

HEALING LOVE

Romans 12:14

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Romans 12:14. I want to do some parallel readings with this verse today. So after I've read it, I'll switch to some words of the Lord as they are found in the Gospel of Matthew and also the Gospel of Luke.

“Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse” (Romans 12:14, NIV).

And Matthew 10: “Be on your guard against men; they will hand you over to the local councils and flog you in their synagogues. On my account you will be brought before governors and kings as witnesses to them and to the Gentiles. But when they arrest you, do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say, for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you. Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child; children will rebel against their parents and have them put to death. All men will hate you because of me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved” (Matthew 10:17–22, NIV).

In regard to the persecution of which Paul speaks, the Lord indicates to His disciples that that persecution would come from four sources. It would come from religion and the synagogues, He indicates. And in councils. Groups of religious people would instigate religious persecution against the disciples. He indicated persecution would come by means of the government, governors and kings. He indicated that persecution would come within families, even violent family action against those who believe. He indicated a fourth source of persecution would be “all men will hate you.”

There is an additional word which the Lord speaks in regard to persecution found in the Gospel of Luke 6, where the Lord indicates in verse 27 (NIV): “But I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you.”

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We talk about persecution, and sometimes—because we don't have it within our society like many Christians in the world are experiencing it today—fail to perhaps realize the emotion that must have been in the Lord when He spoke the words of Matthew and Luke to His friends, to the ones whom He had called, about going through persecution.

I thought, as I read the *Los Angeles Times* yesterday morning about another violent death, of the emotion that comes to us as we try to put ourselves in her parents' and her family's place—as to what they feel toward that person, that they perhaps rightly feel toward the unknown person who ended a life in such a fashion.

Yet the people that Jesus spoke the words to in Matthew 6 would be people who would suffer death by violent hands. Only it would not be an intruder that would steal them away in the night. It would happen before their eyes. Often, it would not be someone unknown. It would be someone within family. He tells them that, in the midst of this kind of human, violent tragedy which they were to experience, that they were to know, on the one hand, that they were to be persecuted. But they would know, on the other hand, that those who persecuted them and cursed them, they were to bless.

Tears must have splashed down the cheeks of Jesus as He warned the disciples of the persecution. It was not an easy thing for Him to do. Persecution on a continuum can go all the way from the violence that we see that happened to the disciples to the other end of the spectrum, where it can simply be a lack of harmonious relationship in life with someone else. Someone who misunderstands you. Someone who criticizes you. Persecution can, in its most violent sphere, be physical antagonism against you expressed in a killing way. But it can be, on the other end of the continuum, the sort of thing where people are wounding you and hurting you by their actions, or in some cases, lack of actions.

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Is there anyone who has a perfectly harmonious relationship with every person who touches your life? Is there anyone whom no one misunderstands, whom no one criticizes, whom no one objects to the way you do things? Is there no one in your life who has ever hurt you or is hurting you now? Is there anyone among us who has never been tempted to even the score with a person who has gotten us, to tell them what we really think, to really hit them with words or with blows?

If there is such a person, you may leave the room. The rest of the sermon will not concern you.

Who is your persecutor? The one who hurt you the most? It may be someone who is close to you in family. It may be someone who is out in the world. It may range, in this spectrum which Jesus taught, from hatred within family to hatred by the world. But to you as well as to me comes the admonition, which we find in Paul's words in Romans 12:14: "Bless those who persecute you.

Bless and do not curse."

Today I want to look with you at the three ways in which we can practice the healing love which Jesus speaks of here in verse 14.

I. The first indication that we can look at which helps us practice the healing love is Paul's word's here repeated from Jesus: "Do not curse."

A classic illustration in the Gospels of what happens when something is cursed is the story of the fig tree in Mark 11:21. The Lord has cursed it, and later the disciples look at it and say, "The fig tree, Lord, which You have cursed, is withered." The Lord did not curse a person. He cursed a thing. When something is cursed, it withers. Words wither, and actions wither.

