

Romans 12:17-21

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[0:00] Well, good morning. Thank you, man, for leading us again so well this morning. Rich songs that! Prep and bring encouragement to my soul in preparation to preach. Would you open up your! Bibles to the book of Romans chapter 12. And we're going to continue the study that we've been in. If you haven't been with us, we've been in Romans for a good amount of time. We'll be here for a while. But after today starts the sabbatical season for a couple of our pastors, and we'll be taking a short break after that. Well, last week we were served tremendously, as Jake helped us to consider what your Bible refers to as the marks of the true Christian from verses 9 through 16.

And by the way, a very quick overview. Paul has labored thus far in the book of Romans to demonstrate the wonder of God's kindness directed towards those who are condemned by their sin. We know judgment stood against us pending. Our hope was vanquished, and an insurmountable list of offenses against the reigning king grew in our accounts. And it was at this time, according to Romans chapter 5 verse 6, that Christ came and he died for the ungodly. And this great salvation, accomplished according to God's sovereign purposes, has resulted in a brand new people. That is us who gather by faith this morning in the work of cross. This is a brand new harvest of those who by grace and through faith enjoy the gift of justification as object of God's loving affection. So, furthermore, in chapter 12, we've been in this over the last month or so, we have been reminded that walking in this grace is only because of the work of the Holy Spirit within local bodies. You see, it's the Holy Spirit that applies the gospel to the heart.

He equips the body with varying gifts to build up one another in love for the praise and the renown of the Lord. And yet today, we arrive at a sobering topic, one that Paul directs our attention towards. And it's this, the difficult opposition that remains and is ongoing. And this is the opposition that not only exists vertically from creature to the creator, but also exists horizontally between fallen creatures and the new creation, the church, the seed of the woman against, sorry, the seed of the serpent against the seed of the woman. Now, Paul, as we know, has been subjected to great wrong that is done against him at the hands of evil men. So, Paul knows the temptation that our flesh feels when wrongdoing is directed towards us. He has experienced bodily, physical mistreatment. He's been ridiculed and mocked and abandoned at the hands of men. And he knows that there's an urge that lies very close to the human heart, one that you have felt and I have felt even this week. The desire to respond to injustice with anger and self-vindication. Perhaps this timely word this morning arrives at a time that you yourself have struggled in your response when exposed to the sin of others. Perhaps God, by the power of his word, intends to break you from your faithless anger that you feel when others wrong you. So, just a few questions to prepare us to receive the weight of our text. As you think of your life, have you expressed trust trust in the Lord when he allows you to be mistreated by spouses, by children, by friends, or by co-workers? Do you trust God when you hear your name being mentioned in a conversation, not a positive one?

And do you trust the Lord when you've been sharing the good news with someone faithfully? And their response, once again, is not only rejection, but perhaps accusations against you. So, in light of these expected circumstances, our text calls us this morning to deep and abiding faith that God alone is able to properly account for all wrongdoing. We are called to trust that one day righteous judgment will be applied by him according to his wise and glorious purposes. And we are called to trust that we have been given the assignment to be ambassadors of reconciliation, not ambassadors of wrath. Let's open and read our text together. Our verses this morning will be verses 17 through 21, but we'll back up just a few more more verses to verse 9 to not interrupt

Paul's development.

[5:45] God's word says this, let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil, hold fast to what is good, love one another with brotherly affection, outdo one another in showing honor. Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer, contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality. Bless those who persecute you, bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice. Weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly and never be wise in your own sight.

Now our verses for this morning. Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

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

So we have two primary points this morning that I intend to show you from our text and a few other sub points. The first main point is seeking the honor of God with our conduct.

And the second, responding to evil with both wrath and with grace in mind. Now let's focus our attention on the significance of what we see in verse 17. It's described as honorable conduct.

[8:07] Again, our text says, Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. So our text reminds us that the initial and prominent responsibility of Christians when encountering evil is to resist the inclination to pay it back in kind.

To return evil for evil is the easy and the natural inclination that many of us feel. This is kind of similar, something that we've been trained by.

When you are exposed to a physical attack, think of the things that you first do. Self-protect, defense, preparation against a future attack, even vocalizing your disapproval of the behavior we have experienced.

We do that as well. We recall, though, that Jesus instructs us away from these types of responses in the Sermon on the Mount.

Now, you've heard that it was said, An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. But I say to you, do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.

[9:28] So Paul picks up this same theme, and he urges readers to resist responding with self-interest as our great priority and instead to strive towards the putting on of honorable conduct.

So we must ask ourselves, why is this the case? What does Paul mean by instructing Christ's followers to acting honorably in the sight of all? And why is outward conduct important to Paul when God's enemies seem to be getting away with wounding God's people?

First, it's helpful for us to understand what honorable conduct is that's described here. And conduct is normally thought of as the package of outside, outward behavior.

The things that you do on the outside, which can be observed and seen and witnessed by other people. The moral behavior that either conforms or does not conform to a certain set of rules.

That's what we think about with conduct. But we can see here that Paul means more than just commending outward behavior. Because he attaches a very important word that is intended to show the essence of how all conduct is to be pursued.

[10:56] So honorable refers to what is valued on the inside, which deserves recognition in our behavior on the outside.

The focus here of outward is on outward behavior, but it also refers to what we value internally. Now, it's helpful for us to just think of a couple other familiar verses in God's word that help us to take a broader look at how the word honor is used.

The exhortation to act honorably actually appears earlier in chapter 12, verse 10. Remember that it says, In this passage, brotherly honor is commended because this is where God has assigned value and worth.

