

DIFFICULT LOVE

Romans 12:17–21

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Romans 12:17-21 (NIV)

“Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: ‘It is mine to avenge; I will repay,’ says the Lord. On the contrary: ‘If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.’ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”

After months in Romans 12, we’re at the end of that chapter today. When we began the chapter, we saw that Paul spoke to us about our relationship with God. “I appeal to you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service” (verse 1).

After we have looked at our relationship to God, then, we are ready as Romans 12 closes to look at our relationship to our enemy. In between the relationship to God and the relationship to our enemy is the relationship in the family of God that we have to one another. In these last few verses in Romans 12, Paul shares with us the ways that we have to experience difficult love. There’s no more difficult love than to love someone who has really hurt you, who has become your enemy.

I. One of the temptations we face in difficult love is to try to even the score.

So Paul says, “Do not return evil for evil. Don’t try to get even. Instead of trying to get even, take thought for what is noble in the sight of all.” Rather obscure language, translated, better might read something like this: “Really think out beforehand what your response is going to be so that it can be a beautiful response.”

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What Paul is saying here is that God did not design our emotions to control us. Rather, our emotions are to be controlled by the Holy Spirit. So that, instead of reacting reflexively to life, we're to act reflectively in life.

When I act reflexively it's like when I go into the doctor's office, and he taps my knee, and my knee promptly jerks out. There is an action that meets an immediate, reflexive response. That's the kind of response like returning evil for evil. My reflex action is to come back at the person who does me wrong.

When I act reflectively, I think in advance, "What provision in my action am I going to take so that what I do is beautiful?" My response can be beautiful.

Not only that, I am to live harmoniously with others so that I don't try to even the score, but as much as possible, I live harmoniously with others. This, "as much as within you" or "if possible, live at peace with others" doesn't mean the kind of statement that says, "I've had just about all I can take and as far as has been possible, I've kept my cool up till now. But I have just reached 99.99 degrees on my rage thermometer, and I am going to let loose. I've found that it wasn't possible." That's not what the apostle means. He means, "As far as other people will let you be at peace, be at peace with them." In other words, the peace responsibility is all on your side. You can't help it if the other person doesn't want to be at peace. But you can help it, in your own heart, to be at peace. It takes two to quarrel. And if one of you is at peace, all the other person is doing is simply talking. Peace is there.

I sometimes think that we don't really take a sufficient account of what Scripture is telling us to do in response to other people. There are things that trip us up and cause us to act reflexively so that we become abrasive or feisty.

I think of our little dog Boomer, a French poodle who is a continual source of sermon illustrations. He is approaching now his twelfth birthday this month. We've noticed something

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lately in his personality which is rather fascinating. We have a neighborhood cat, which visits our backyard from time to time. Boomer has picked up spotting the cat. We've noticed that if we'll say, as we go to the glass door, "Boomer! There's the kitty cat," all of a sudden those lazy muscles in his body become rigid. His tail perks up. His ears are in the air, and he's just clamoring to get out the glass door and chase the cat. We've even found, if we want to get him out from underneath the bed and the cat isn't there, that all we have to do is go to the door and say, "Boomer! Kitty cat!" And off he goes. He's acting reflexively to life.

Sometimes our enemy can be a kitty cat to us. Sometimes something that just ticks us off, a pattern of behavior in someone else that's close to us, can elicit that kind of response which does not live at peace with all. There are times when persons may not let you live at peace. But you can always be at peace in yourself.

II. Closely related to the temptation to even the score with our enemies is the temptation to exclude God from entering in to the relationships that I have with my enemy.

One aspect of that excluding God might be that, by taking retaliation on my enemy, I'm actually taking matters into my own hands. Therefore, not demonstrating faith that God is perfectly capable of taking care of evil and wrong in His universe. So that's why Paul reminds us here, "Vengeance is mine. Beloved, do not avenge yourselves for 'vengeance is mine,' says the Lord" (Romans 12:19). That's a quotation here from Deuteronomy 32. "Vengeance is mine."

What is being said is, from God's point of view, the government is upon God's shoulders, not upon ours. It is He who dispatches justice. It is He who will even the scales of justice so there is equity. We get in His way when we try to assume the role of God in judging and in striking back. So Paul says here in regard to vengeance that we are to leave it to the wrath of God. Literally, he says, "Give place to the wrath of God." That means that instead of standing in God's place, step out of the circle and let God occupy His place and let God visit the punishment.

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We know from the Book of Romans that the wrath of God is exhibited in several ways. For the non-Christian, it's exhibited in the fact that God lets us live with the consequences of our actions.

If you sow lust, you cannot reap love. You sow selfishness, you cannot reap love. When we come to the new birth, Jesus makes everything new so that suddenly it's possible to plant new seed and get new fruit. But the wrath of God simply allows us to live with our choices till we come to Christ and the process is reversed. The wrath of God is reserved for the end of the age when God judges finally with equity and justice.

