ‘contributing.’

Our care for brothers and sisters in Christ should reach down right into our wallets and purses and cost us. Paul presents this as a privilege rather than a sacrifice because the word ‘contribute’ is one of our great Christian words, *koinōnia*, which suggests a common sharing or fellowship. Love’s care is natural and right and joyful!

(2) Be Hospitable (12:13b)

...and seek to show hospitality.

Another dimension of Christian love is the practice of hospitality. The need to give shelter and food to visitors was great in the NT world, there being few hotels or motels. And the need among Christians was exacerbated by the many travelling missionaries and other Christian workers. Hence the NT frequently urges Christians to offer hospitality to others (see 1 Tim. 3:2; Tit. 1:8; Heb. 13:2; 1 Pe. 4:9). But Paul does more than that here; he urges us to ‘pursue’ it – to go out of our way to welcome and provide for travellers.

In pre-welfare societies, the ‘needs’ of widows, orphans, and disabled folk were extreme. These needs may have been met by ‘hospitality’ (*philoxenia* – ‘love of strangers’), that is, by taking in such needy folk as lodgers in an era that had not yet established hostels and hospitals. Traveling ministers arriving in strange cities and towns were also deemed worthy of ‘hospitality.’

The last responsibility to fellow believers that Paul mentions in this list is that of ‘practicing hospitality.’ The literally meaning of that phrase in the Greek is, ‘pursuing the love of strangers.’ In other words, we not only are to meet the needs of those people, believers and unbelievers, who come across our paths but are to look for opportunities to help (cp. Heb. 13:2).

Paul is still explaining what it means to love without hypocrisy. We are to be those who meet the needs of our Christian brothers and sisters, and we are to be known for our hospitality. Hospitality has always been and continues to be an important virtue in the Middle East.

Love’s care is exhibited when we ‘show hospitality.’ Here we must note something both beautiful and convicting: ‘show’ means ‘pursuing’ or ‘chasing.’ The word sometimes even denotes strenuous pursuit. The idea is that the loving believer does not wait for the stranger to show up on the doorstep but goes out and gets him. The benefits that mutual hospitality brings to the Church are incalculable: relationships enhanced, love disseminated, souls encouraged. All

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of us are to do this (cp. 1 Pe. 4:9; Heb. 13:2). And our text in Romans says we should aggressively pursue it.

B. Our Duties Towards Others (Romans 12:14-16)

The apostle now switches his focus from love's actions in the Church to love's actions in the world. What we read here should be interpreted from the perspective of one who is under pressure from an unbelieving world. We will briefly consider some general principles of loving action in verses 14-16 and then, in verses 17-21, some specific principles for loving when wronged.

1. Bless Others (12:14)

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

A break in the passage occurs here, marked by a change in both style and topic. More important, however, is the thematic connection with v. 9; blessing persecutors is one manifestation of that 'sincere love' which shuns evil and clings to the good. And it is certainly one of the most striking exhibitions of that transformed way of thinking which is to characterize believers (v. 2). In the Scriptures, 'blessing' is typically associated with God; He 'possesses and dispenses all blessings.' To 'bless' one's persecutors, therefore, is to call on God to bestow His favor upon them. Its opposite is, of course, cursing – asking God to bring disaster and/or spiritual ruin on a person. By prohibiting cursing as well as enjoining blessing, Paul stresses the sincerity and single-mindedness of the loving attitude we are to have toward our persecutors.

This section begins with a very difficult admonition, one that is completely contrary to unredeemed human nature: 'Bless those who persecute you.' The obedient Christian not only must resist hating and retaliating against those who harm him but is commanded to take the additional step of blessing them. Paul is essentially paraphrasing the Lord's own words (Lk. 6:27-28; cp. Mt. 5:44). Jesus referred to the same self-giving, heartfelt, unhypocritical, willing love (*agapē*) that Paul admonishes in Romans 12:9. To truly 'bless' those 'who persecute' us is to treat them as if they were our friends. And not only are we to 'bless them,' we are not at all or ever to curse them.

We immediately know that a radical relationship with the world is in view from the supernatural injunction of verse 14. This is the radical way of Jesus as given in His Sermon on the Mount. More than speaking well of one's enemies, it includes praying for their forgiveness and blessing. This is supremely radical. It is one thing not to curse your enemies, but entirely another to pray for their blessing. This is a life-changing call.