There is the story from one of the apocryphal gospels—one of the gospels written in a latter century which reportedly was by a disciple, but it wasn't. It was a false gospel. One of the stories in there was when Jesus was a little boy, He used to make things. Like if He wanted to make a bird, He could just scoop up some clay from the ground and make it in the form of a bird and blow some air into it, and off it would fly away. It seems that Christians in some of the early

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centuries were intrigued with what Jesus did as a child. Because the Gospels, other than the one instance when He was twelve, don't tell us anything that He did as a child. So they made up stories. One of the stories was that one day when Jesus was out playing, a playmate bumped into Him. And He didn't like the way He had been jostled, so He stuck out His finger and withered Him, and he vanished.

I use that as an illustration. That's what happens when you curse. The act of cursing makes impossible any future blessing. For what you curse, in your eyes, is in the act of dying. It is going away. You are incapable, once you curse it, of bringing further life or hope or vitality. If you continue cursing, in your eyes, that which you are cursing will continue to wither away. Even within a family relationship, harsh words, if they continue, can negate the possibility of healing or reconciliation. Because as they're being given, the person who is receiving them is withering away from our presence.

The early believers understood this. They understood that if they cursed their persecutors, they would make impossible the hope of their salvation. Therefore, they were to bless because that was the only condition that would make salvation possible.

I have a visual illustration. I think the early believers understood this. At the end of Acts 7 you find the text saying that they rushed against Stephen, and they were gnashing their teeth in rage at what he had said. Stephen's life, was it a mirror? When they, in rage, looked into his face, did they only see rage back in return? Or when they looked into Stephen, did they find not a mirror but, instead, something else—the picture of Jesus Christ reflecting through him? They never saw themselves when they looked at a Christian. They saw another image, the image of Christ.

It is, with us, as difficult a lesson as it is to practice. God has not called us to be mirrors, to simply reflect back the words and the looks that we may receive from someone who's cursing us.

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But to, instead, remember that behind us stands the example of Jesus Christ, who is shining through us.

James notes the impossibility, therefore, of cursing anyone, for the person who is praising God. For, he says, to praise God on the one hand and to curse another person is to be totally inconsistent. “With the tongue,” he says, “we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse men who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brethren, this ought not to be so” (James 3:9-10).

So the first way to have healing love is to end the negative input that we are giving to another person, the tit for tat, the get even in the relationship that makes sure if someone has given us a word, we’ve got to yet speak another word so that the score is now even.

The second thing that we look at if we are to have healing love: Not only in the negative sense, we are to not curse...

II. But in the positive sense, we are to bless by speaking well of another.

The word “bless” literally is the word “eulogy.” When you attend a funeral, what happens? You hear a eulogy. A eulogy is simply a good word. That’s the word in which Paul is using here. Eulogize those who persecute you. Eulogize, and do not curse them. To speak well. To have something good to say.

An illustration of how that happens in a positive sense is when, in the Gospel of Luke, the story of Jesus’ experience and ministry in life has ended and He has been received back into the heavens. The last verse in Luke notes that the disciples were continually in the temple. And the modern translation says, “They were continually in the temple praising God” (Luke 24:53).

But the word is “eulogize.” They were continually in the temple eulogizing God. What do you think they were doing in the temple eulogizing God? They were talking about Jesus. They were saying, “We remember when You did this. We remember when You did that. We remember

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Your great love for us on the cross. What a wonderful God You are to love us. We remember Your great power in the Resurrection. What a fantastic One You are who has broken death's hold." They eulogized God. They were affirming the Lord with their words. This very act of affirming the Lord with words is to be turned around by us to affirm others with words, and even our enemies we are to speak well of.

A question might well arise. Before looking at our enemies, we might ask how we're doing with those who are not our enemies. Because I think love moves out in a radius, and if we're having trouble affirming and blessing the people that are closest to us, it's going to be, as a matter of fact, difficult to love and speak well of those people who are out on the outer perimeter of our lives, who may be persecuting us. I would just ask of myself and of you, "Do we affirm with words the people that are nearest us? Do we speak well of them?"

I think there are two tragedies that occur in family settings. One is the cold shoulder treatment. Silence. We get into a situation in the home where two people, or a whole family, become silent as a way of giving the cold treatment to one another. Do you ever do that?