If it's a matter that needs to be decided in this world, I'm not to take a vigilante action to do it on my own. Paul says in Romans 13 that the government is the agent of the wrath of God. That if it's a criminal matter, that kind of matter, then leave it to the government. He says don't take that action yourself. That circle of judgment belongs to God and you simply demonstrate lack of faith in God if you attempt to get even or retaliate against your enemy.

Not only that, but Paul tells us that if we try to exclude God from the process of relating to our enemy, what happens is that we fail to participate in God's plan of salvation for our enemy. For God loves our enemy. "God so loved all the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but everlasting life" (John 3:16). That means God loves my enemy as much as He loves me.

So Paul tells us here, quoting from Proverbs 25: "If you see your enemy is hungry, give him something to eat. If you see that he is thirsty, give him something to drink." In other words, instead of retaliating against your enemy—watching for his flaws and pouncing on them—instead, look at the needs in your enemy's life and respond to those needs and seek to meet them. As you do, you'll be putting coals of fire upon his head. That's kind of an odd picture. Coals of fire upon the head? Here we're trying to be kind to our enemy, and all of a sudden we're dumping a bunch of hot coals on his head? What does that mean? Kindness has finally got even?

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Kill him with kindness? That's really not what Paul means here. He's quoting from Proverbs 25. Several commentators on the Proverbs point out that it was an Egyptian practice, ritual, that when a person in public gave evidence of penitence or repentance, he would often put a pan of burning coals upon his head and begin carrying it around to indicate his remorse over the way he had treated someone. That's probably where the Proverbs reference comes from. Burning coals upon his head really means, not that you're trying to kill your enemy with kindness, but your kindness will illicit the kind of response that says on the enemy's part, "I really feel sorry. I'm really ashamed for the way I treated that person." And of course, shame is what leads to real repentance, the changing of mind, the changing of life. When real repentance has occurred, then the shame can be lifted. So what Paul is saying is watch for your enemy's level of need, minister to that level of need, and it should elicit a sense of shame and remorse, which then we could go on and say could lead to repentance and conversion and a new life and reconciliation.

III. The third temptation, in addition to the temptation to even the score and the temptation to exclude God from the picture, the third temptation is to be conquered by evil.

That's why Paul says here, "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Romans 12:21).

I think back several months ago to a late-night phone conversation I had. I had attempted to be a third party in a dispute, and had not been too successful in arbitrating it. One of the parties was especially offended and called me late that night and read me the riot act, threatened me with civil litigation, called me some names which I won't repeat. I realized that the real problem in this relationship was with this particular person, and tried in a gentle but firm way to point out that they were always scapegoating and blaming someone else for their problems. And that the problem lay at their own door. When this attack occurred on me, I responded in volume. I came

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back very strongly to the other person, and I thought during the course of the conversation that I had responded in “righteous” anger. Why is it when *I’m* angry it’s always *righteous*, but when *someone else* is angry it’s *not*? When I hung up the phone, I was shaking. I realized, as soon as the conversation was ended, that I had been overcome with evil. I had responded in kind. I knew that the only thing left for me to do, even though it would be misunderstood, was to sit down and write a note of sincere apology saying that while what I had said was right, my spirit was wrong in which I spoke. As soon as I did that, I had the release. I hadn’t let evil overcome, but good had overcome evil.

When you try to match word for word, evil for evil, you always come out on the losing end. You cannot respond with hate and anger in life. It will fill you. It will devastate you. It will push everything out. The hurts of life are to be lanced with forgiveness and healing. Peter says: “To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. ‘He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.’ When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly” (1 Peter 2:21–23, NIV).

He did not yell down from the cross, “Get even with them, Father!” He said, “Forgive them.”

This beautiful twelfth chapter of Romans has led us all the way from our relationship to God, our relationship to our brothers and sisters in the Lord, to our relationship to our enemy. It’s a family chapter. A chapter for those in the family of God. What people are to live like when they’re in the family of God.

Just a simple question to ask as we close this time today. Are you in the family of God? Suppose that you had been born to a very wealthy and loving family, but when you were baby you had been kidnapped by some unscrupulous people. You had been taken away to live in a very dark and dingy, hate-filled atmosphere. You’d grown up with bad manners, bad temper, and a certain

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kind of desperateness in life. Sometime, reaching the age of adulthood, you are discovered. Your real family finds you and says, “All these years we’ve been looking for you. Will you come back and be part of our family? Will you share in the life and the beauty, the assets, the warmth of relationships of our family? It’s all yours. You belong to us. Will you come back?” What do you think you would say? That you want to stay with the kidnappers, or that you want to come to your real family?

That’s what Romans is talking about. Two families on earth: the family of Adam and the family of Jesus Christ. We started out in life, mankind was created good and upright. He was carried captive into sin, kidnapped, lost, broken, bad manners, bad habits, despair, grief, loneliness, hatred, and exile. Jesus came into our life to tell us who our real Father was. To bring us into the family of God, where we get a new name, new possessions. We become heirs, and we live and act like a member of the family of God. There is no greater thing in all the world than to be in the family of God.