It was Jesus Himself who first enunciated this demand of the kingdom, and there is good reason to think that Paul deliberately alludes here to Jesus' own saying (Mt. 5:44; Lk. 6:27-28; cp. also 1 Pe. 3:9). Paul seems to combine these two forms of Jesus' saying from the 'Sermon on the Mount,' suggesting perhaps that he quotes here a pre-Synoptic form of one of Jesus' best-known and most startling kingdom demands. For Jesus' command that His followers respond to persecution and hatred with love and blessing was unprecedented in both the Greek and Jewish worlds. Paul's dependence on Jesus' teaching at this point is bolstered by the fact that he appears to allude in this same paragraph to other portions of Jesus teaching on love of the enemy from this same sermon (cp. vv. 17a and 21).

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This is not simply a call to bless those who insult you occasionally. Paul was constantly attacked by people. His entire ministry was conducted under persecution, just as his Lord's ministry had been. Paul's response to persecution was to bless his enemies, not curse them. Refraining from cursing our enemies is not too difficult, but to bless them, to pray that God would bestow upon them His favor and grace, is much harder. Doing so is tough, but it is what love means.

2. Have Empathy with Others (12:15)

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

Paul changes both style and topic yet again. Paul shifts from exhortation about the relation of Christians to those outside the community (v. 14) back to their relations to fellow Christians (vv. 15-16). Indeed, identifying with others in both their joys and their sorrows is an appropriate way for Christians to demonstrate the sincerity of their love to non-Christians as well as Christians. But Paul's exhortation here seem to pick up his assertion about the mutual and intimate relations of the members of the body of Christ in 1 Cor. 12:26. Love that is genuine will not respond to a fellow believer's joy with envy or bitterness, but will enter wholeheartedly into that same joy. Similarly, love that is genuine will bring us to identify so intimately with our brothers and sisters in Christ that their sorrows will become ours.

Can we participate in others' joy and forget about our sense of loss? That is how the body of Christ is knit together. If one rejoices, everybody rejoices. There are no politics of envy in the kingdom of God—none. If a brother prospers beyond how we prosper, we should delight in his prosperity and blessing rather than say, 'He doesn't deserve that; why should he get this wonderful advantage?' When one of us weeps, we all should weep. That is what the body of Christ is about. When Paul came to sorrowful people, he sorrowed with them. He stood beside them in their tribulation; he wept with those who wept. Jesus also wept with those who weep (Jn. 11:35), and we are supposed to do that too.

In a much more positive vein, Paul next counsels us to 'rejoice with those who rejoice.' At first thought, that principle would seem easy to follow. But when another person's blessing and happiness is at our expense, or when their favored circumstances or notable accomplishments make ours seem barren and dull, the flesh does not lead us to rejoice but tempts us to resent. It is also distinctively Christian to be sensitive to the disappointments, hardships, and sorrows of others, to 'weep with those who weep.' That is the duty of sympathy, empathy, entering into the suffering of others. Compassion has in the very word the idea of suffering with someone.

Such 'love' goes beyond material help (v. 13) to close emotional commitment and attachment. Such is the closeness of this spiritual family that each shares the joys and the sorrows of the other.

Believers are to identify with the world in the ups and downs of human life, to be a healing balm for a cold world. Enter the loving believer—he who weeps with those who weep and rejoices with those who rejoice. He is a tonic for life—a light leading to Christ!

3. Be Humble with Others (12:16)

a) *Live in Harmony (12:16a)*

¹⁶*Live in harmony with one another.*

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The mutual sympathy that Paul calls for in v. 15 is possible only if Christians share a common mind-set. The ‘one another’ language of v. 15 picks up the same theme from v. 19, while the use of the root *phron-* (‘think’) in all three admonitions in this verse reminds us of Paul’s demand for the right kind of ‘thinking’ among Christians in v. 3. These parallels make it clear that v. 16 is about the relations of Christians with one another. Paul’s first exhortation uses language that he uses elsewhere to denote unity of thinking among Christians (cp. 15:5; 2 Cor. 13:11; Phil. 2:2; 4:2). However, his wording here suggests not so much a plea for Christians to ‘think the same thing *among* one another,’ but to ‘think the same thing *toward* one another.’ Paul’s point might then be that Christians should display the same attitude toward all other people, whatever their social, ethnic, or economic status. However, while Paul might emphasize here the outward display of our ‘thinking,’ it does not force us to adopt a meaning for the basic phrase that is different from its sense in its other occurrences in Paul. He is calling us to a common mind-set. Such a common mind-set does not mean that we must all think in just the same way or that we must think exactly the same thing about every issue, but that we should adopt an attitude toward everything that touches our lives that springs from the renewed mind of the new realm to which we belong by God’s grace (see v. 2).

