

Sam Storms

Enjoying God Ministries

Romans #51

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God and Getting Even

Romans 12:17-21

If a person didn't know anything about human nature, he might look at all of us today and conclude that we have very little in common. We don't all look alike, dress alike, walk or talk alike. Well, maybe in Oklahoma we all talk alike, but you get my point. Each of us has his or her own distinctive personality, unique likes and dislikes, all of which might lead someone to think that we are fundamentally different from one another.

But those of us who do know something about human nature realize that, notwithstanding the outward differences among us, inside we are all very much the same: we are sinners. And because we are sinners, we share certain characteristic features that go to make up what we call human nature. For example, we are all fundamentally selfish. We all, to some degree, lust for power and recognition. We all, at some time or other, experience envy and jealousy, bitterness and resentment, anger and hatred. There is simply no escaping the fact that no matter how much we may differ on the outside, we are all very much the same on the inside.

Here in Romans 12:17-21 the apostle Paul describes one particular characteristic of human nature that we all share, at least to some degree, one universal feature from which no one can claim always to be exempt. I have in mind that insatiable, ever-present, inescapable, irrepressible desire in the heart of every man and woman to get even. Whether we like to admit it or not, we are a vengeful people. We love to get even. We love to retaliate. We love to experience the sinful satisfaction that comes from revenge.

For some people it is so basic to their nature that they put bumper stickers on their cars that read: "Don't get mad. Get even!" One that I especially like reads, "Avenge yourself! Live long enough to be a Problem to your Children." You probably don't know this about me, but I love the old Andy Griffith show with Don Knotts as Barney Fife. There is one episode that beautifully illustrates what Paul is talking about here. Andy and his young son, Opie, engage in a conversation that goes something like this:

Andy: "Where are you going son?"

Opie: "Over to Jerry Parker's. Me and him are making a trade: his roller skates for my licorice seeds."

Andy: "Licorice seeds? What are licorice seeds? And where did you get them?"

Opie: "On another trade with Tommy Farrell. I gave him my cap pistol."

Andy: "Your new one?"

Opie: “Yeah. And it would have been worth it to grow my own licorice sticks. But it was a fake. I planted them, but nothing came up. Pa, I think Tommy cheated me.”

Andy: “Yes, son, I’d say so. So now you’re gonna’ pawn ‘em off on the next fella?”

Opie: “Yeah. And on a better trade too! Roller skates are a lot better than a cap pistol.”

Andy: “You know you’ve been taught the Golden Rule, ‘Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.’ Do you think you’ve been living by it?”

Opie: “Sure, Pa. Tommy did it unto me and now I’m gonna’ do it unto Jerry!”

The apostle Paul was no stranger to the alluring power of revenge and retaliation. He was human just like the rest of us. It was a sin that he had to deal with no less than we do today. There may be nearly 2,000 years of history separating us from the Christians in Rome to whom Paul wrote this letter, but when it comes to “getting even” we are all united. And that is why Paul wrote what he did in Romans 12:17-21.

Private vs. Public Vengeance

A lot of confusion has come out of these verses due to the failure of some to recognize that Paul is here concerned solely and exclusively with our private, individual relations with one another. He is not addressing the responsibility of the state or the police or the military or our courts of law. ***We must keep in our minds the differing responsibilities of the private and the public spheres of authority.***

The Bible often times tells the individual to do something that it would never tell the state to do. Conversely, the state has rights and prerogatives and an authority that are expressly forbidden to the individual. Some have mistakenly concluded that what Paul says here in 12:17-21 is to govern the actions of the state. You can see from these verses that Paul clearly forbids vengeance, retaliation, or paying back evil for evil. From this, some have erroneously concluded that complete and unqualified pacifism is required of all believers. The fact of the matter is that in Romans 13 Paul will address the responsibilities of the state, of government. And he will make it quite clear that there are things God has authorized the state to do that he has forbidden the Christian individual to do.