I can remember one time, earlier in my marriage, that was the first hassle that we really ran into. I had been inordinately busy. Our first child had been born, and through no fault of my own I couldn't help that it was time for the baby to come home from the hospital in the middle of the Spiritual Emphasis Week at the college with Paul Finkenbinder as the guest speaker. That meant I was going morning to night. And, of all things, on a Saturday morning when it was the first chance to be at home with our firstborn, Evangeline, would you believe that Paul Finkenbinder had flown in from Berlin, Germany, and had somehow, when they wrote his ticket months ago, had failed to take into account the weekend of daylight savings time change. We're sitting in our apartment having coffee together. I said, "Now, what time does your plane leave?" He tells me, and it looked like we'd still have a little bit of time. I said, "Does that include daylight savings

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time?” We called the airport, and the plane was getting ready to leave. We got there as the plane was taking off down the runway. That meant I had to drive him to Tulsa that day so he wouldn't miss a speaking engagement that night. That was just symptomatic of all that was to happen the next number of days. It created tension in our relationship. The silence, believe me, is not an affirming kind of experience.

As hard as silence can be, hard words can even be more detrimental. Paul says, within a family relationship or within all human relationships, “Finally brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious. If there is anything worthy of praise, consider these things.” Even within the closest relationships of life, God has called us to let this be a filter for our words. There are some things which are true, but they are not lovely. They are not gracious. And they are not honorable. They do not build up. They tear down.

My wife, if she wanted to, could really do a number on me. I am terribly clumsy around the house. She could just keep reminding me of how clumsy I am. I'm just unable to do anything. I can't hardly chop down a tree right. While that may be true, that is not lovely, and that is not gracious. So she affirms me. This is not to negate, at times, sitting down and having an honest talk with one another and differentiating between when a person is being clumsy or is just sloughing off a responsibility. But the attitude is what is important.

It is so important, not only in the family to be kind to one another with our words—to bless rather than curse—it's important in the Church as well. Here in the body of Christ, we have such a mix of people. Wherever people are mixing together, even when we are Christians there is always the opportunity and the occasion which may come where one or more of us may feel hurt or neglected, or somehow feel that our needs haven't been met, or we have been slighted. This is an occasion where we can practice what Paul is saying here in Romans 12:14: “Bless and not

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curse.” If we are suffering with a need and someone else in the Body has not seen it, or we sense a collective need in the Body and it has not been met, instead of agitating in any way for a course of action to be taken, simply bring it to the Lord in prayer. Then begin to find out ways that we can talk to people that can help us in a blessing sort of a way. And bring our need in a context which will heal rather than harm. I’m so glad to be able to say that in a church where, as I look over the landscape of our affairs, it’s not a word that really needs to be said. It’s a word which you can kind of say is saved for a rainy day.

In a church situation you want to see needs met that you perceive are not being met, or you want God to do something for you. And it’s going to take other people to help do that. It’s important, in progressing in that way, to bless rather than to curse.

If we start out with people nearest us—with family, or in church—then we come finally to those people who have really hurt us. How do we speak well of them? Sometimes to speak well of them doesn’t mean making up false things about them which are not true in order to pass off some phony sort of compliment. It’s very fascinating to watch how Jesus and Peter and Paul approached this matter of blessing those that had persecuted them and had cursed them. Jesus, on the cross, cries out, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.” That was the kindest thing that He could say to His enemies. “They know not what they do” (Luke 23:34). I stagger at that word from the cross, for it seems to me that they well knew what they were doing. That they had deliberate murder in mind, and they had planned it practically from day one when He had first forgiven sins. They were out for His life. Yet on the cross, instead of saying to the Father, “Let My suffering be a token that you will get even with them,” He says, “Forgive them, for they do not know what they do.”

It so happens that in the Old Testament there were two kinds of sins. One was covered by the sacrificial system, and one was not. The sins of a high hand, they were called, were the sins that

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were premeditated in character, like first-degree murder and the like. If a person tried to let a blood sacrifice atone for his crime of premeditated murder, he could be hauled away from the altar and still executed for that was a sin of the high hand, a sin of deliberation. It was a sin he knew, and there was no forgiveness in the sacrificial system for it.

Quite another matter for unwitting sin, or careless sins—for sins of a minor degree. Jesus, when He says to the Father, on the cross, “Forgive them, for they do not know what they do,” is thinking back to that Old Testament system, where those who had been guilty of something premeditated were not exempt by the sacrificial system for that crime. And the Lord is telling His Father, “Don’t let this sin be held against them as one that is premeditated.” He, on the cross, does not curse His enemies, but does what He can to speak well of them.