‘Be of the same mind toward one another.’ Paul is referring here to more than doctrinal unity. Certainly it is important for the people of God to believe the same things. After all, we have one Lord, one faith, one baptism. We agree about the content of our faith, which is why churches produce confessions of faith, but intellectual agreement, such as we find in our creeds and doctrinal statements, is only a portion of what Paul is speaking about. In this context, ‘being of the same mind’ has to do with affection. We are not to reserve our love for a small group or clique within the church; we are to distribute our affections to the whole body of Christ.

‘Think the same thoughts one with the other.’ Such is the depth of their love that they understand and sympathize with the ‘thoughts’ of the other. This doesn’t mean unquestioning agreement in all things but at the very least it includes a respect for the opinions of others.

b) Associate with the Lowly (12:16b)

Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly.

‘Haughty in mind’ translates *hupsēla phronountes*, which literally means ‘minding high things.’ But the things to which Paul refers here are not lofty in the spiritual sense but in the sense of self-seeking pride. The point is that there is no aristocracy in the church, no place for an elite upper crust.

As Paul recognizes elsewhere (see esp. Phil. 2:2-4), the biggest barrier to unity is pride. Therefore, Paul next warns us about ‘thinking exalted things,’ that is, ‘thinking too highly of ourselves.’ Our overly exalted opinion of ourselves, leading us to think that we are always right and others wrong and that our opinions matter more than others, often prevents the church from exhibiting the unity to which God calls her. The positive antidote to such pride, Paul says, is association with ‘the lowly.’ It is not certain what Paul means by this positive exhortation. The adjective ‘lowly’ could be neuter, in which case Paul might be urging Christians, in contrast to being haughty, to devote themselves to humble tasks. But ‘lowly’ could also refer to persons, in which case Paul would be exhorting believers to associate with ‘lowly people,’ that is, the outcasts, the poor, and the needy. A decision between these two options is impossible to make; both fit the context well and both are paralleled in the NT.

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This second phrase in v. 16 amplifies—indeed, explains—the first. Considering the first phrase together with the second phrase enables us to see that Paul is not talking about spiritually high things but about high positions in the world. Some people are driven by status; they desire to be exalted over others. Paul is warning against a life driven by fleshy ambition. Such ambition can drive us to ruthlessness in our relationships so that we do not hesitate to step on others in our desire to reach the top of the ladder. Therefore, we are not to set our minds and hearts on the positions of esteem and exaltation in this world; rather, we are to associate with the humble. Not many of the great and powerful have been called into the kingdom; God gives Himself to those of no reputation, to the lowly and meek. Jesus, as the Son of God, practiced this same process. We, in turn, are called to follow His example of associating with the humble.

Paul’s warning about ‘high-mindedness’ picks up a similar idea in verse 3 and suggests this may have been a problem with some in Rome. The ‘high-minded’ tend to associate only with those they see as their equals. But this is blind to the very humility of God as revealed in the incarnation and death of Jesus (2 Cor. 8:9; Phil. 2:1-18). For his part, Paul was passionately committed to the ‘weak’ (2 Cor. 11:7, 29) and the poor (1 Cor. 1:22).

c) Don't Be Self-Wise (12:16c)

Never be wise in your own sight.

The word *phronimos* in the final exhortation in the verse continues the rhetorically striking use of the root *phron-*. The person who is *phronimos* is characterized by ‘thinking’ and is therefore ‘wise.’ The quality denoted by the word is therefore a positive one. It becomes negative only when the standard by which we judge our wisdom is our own. It is this subjectivity and arrogance that Paul warns us about here: ‘do not be wise in your own eyes.’