My point is simply that we must recognize the difference between what belongs to the realm of public jurisprudence, on the one hand, and what belongs to private, personal relationships, on the other. Do not make the mistake of thinking that what the Bible forbids the individual from doing it forbids the state from doing. There are things that our government must do that we as individuals must not do. And there are things that we as individuals must do that our local, state, and national government cannot.

In summary, we must be careful that we do not apply the principles of Romans 12:17-21 to the government, or the principles of Romans 13:1-7 to the individual. Each has its own sphere of authority, its own unique responsibilities.

Six Exhortations

As I read this passage, I can identify no fewer than six exhortations or commandments. Let us take each one in turn.

First, “repay no one evil for evil” (v. 17a). Paul says virtually the same thing in 1 Thessalonians 5:15 – “See that no one repays anyone evil for evil” (see also 1 Cor. 4:12-13; 1 Peter 3:9; Prov. 20:22; 24:29).

But what about the OT law which commands “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth?” Are the OT and the NT in conflict with each other? No. Here is what the OT says:

(17) Whoever takes a human life shall surely be put to death. (18) Whoever takes an animal’s life shall make it good, life for life. (19) If anyone injures his neighbor, as he has done it shall be done to him, (20) fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth; whatever injury he has given a person shall be given to him (Leviticus 24:17-20).

This came to be known as the *lex talionis*, or the law of retaliation. The point of this law was to ensure that punishment was proportionate to the offense. The penalty must fit the crime. The phrase “eye for an eye” was itself simply a formula. Rarely if ever was it literally applied. It meant only that compensation had to be appropriate to the loss incurred.

For example, the man who killed an ox didn’t necessarily have to replace it with another ox. He could pay its owner enough for him to buy another. Only in the case of premeditated murder was compensation forbidden. In the case of a murderer, “a life for a life” was literally demanded (Num. 35:16-34).

The second thing to remember is that the *lex talionis* was not only fair and just, it was also extremely effective. It was immensely successful in preventing blood feuds and tribal warfare. Do you recall this conversation between Huckleberry Finn and Buck?

“What’s a feud, Buck?”

“Why, where was you raised, Huck? Don’t you know what a feud is?”

“Never heard of it before – tell me about it.”

“Well,” says Buck, a feud is this way: A man has a quarrel with another man, and kills him; then that other man’s brother kills him; then the other brothers, on both sides, goes for one another; then the cousins chip in – and by and by everybody’s killed off, and there ain’t no more feud. But it’s kind of slow and takes a long time.”

That is precisely what the *lex talionis* was designed to prevent. If the initial offense is met with a fair and proportionate penalty, that’s the end of the matter.

Finally, this particular law fell within the domain of public, civil justice. It was not a law endorsing personal revenge. ***The intent of the law of retaliation was to undermine the personal vendetta.*** It was an

instrument of the court, a means of satisfying the legal demands and penal sanctions of the state. Again, we must be careful that we do not transfer to our private affairs a law which carried force only in the public domain.

The simple fact is that there is no command in Scripture that is more contrary to our nature than the one given to us by Paul here in Romans 12. “Revenge,” wrote James Denney, “is the most natural and instinctive of vices.” Why? Pride! I am persuaded that if it were not for human pride Paul would never have had to write these words. After all, what is revenge and retaliation? What motivates it? I think the answer is wounded pride and the sinful lust to vindicate ourselves.

So remember, Paul’s words here are not designed to undermine the principle of justice or to forbid you from longing that the perpetrator be held accountable for his/her actions. Those who sin against you or do evil to you will be recompensed appropriately. But it must either be by the state or ultimately by God. It must never come from us in an effort to get even.

But there is more to v. 17 than simply resisting the urge to strike back at someone who has done some evil to you. You may be able to obey the command in v. 17 simply by gritting your teeth and through sheer willpower resist the temptation to strike out at those who have hurt you. But that isn’t enough. Back in v. 14 Paul said that we are to “bless” those who persecute us and do evil to us. It’s clear, then, that he’s concerned with more than your external actions. He cares even more about the attitude of your heart. To bless your enemy involves more than how you treat him/her. It also includes the longings or desires you have toward him/her. Don’t curse them. Pray for their good. Pray that they will come to Christ and flourish as a believer.