Peter follows the lead of the Lord when he preaches in Acts 3. Acts 3 closes with: “Now brethren, I know that you acted in ignorance, as also did your rulers.” He uses this phrase, “acting in ignorance.” Speaking a good word to the Father on behalf of the enemies.

Paul says, when he has suffered much from the hands of his fellow countrymen, when he comes to Rome and begins talking to the leadership of the Jewish community of Rome (Acts 28) he says, “I was compelled to appeal to Caesar, although I had no charge to bring against my nation.” In actual fact, when we look at his case we can see many charges he could have brought against his nation in regard to miscarriage of justice. But he takes that moment and says, “I have no charge to bring.” He speaks well.

If there is absolutely nothing good that can be said about a person, maybe it’s well that we say nothing. Unless we speak directly to the person involved. It’s always easy to be circuitous in our conversation about people. We can come to them when we praise them. It seems easy to be direct when we have something to bless. But it is so easy to be indirect when we have something

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to curse. So we're reminded in the Scripture that we're to speak well of others. And if we can't find anything good to say, say as good a thing as we can in regard to those who harm us.

There's even an example in the Book of Jude that's an amazing example to point out. It's something that's somewhat mystical. Jude 9 says, "When the archangel Michael, contending with the devil, disputed about the body of Moses [I won't get into a conjecture of what all that meant, but evidently there was a big hassle of what was going to happen to the body of Moses. The archangel was sent to care for the body of Moses. He disputed with the devil about the body of Moses], he did not presume to pronounce a reviling judgment upon him, but said, 'The Lord rebuke you.'" Even an archangel of God didn't curse the devil. He said, "That's in the Lord's hands to curse you, and I won't provoke a reviling judgment upon you." That's an illustration to say, "If an archangel wouldn't curse the devil, how much more are we not to curse one another, but to let final judgment be reserved in the hands of the Lord?"

So Paul can say, "When reviled, we bless."

So we have healing love as we avoid cursing and as we speak well of another. This healing love. There's also another dimension to the word "blessing" which we should note.

III. That is, thirdly, we bless through our prayers and actions.

Not only through our well speaking, which kind of creates a climate in which it is possible for a person to change. That's Stephen's prayer, "Lord, lay not this sin to their charge" (Acts 7:60).

And that creates the freedom for Saul of Tarsus to have room to be converted and brought into fellowship with God. But we bless through our prayers and our actions.

Prayer makes the blessing of God possible. We see this in a positive context in Luke 24:50.

Describing Jesus at His ascension, he says, "Lifting up his hands, he blessed them. And while he blessed them, he parted from them." What do you think that meant? Does this mean just, "I bless you"? I think He may have said more than that. I think He may have said things like, "My peace

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will go with you now that I am raised from the dead. Be sure that My life will go with you and that you'll never be lonely. And I will be with you. You're not to fear anything. I have overcome the world, and I will overcome the world through you." That He praised them, that He acted toward them in a very verbal way.

So we are to, in regard to evil or reviling, bless. We are to take the stance with Joseph that He had with his brothers. When his brothers meant something harmful against him, Joseph was able to act good toward them and said, "You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good" (Genesis 50). We're to not let grow up a root of bitterness within our lives which festers year after year as we think about persons who have wounded us. A root of bitterness will destroy not only our relationship with that person; it will destroy our relationship with the Lord.

It's striking as you look at Acts 16 to find that the Apostle Paul, in the middle of his second missionary journey—actually toward the forefront of it—had suffered a great deal in getting to where he's at, the city of Philippi. He no sooner gets here, spends a few days, and he's beaten savagely, and he's thrown in jail. He has that opportunity to be a mirror to the people around him and to reflect back their cursing and their beating. Instead, at midnight he and Silas are lifting praises to God. Because they kept clean the line of communication with their persecutors, their line of communication was clean with God. And all of a sudden, it created a condition which made salvation possible.

I have found that it is easy for me to curse people, to run them down, to find their faults. It is so easy for me to do it when I am not praying for them. But the minute I am forced to, in prayer, come to the Lord for them and visually recall them before the Lord, it makes that act of cursing impossible, and negates it. And one can only pray blessing instead.