A conceited, self-promoting Christian is a serious contradiction. Every believer should be humbly submissive to the will of God found in the Word of God, having no confidence in himself or in his own wisdom and talent. And sure there should be no social aristocracy in the church, neither should there be intellectual aristocracy. There are no castes of any sort in the Body of Christ. We must ‘not be wise in [our] own estimation’ in *any* regard, thinking we are in any way superior to fellow Christians.

C. Our Duties Towards Enemies (Romans 12:17-21)

From the commands in v. 14 and vv. 17-21, it is clear that believers were suffering persecution, though details are lacking about such problems in Rome at the time. From the book of Acts, as well as from his own letters, we know that Paul experienced rejection, scorn, imprisonment, flogging, and stoning wherever he went (see 8:35-36). The strong religious cultures of those times disliked intensely the message of the crucified and risen Messiah. Ordinary believers in the churches also ‘shared the same sufferings’ as the apostolic leaders (2 Cor. 1:7). Paul’s advice, like that of Peter (1 Pe. 2:21-23; 3:9-17), derived ultimately from Jesus’ ‘turn the other cheek’ teaching, which he embodied in His own trial and execution. Jesus’ ethic and example of forgiveness instead of vengeance permeates the entire New Testament and has contributed values that changed the course of history.

1. Do Not Repay Evil (12:17)

¹⁷*Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all.*

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Paul concludes his delineation of the manifestations of ‘genuine love’ (v. 9a) with admonitions about the attitude Christians are to adopt toward non-Christians (vv. 17-21). As in v. 14, where Paul first touched on this topic, his focus is on the way Christians are to respond to non-Christians who persecute and in other ways ‘do evil’ to us. Thus the prohibition of retaliation in v. 17a expands on Paul’s warning that we are not to curse our persecutors in v. 14b. Here again, Paul’s dependence on Jesus’ teaching is clear. For not only did Jesus exhort us to love and pray for our enemies; in the same context he also warns us not to exact ‘eye for eye, and tooth for tooth’ (Mt. 5:38).

We are ‘never [to] pay back evil for evil to anyone,’ reiterating and extending the second aspect of the principle taught in verse 14. We not only are to bless those who persecute us and *not* curse them, but certainly are never to move beyond a verbal curse to an act of revenge. The Old Testament law of ‘eye for eye, tooth for tooth’ (Ex. 21:24; cp. Lev. 24:20; Dt. 19:21) pertained to civil justice, not personal revenge. Not only that, but its major purpose was to prevent the severity of punishment from exceeding the severity of the offense. A few verse later in this letter Paul declares that civil authority ‘is a minister of God to you for good. But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath upon the one who practices evil’ (Rom. 13:4). But that very authority, which not only is divinely permitted but divinely mandated for civil government, is divinely forbidden for personal purposes.

In a pattern similar to that in vv. 14 and 16, the negative prohibition ‘Do not repay evil for evil’ is paired with a positive injunction: ‘Take thought for what is good in the sight of all people.’ The verb ‘take thought’ is probably emphatic: ‘Doing good to all is something to be planned and not just willed.’ Paul wants us to commend ourselves before non-Christians by seeking to do those ‘good things’ that non-Christian approve and recognize. There is, of course, an unstated limitation to this command, one that resides in the word ‘good’ itself. For Paul would certainly not want us to have forgotten that the word ‘good’ itself. For Paul would certainly not want us to have forgotten that the ‘good’ that he speaks of throughout these verses is defined in terms of the will of God (v. 2).

Revenge occurs in two stages. First, there is the festering wound with plans for getting back at the ‘enemy.’ Then there is the actual execution of the planned revenge. Paul urges against both stages. ‘Do not “take thought” for it and do not do it’ is his admonition. Rather, he says, think ahead how you can do good, and indeed, be known for doing good. At times of felt injustice, plan to do good in some way and reject the instinct to take revenge.

If we genuinely ‘respect’ others, including our enemies, we will have a ‘built-in’ protection against angrily repaying them evil for evil and will be predisposed to doing ‘what is right’ toward them. Such respect will help us develop the self-discipline necessary to prepare ourselves beforehand for responding to evil with what is good instead of with what is bad. Believers should respond instinctively and spontaneously with what is pleasing to God and beneficial to others. *Kalos* (‘right’) refers to that which is intrinsically good, proper, and honest. It also carries the idea of being visibly, obviously ‘right,’ as emphasized in its being fitting and proper ‘in the sight of all men. Paul is not speaking of hidden feelings but of outwardly expressed goodness.