Second, “give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all” (v. 17b). Some think Paul is referring to those principles of equity and goodness which all men, even unbelievers, recognize as right and honorable. After all, even the unbeliever has a conscience by which he is able to know what is right (Romans 2). But I’m more inclined to think that Paul has in view Christians who are to take thought for, aim at, seek after in the sight of all people those things that the Bible says are good, even if others don’t recognize them to be good. When he refers to what is “honorable” he means the principles of God’s Word. We are to be diligent to preserve our reputation and image in the sight of unbelievers as we stand firmly for the truths of Scripture, whether they recognize and agree with those truths or not.

Third, “if possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all” (v. 18). I love how the Word of God is both idealistic and realistic. Its idealism is seen in the exhortation to “live peaceably with all.” That’s what we should aim for. But its realism is seen when Paul adds the phrase, “if possible.”

Let’s examine the realistic element in this exhortation. What does Paul mean when he says, “if possible, so far as it depends on you”? This does not refer to an inability arising from our weakness. In other words, Paul isn’t saying, “Hey folks, I realize that some of you have a quick temper, a short fuse, and that you struggle to restrain your impulse to get even. I realize that in your case it simply isn’t possible for you to live peaceably with others.” No. Paul is not giving us a loophole or excuse in case we can’t control ourselves. The impossibility here is not subjective, in ourselves, but objective, in others.

I think there are two instances in which we may not be able to be at peace with all men. The first is when the spirit or temperament of the other person makes it impossible. We are not masters of the feelings of others. We cannot control what they feel or do or how they will react. Sometimes it simply isn't possible to be at peace with them because *they* refuse to be at peace with us! This is the force of the phrase, "so far as it depends on you." We can exercise restraint. We can control ourselves. We can do things which make for peace. So, if disharmony is to exist, be sure that it isn't *your* fault.

The second factor that may make living peaceably with others impossible is when peace comes only at the expense of purity or truth. Where biblical truth is at stake, peace must be sacrificed. If the only way I can live peaceably with a person living out a homosexual lifestyle is to affirm the moral legitimacy of their decision, then peace must go. If the only way I can be at peace with another pastor in this city is to deny that salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, then peace must take a back seat. *We are never permitted to be at peace with sin or falsehood.* If our pursuit of peace leads to moral compromise or tempts us to negotiate the gospel, so much the worse for peace. Sometimes, sanctification leads to conflict. Sometimes, peace and purity cannot coexist.

Fourth, "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'" (v. 19). This exhortation is almost identical to the one in v. 17 but with the added command to "leave it to the wrath of God." The words "of God" are not in the original Greek text. That has led some to think that the "wrath" in view is ours. But the very point of the prohibition is that we are not to show anger or wrath in retaliation against our adversary.

Some say the "wrath" in view is the judicial wrath of the state as described in Romans 13:1-7. But the second half of v. 19 would seem to indicate that the wrath is indeed "God's" wrath. Paul's point is that we should not seek to exact revenge or impose justice on our enemies, even if we are in the right and they are in the wrong. Why? Because God will see to it that justice is served. Permit him to exact his judgment and retribution as he sees fit and at the appropriate time. That may occur in this lifetime, but if not, it will surely occur at the final judgment, in the age to come.

So, when Paul tells us not to seek our own vengeance, he is not saying there will be no justice. He couldn't have been clearer in v. 19 when he says that *God will repay*. Either your adversary will repent in this life and trust Christ to be forgiven for the wrongs done against you and others, or your enemies' debt will be paid in hell. Justice is often inconsistent or fleeing or altogether absent in this life. But not ultimately. *All wrongs will be punished. All sins will be judged. Either they are judged and punished in the person of your substitute, Jesus Christ, on the cross, or they are judged and punished in the person who commits them in hell.*

If you are bothered by the fact that God is not only gracious and forgiving to those who repent but also holy and just toward those who don't, you need to reckon with repeated declarations in Scripture such as these:

"The Lord is a jealous and avenging God; the Lord is avenging and wrathful; the Lord takes vengeance on his adversaries and keeps wrath for his enemies" (Nahum 1:2).