So the Lord is saying himself, and it is repeated by the Apostle Paul: "Bless those who persecute you. Bless, and do not curse." Invoking blessing upon someone is what I would call a unilateral

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action. We read the words unilateral and bilateral a lot in international treaty relationships and the like. Unilateral is simply when one country decides on its own to initiate an action, regardless of what the response of the other country may be. Then there's unilateral action on the part of an individual. Unilateral comes from two Latin words meaning "one-sided." One-sided action means I can do something without another person's approval, or even their participation. This is what is involved here in blessing. It is unilateral.

It's just like when I name my children. My wife and I decided that we would name our two children Evangeline and George Paul. Because we are parents, we have the right to name our child. We did not choose to let her grow up and then about the age of eighteen say to her, "What would you like to call yourself? You now have the freedom to do that." Right from the beginning, we have chosen unilateral action without her consent and approval, and without anyone else's consent or approval. We have that right reserved for ourselves to give her a name. No one else has anything to say. Whenever anyone ever gives her a shortened nickname, we immediately remind her, "Be proud of your name."

It's fascinating. When you wed that with the concept of blessing in the Old Testament, you find that the patriarchs had a once-and-for-all ability at the end of their life to bless their children. They had the power at the beginning of the child's life to name them. But they have something in their culture that we don't have in ours. When I come to the end of my life, I don't retain to myself some right which I have to do something in the way of blessing for my child before I am gathered to my fathers.

But the Hebrew patriarchs, when they were being gathered to their fathers, would call the children in at the bedside and they would pronounce upon them a once-and-for-all blessing. We know how important this was in Jacob's case. When it is given, it is irrevocable. It was once to give. It wasn't Jacob's and it wasn't Esau's privilege to give. It was Isaac's to give. It was within

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him. Blessing, I think, if I put together the two aspects of parenting in regard to choosing a name for blessing in regard to the patriarchs—using both these models, I have power through the gospel of Jesus Christ to bless everyone that I come into contact with. It is I who have power through Jesus Christ to indicate what those people are going to be to me. I have the power to curse and to defame and to tear down. But if I do that, these people will only wither away from me and I will diminish and wither in return. But I have the power to bless, to give to them something which they don't even participate in. In spite of what you're doing, if you're my persecutor, I retain the right and the privilege to bless you in the Name of the Lord.

You can give the blessing. This is what Paul is saying. Give the blessing. Pass the blessing on to the people near to you, to the people that are for you and against you. It is the very character of God to bless.

When God created man, do you know the first thing He did after He created them? Genesis 1:27 says, "The Lord God created man, male and female he created them, and he blessed them." God retains the right to determine what His attitude is going to be to the human race. So that the first thing that God does when He creates is He blesses.

When man refused to receive the blessing which God provided of life, God chose again in Jesus Christ to bless once more. So that Peter, in preaching His second sermon in Acts 3, says to his audience, "He sent Jesus to bless you, to turn every one of you from your wicked ways unto life." Paul says in Ephesians 1 that "He has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in Christ Jesus." He retains the right to bless us.

Whether or not we, as recipients, choose to be blessed is a matter of our own deciding, knowing that to refuse His blessing is only to opt out for the negative—to be cursed. But He ever stands ready to bless. If He ever stands ready to bless, ought we not also, in the name of Christ, bless each other?

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Bless those who persecute you. Bless, and do not curse.

Closing Prayer

We just take this moment, our heavenly Father, to quiet our hearts. To bring before our minds the images, personalities, of those persons who we are near. To remember those who, perhaps, are against us—who have hurt us, or who have wounded us. Your Word has been sent to us this day, that we might know how we ought to live. Now in our own heart and mind, as we consider these persons that are near us and that are far from us, Your Spirit would show us what we're to do specifically for each one of them. How we are to bless. It may be, Lord, a husband. It may be a wife. It may be a child or a parent. It may be a brother or a sister, or someone within the extended family. It may be someone we work with, or work for, or who works for us. But in Your Name, we seek to bless. We know, Lord, that as we come to that recognition of our need for blessing, that forgiveness begins to flow from our heart. The bitterness begins to leave. Even roots of bitterness—that have been there and grown hard over the years of being ingrained in our life—will dissolve and give way as we call upon You. You who love us so much that on the cross You say, “Forgive them, for they do not know what they do.” You ever stand ready to bless us, to speak well of us. You ever pray for us and act toward us. So we learn from You to do that for one another. In Jesus' Name. Amen.