Moral evil has to do with the behavior or moral agents, those whom God has created with the faculty of choosing and are therefore capable of obeying or disobeying the commandments of the

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Creator. Today when we are hurt or offended, we are prone to say, ‘It is payback time. What goes around comes around.’ We look for an opportunity to wound the one who has wounded us. We want to get even. In fact, we are very seldom satisfied with getting even. Getting even is simply tying the score. We do not want to get even; we want to get one up. We want to win in the battle of human relationships. Paul says that such a disposition, which reigns in the human heart, is a manifestation of corruption and an example of moral evil. If we are victims of someone’s sin, the flesh wants to get even, and the payback involves us in sin. That is not the way the Christian life is to be. We are not to return evil for evil.

2. Live Peaceably (12:18)

¹⁸*If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.*

The close relation between this exhortation and the last one in v. 17 is obvious: both urge Christians to pursue behavior that will have a positive impact on ‘all people.’ Jesus Himself commended ‘peacemakers’ (Mt. 5:9) and urged His followers to ‘be at peace with one another’ (Mk. 9:50). Although much less clear than the allusions in vv. 14, 17, and 21, this may, then, be another allusion to the teaching of Jesus. Paul’s encouragement to Christians to bless persecutors (v. 14) and not repay evil for evil (v. 17a) assumes that Christians are in conflict with the world around them. To a considerable extent, Paul recognizes, such conflict is inevitable: as the world hated Jesus, so it hates his followers (Jn. 16:33). Paul acknowledges that much such conflict is unavoidable by adding to his exhortation to ‘be at peace’ the double qualification ‘if possible, to the extent that it depends on you.’ But Paul does not want Christians to use the inevitability of tension with the world as an excuse for behavior that needlessly exacerbates that conflict or for a resignation that leads us not even to bother to seek to maintain a positive witness.

This is not the ‘peace at any price’ attitude where we compromise with evil for the sake of a quiet life. Christians should seek peaceful relationships, even with enemies and persecutors, as far as possible.

We all experience broken relationships and significant conflicts with others. Nevertheless, Paul says, we are to live peaceably with all men (cp. Mt. 5:9). The making of peace should be part of our Christian character. We ought to endeavor to live peaceably with everybody. We are warned in the Bible, however, to beware of the peacemakers of the flesh (e.g., Jer. 6:14). Martin Luther described a fleshly peace, one based on falsehood rather than truth, a peace born of cowardice rather than courage. There is a wrong kind of peace, and because of that it is impossible to live at peace with all men. Notice how Paul qualifies his admonition: ‘If it is possible, *as much as depends on you*, live peaceably with all men.’ Paul is addressing a problem that strains possibility to its limit. Our burden is to live peaceably with all men as much as doing so depends on us. When somebody offends us, we can have a spirit of retaliation, revenge, or vengeance, but that only exacerbates the tension and deepens the chasm that separates us from the offender. According to Paul, if somebody offends us, we are not to strike back. Instead, we are to seek peace.

Whether between nations or individuals, peace is two-way. By definition, a peaceful relationship cannot be one-sided. Our responsibility is to make sure that our side of the relationship is right, that our inner desire is genuinely to ‘be at peace with all men,’ even the meanest and most undeserving. Short of compromising God’s truth and standards, we should be willing to go to great lengths to build peaceful bridges to those who hate us and harm us. We must forsake any

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grudge or settled bitterness and fully forgive from the heart all who harm us. Having done that, we can seek reconciliation honestly.

3. Do Not Avenge (12:19)

¹⁹*Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.'*

Paul then escalates his warning, but he does so with a term of affection, 'Beloved.' Paul was not flattering his readers; he loved them and understood their temptations, weaknesses, and struggles for Christian maturity and obedience. When he prefaces his admonition with a term of endearment, he is preparing them for something difficult: 'do not avenge yourselves.' When we are injured, we are not to seek revenge. Once wounded, our deepest natural desire is for revenge. One of the most important concepts we find in the New Testament is vindication. Vindication takes place when someone accused of a crime or an evil is found to be innocent of the charge, or when someone's labor is shown to be of great value after it was ridiculed or scorned. Vindication has to do with justice. Justice is served when innocent people are shown to be innocent and are exonerated of charges brought against them.