“He avenges the blood of his children and takes vengeance on his adversaries” (Deut. 32:43; cf. Isaiah 59:17).

And there are dozens more just like those in both the old and new testaments. This doesn't mean you are to gloat over the final judgment of your enemies. We are not to feel glad or rejoice over their demise. Proverbs 24:17-18 makes this clear: “Do not rejoice when your enemy falls, and let not your heart be glad when he stumbles, lest the Lord see it and be displeased, and turn away his anger from him.”

Fifth, forbearance or refusing to seek vengeance is only half the story. It isn't enough merely to refrain from retaliation. It is not enough simply to control the impulse to get even. The Christian must take steps to do good to those who seek our harm. This brings us to our fifth exhortation: ***“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”*** (v. 20).

This exhortation is clearly a reference to Proverbs 25:21-22. There we read:

“If your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat, and if he is thirsty, give him water to drink, for you will heap burning coals on his head, and the Lord will reward you” (Prov. 25:21-22).

Some believe the “burning coals” is a reference to divine wrath and judgment (see Psalm 11:6; 140:10). In other words, we are to act kindly to them, for in doing so we increase their guilt and magnify the punishment they will ultimately endure at the hands of God. Or perhaps Paul is simply describing the inevitable result of our kind deeds. But that seems to run counter to v. 21.

Are the “burning coals” a symbol of the irritation and aggravation our enemy will experience when he sees us respond to his evil with good? We might like to think so, but it seems unlikely. After all, isn't that just a round-about way of getting even after all?

Perhaps Paul is describing the burning sense of shame and remorse our enemy feels when he sees how his evil has been met with kindness. Or the burning coals might be a metaphor for the melting down of his anger by the power of our mercy. There was an ancient Egyptian ritual in which a man would give public evidence of his repentance by carrying a pan of burning charcoal on his head. Could this be what Paul means? Whatever the case, Paul's point seems to be that the best way to handle an enemy is to transform him into a friend.

Not everyone likes this advice from the apostle. After all, it's one thing for Paul to tell us not to punch an enemy in the nose. It's something else entirely for him to tell us that we should do them good. But that is what Paul is saying, and in doing so he appears to be echoing the teaching of Jesus. When Jesus addressed himself to the problem of anger, he let it be known that suppressing your enmity was a bare minimum. It isn't enough just to control the outward display of your feelings, all the while permitting the spirit of alienation and animosity to fester secretly and out of sight in your soul. See Matthew 5:21-24. He also said in the Sermon on the Mount:

“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, ‘Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you’” (Matt. 5:44; Luke 6:27-31).

But why should I love my enemy? One reason is because God loved you when you were his enemy (Rom. 5:10-11)! ***When you love your enemies, you display for all the world to see a little bit of what God is like.*** When we love and pray for and bless those who hate and persecute us and do all manner of wrong to us we put on display not our own glory, but God’s.

An Illustration of the Principle in the Life of Jonathan Edwards (1703-58)

If anyone seemed justified in “getting even” it was Jonathan Edwards, Puritan pastor in eighteenth-century Northampton, Massachusetts. In December 1748, Edwards informed a man who applied for church membership that he must be born again before he could partake of the Lord’s Supper. That sounds routine for us today, but in 18th century New England it was revolutionary. Up until Edwards took his stand, no credible profession of faith was required. Edwards went so far as to write an entire book defending his position, but the governing church council refused to even read it.

Edwards also provoked the anger of several in his congregation when he spoke publicly about the practice of what they called “bundling.” Bundling was the habit of the young people who would wrap themselves up in blankets and engage in what can only be called intense sexual foreplay. Edwards also objected to what were called the “bad books.” Some young man had obtained a midwife’s manual that contained portrayals of women’s bodies. Several teenagers made use of this manual to mock and make fun of the young women in the town, among whom were Edwards’s own daughters. His only mistake was in naming from the pulpit on a Sunday those who had been caught, without differentiating between those suspected of the indiscretion and those actually guilty of it.