'Do not avenge yourselves' moves one step beyond 'do not repay evil for evil' (v. 17a). Confronted with someone who is wronging us, we might be tempted to harm our adversary by doing a similar wrong to him. Perhaps because he understands the strength of this temptation, Paul reminds us that we are 'beloved': people who have quite undeservedly experienced the love of God. Rather than taking justice into our hands, we are to 'give place' to wrath.' But Paul certainly intends to refer to the wrath of God as the definite 'the wrath' and the OT quotation that follows show. It is not our job to execute justice on evil people; this is God's prerogative, and He will visit His wrath on such people when He deems it right to do so. The prohibition of vengeance is found in both the OT and Judaism, but it tends to be confined to relations with co-religionists. Paul's prohibition of vengeance even upon enemies is an extension of the idea that reflects Jesus' revolutionary ethic.

Undergirding this non-retaliatory attitude is the knowledge that God is judge of all, including those who have treated us unjustly. 'Vengeance' for wrongdoing is God's prerogative, not man's, as Paul declares, quoting Deuteronomy 32:35. Thus Paul says, 'Leave wrath to God,' that is, 'give it over to Him.' That is excellent advice, because it is both true and helpful. If we allow ourselves to become embittered by unjust treatment, we destroy ourselves and merely compound the damage and add to the hurt.

Paul buttresses his exhortation to defer to God in matters of retributive justice with an OT quotation highlighting God's determination to exact vengeance. The words are for Dt. 32:35, but the theme is quite widespread, and it might be that Paul has in view some of the other texts enunciating this theme as well (See e.g., Jer. 5:9; 23:2; Hos. 4:9; Joel 3:21; Nah. 1:2). This may explain the cumbersome addition at the end of the quotation, 'says the Lord,' since these words appear in some of the prophetic announcements of God's vengeance.

There is a difference between vindication and vengeance. Vindication reveals innocence whereas vengeance is payback for harm. Vengeance is a desire for revenge. Actually, revenge is not a bad thing. It is a good thing, because God takes revenge. Therefore, revenge in and of itself is not evil. What makes it evil is who undertakes it. Revenge belongs to God, who tells us that we ought not to avenge ourselves. Revenge is God's prerogative to dispense, although He

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delegates to the civil magistrate the responsibility of vengeance, as we will see in Romans 13. In the final analysis vengeance belongs to God. There will be payback. Our offenses will be avenged, but the one who is to do it is God. When God brings vengeance, He brings it perfectly. His justice never punishes more severely than the sin. If vengeance were left to us, our fallen condition is such that we would not be satisfied unless we could inflict more pain than the crime deserves. God never does that. [DSB: consider how the 1919 Treaty of Versailles after WWI inflicted such harsh penalties on Germany – land loss, devastating reparations, sole blame for the conflict – that it inevitably led to the destabilization of Germany, the rise of Hitler, and WWII].

This is supremely radical because it is supremely unnatural. Our conditioned reflex is to hit back. The world says, ‘Common sense demands getting even.’ However, there is a better way, God’s way, and it has two elements. First, *trust God*. We must trust God to work in the lives of the one who has wronged us. Leaving room for His wrath is to leave the vengeance to God, knowing also that He smites in order to heal (Is 19:22). God’s wrath may one day come in ultimate judgment to those who abuse us, but His wrath also brings enemies to repentance in this life. Whatever happens, God will be perfectly equitable. We can trust Him implicitly for this.

4. Heap Burning Coals (12:20)

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.’*

Paul continues quoting the OT: the exhortation in v. 20 is a straightforward rendering of Prov. 25:21-22a. Paul was probably drawn to this text for several reasons. First, the reference to the ‘enemy’ may have attracted his attention since the teaching of Jesus on which he depends throughout these verses exhorts us to ‘love our enemies’ (Mt. 5:43=Luke 6:27). Second, feeding and giving water to our enemy is similar to the action Jesus recommends as the expression of this love: turning the other cheek; giving our shirts to those who ask for our coats; giving to those who beg from us (cp. Luke 6:29-30). And, third, such a response to our enemies is a practical way of putting into action our ‘blessing’ of those who persecute us (v. 14) and a specific form of ‘doing good in the sight of all people’ (v. 17b).

Paul quotes from Proverbs 25:21-22. Providing food and drink is not to be narrowly interpreted. Rather, food and drink symbolize ‘doing good’ in every way. Thus so far from revenge the Christian will endeavor to do whatever good he can do, even for the one who has proved to be the enemy. The unusual words about ‘heaping coals of fire’ are much debated, and probably mean that doing good to enemies ultimately shames them to acknowledge the good that has been done to them.

The text indicates that acting in this way toward the enemy will mean ‘heaping coals of fire on his head.’ What is intended by this imagery is not clear, either in Proverbs or in Paul. Most modern commentators have concluded that Paul views ‘coals of fire’ as a metaphor for ‘the burning pangs of shame.’ Acting kindly toward our enemies is a means of leading them to be ashamed of their conduct toward us and, perhaps, to repent and turn to the Lord whose love we embody. Paul is giving us a positive motivation for acts of kindness toward our enemies. He does not want the prohibition of vengeance (v. 19) to produce in us a ‘do-nothing’ attitude toward our persecutors. However, Paul is not claiming that acts of kindness toward enemies will infallibly bring repentance; whatever degree of shame our acts might produce, they may be quickly pushed aside and produce even greater hostility toward both us and the Lord.

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Second, *do positive good*, as verse 20 exhorts us. There has been much scholarly speculation as to what the final phrase regarding ‘burning coals’ means, but the oldest and simplest explanation is best: in doing good to our enemies, we will heap burning pangs of shame and contrition on their heads that hopefully (not surely) will lead them to God’s grace (e.g., 1 Sam. 24:8-19).

The phrase ‘heap burning coals upon his head’ referred to an ancient Egyptian custom. When a person wanted to demonstrate public contrition, he would carry on his head a pan of burning coals to present the burning pain of his shame and guilt. The point here is that, when we love our enemy and genuinely seek to meet his needs, we shame him for his hatred.

We are to repay our enemy with good rather than evil. We are to repay him with kindness. When we respond to evil with good, we expose our enemy to God’s wrath. If someone persists in treating us evilly while we persist in repaying him with good, we increase our enemy’s guilt before God, although we certainly are not to repay evil with good in order to get evildoers into trouble. The point is that the burden is no longer on us. If we return good for evil, our hands are clean.

5. Overcome Evil (12:21)

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

Paul rounds off his series of admonitions about the Christian’s response to hostility with a final, general summons. The double use of the word ‘evil’ links this verse with v. 17a in a chiasmic arrangement. Evil can overcome us when we allow the pressure put on us by a hostile world to force us into attitudes and actions that are out of keeping with the transformed character of the new realm. Paul urges us to resist such temptation. But, more than that, sounding a note typical both of this paragraph and of the teaching of Jesus that it reflects, he urges us to take a positive step as well: to work constantly at triumphing over the evil others do to us by doing good. By responding to evil with ‘the good’ rather than with evil, we gain a victory over that evil. Not only have we not allowed it to corrupt our own moral integrity, but we have displayed the character of Christ before a watching and skeptical world. Here, Paul suggests at the end of this important series of exhortations, is a critical example of that ‘good’ (*agathos*) which Paul exhorts us to display in this section of the letter (see 12:2).

Paul concludes his admonitions about unjust suffering with the powerful exhortation not to be overcome by evil but to overcome evil with good. We are ‘conquered’ by evil when we engage in counter-punching, in ‘giving back’ what has been meted out to us. We ‘conquer’ evil by overcoming our vengeful instincts and doing good to our enemies instead. This is stark and overwhelming. Surely it is beyond us! We must read these words alongside Paul’s earlier promise that we ‘more than conquer’ enemies natural and supernatural ‘through Him who loved us’ (8:37).

Love in the Church and love in the world go together. They are the demands of our commitment. Our minds have been renewed. Our lives have been transformed. And the Holy Spirit can do all this through us. Are we loving the church? Are we loving the world?

For next time: Read Romans 13:1-7.