Many of the businessmen in the town were angry with him because of his repeated appeals from the pulpit that they cease their dishonest ways of conducting business. Cheating their customers and defrauding the poor greatly angered Edwards.

Then there was the incident when the church was rebuilt. The wealthy, influential, land-holding citizens in Northampton insisted that they be assigned the best seats up front, while all others had to sit in the back or in the balcony. Edwards was furious and made it clear that this was a violation of James 2:1-7. He wanted those seats to be given to the poor and the elderly. On top of all this, Edwards again angered the leaders of the church when he requested a salary increase. But if you had 11 children like Edwards and his wife Sarah, you might have made the same request!

The pressure on Edwards and his family grew increasingly intense. You can sense this from a letter he wrote to a friend:

“I need God’s counsel in every step I take and every word I speak; as all that I do and say is watched by the multitude around me with the utmost strictness and with eyes of the greatest uncharitableness and severity, and let me do or say what I will, my words and actions are represented in dark colors, and the state of things is come to that, that they seem to think it greatly concerns them to blacken me and represent me in odious colors to the world to justify their own conduct – they seem to be sensible that now their character can’t stand unless it be on the ruin of mine. They have publicly voted that they will have no more sacraments; and they have no way to justify themselves in that but to represent me as very bad. I therefore desire, dear sir, your fervent prayers to God. If he be for me, who can be against me? If he be with me, I need not fear ten thousand of the people. But I know myself unworthy of his presence and help, yet would humbly trust in his infinite grace and all sufficiency.”

In any case, on July 22, 1750, after serving the church for 24 years, Jonathan Edwards was fired. Rarely has a man been treated more unjustly than was Edwards. Yet he refused to strike back. He was determined to obey Paul’s counsel here in Romans 12. He refused to repay evil for evil. One church member who was sympathetic to Edwards described his reaction to being fired:

“That faithful witness received the shock, unshaken. I never saw the least symptoms of displeasure in his countenance the whole week, but he appeared like a man of God, *whose happiness was out of the reach of his enemies* and whose treasure was not only a future but a present good, overbalancing all imaginable ills of life, even to the astonishment of many who could not be at rest without his dismissal.”

How did Edwards find the strength and courage to resist the powerful temptation to be “overcome by evil”? You just heard his answer: his happiness “was out of the reach of his enemies.” In his final sermon on July 1, 1750, he was concerned far more with the needs of his congregation than his own. As one biographer of Edwards said, “No congregation was ever spoken to more tenderly than the people of Northampton on July 1, 1750.”

This brings us to the sixth and final exhortation from Paul.

Sixth, and finally, Paul tells us, *“do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good”* (v. 21). This is simply a short summation of everything he’s said in vv. 17-20. To be overcome by evil is to allow your enemy to get your goat. It is to allow him/her to cripple your joy in Jesus and your commitment to do good. It is to give them the power to induce worry, resentment, anger, and depression in you rather than the joy and peace of knowing that we are eternally forgiven in Christ. In telling us not to be overcome by evil he means that we must guard our hearts lest we be enticed into retaliation and revenge.

You are overcome by evil whenever you allow yourself to justify ignoring the commands of vv. 17-21 by reminding yourself of how much harm an individual has caused you. It is to let the pain of their persecution triumph over the peace and freedom and joy of knowing you are fully and eternally forgiven.

Conclusion

I'd like to conclude by making application of this text to the way we pray for the persecuted church around the world. Many who serve Christ in challenging places are daily faced with persecution and slander and the threat of imprisonment and even death. If you have ever struggled to identify with our brothers and sisters in such contexts and have wondered how you might pray for them, Paul's exhortations here in Romans 12 are a good place to begin. Intercede for them that God might supply the humility and grace and strength to resist retaliating and to display the mercy and kindness of God himself by enduring whatever hatred and mistreatment they may face.