God has valued the brethren. He has purchased and redeemed a group of people that belong to him at the cost of his son's sacrifice.

Therefore, the brethren are deserving of our honor. We see another example in the fifth commandment. Here God instructs Israel to honor fathers and honor mothers.

[12:21] Again, this is helpful because it locates honor as a derivative of what God himself esteems and what he values. So honor is not primarily about maintaining respectful standards or guidelines.

It's not about a moral code, although it may include that. But it's more directly about pointing us towards that which is worthy of being held to the highest honor, even in the face of opposition by God's enemies who question God's honor.

Consider for a moment with me a text you may have heard from the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah 42, verse 8 says, I am the Lord.

That is my name, my glory. I give to no other, nor my praise to carved idols.

This pursuit of God's own honor never changes in the providential outworking of his plan. John chapter 5, verse 21 through 23.

[13:39] For as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whom he will. For the Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son for this purpose, that all may honor the Son, just as they honor the Father.

We see even the judgment of God is carried out in a way that is purposely meant to ascribe honor to the value of Christ.

God indeed holds righteous jealousy for the honor of his name, and it's a good thing that he does. The honor of his faithful character, the honor of his saving work in Christ, is our theme as well. And he desires that this honor should be held in the highest regard when things are going well, or when we are exposed to the sinful outworking, the evil rebellion that sometimes the Lord has called us to. You see, there's more at stake in responding to evil than we normally think of. The goal is not just to avoid losing our cool.

[15:05] As Jake reminded us last week, there's an expectation that evil will be the regular course for all Christians in their discipleship.

It ought not to surprise any one of us when we're faced with frequent opportunities to express honor to God as we encounter evil.

Romans 12, 14 says, Bless those who persecute you. Bless and do not curse them. 2 Timothy 3, Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life will be persecuted.

Notice the certainty of that expectation. And Acts 14, 22 says, Strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying through many tribulations, we must enter the kingdom of God.

Bearing with evil, then, is not an accident. It's not an inconvenience. It's not a mistake. It is an intentional tool the Lord uses to reveal the surpassing worth, glory, and honor of His name.

[16:24] So why so much focus already on this one word, honor? Well, if we are honest too often, honor for God is the furthest thing from our minds when we are exposed to wrongdoing.

Instead, we labor for other things that we value more in the moment. We cling to the esteem and respect that we feel entitled to and deserving of.

And instead of honor for God, we replace honor for ourselves. Do you recognize this tragic replacement even in your own responses as of late?

Every time we object with outward conduct, which seeks to repay evil for evil, we grasp for honor for ourselves above honor for God.

Let's continue forward by looking at the last few verses and the last few words in verse 17 and into 18. Give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all.

[17:44] If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. At first glance, this seems like a very difficult instruction for us to follow, if you notice what Paul is saying.

Uphold God-honoring behavior in the sight of your adversaries. Isn't this a wasted endeavor? They aren't going to see God's value because they are spiritually blind, you might think.

The same goes for living peaceably among those who do not value peace and rather seek for discord. Doesn't Paul understand his own words in Ephesians chapter 2?

In Ephesians 2, he says that you are dead in your trespasses. And these are those that we are called to honor God amongst.

But the point that Paul is implying is that when God chooses to save and to redeem, to rescue the lost, he often does so through the conduct of his children as downstream grace from the cross flows from you to these enemies in visible form.

[19:07] Listen to this same emphasis in a few other passages in Scripture. God does indeed call us to be aware of how our conduct appears to the lost.

And the goal is so that grace may become visible in their eyes. 2 Corinthians 8.21 For we aim at what is honorable not only in the Lord's sight but also in the sight of men.

Grace becoming visible. Matthew 5.16 In the same way let your light shine before others so that they may see your good works and give glory to God.

Grace visible in our conduct. 1 Peter 2 verses verse 12 Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable so that when they speak against you as evildoers they may see your good deeds and then glorify God on the day of visitation.

The Bible makes this so clear that God is committed to pursuing his glories and he will open eyes that are currently bound shut.

[20:36] So sight is important to God. Is it important to you? are your co-workers going to understand why you respond the way you do?

Probably not. How about when you are patient the next time your children disregard your instruction? You might think a hundred times they've disobeyed me and a hundred times they have not benefited from my patient instruction.

Why not try a harsh word that gets their attention quickly? Beloved, our instruction is not in vain. Just as God has done for us when we least expect it, God may use the demonstration of your gracious love in response to God's enemy to soften the enemy's heart and expose them to the grace of Christ.

Perhaps it's a long-suffering response. Perhaps your trust in God is clear when you are patient although maligned.

[21:53] Now, as we transition to our second main point, I'll remind you it's responding to evil with both wrath and grace in mind.

We must notice that Paul connects his exhortation of honorable and peaceful conduct to the wrath and the vengeance of the Lord.

Verse 18 says this, if possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God. Let's not move too quickly without giving proper weight to the strength of this connection that Paul is making.

Paul is not grounding his argument in your response because it is convenient and makes your life easier. He's not saying that family holiday gatherings will be a lot more pleasant, although I'm sure they will if you restrain yourself when evil is directed at you.

[23:05] Rather, he is grounding his claim in the most sobering of realities for followers of Christ to heed. Vengeance is coming.

Holy wrath against rebellion awaits. Now, I believe there are two primary reasons that Paul makes this connection for us.

The first is we are prone to minimizing, forgetting, or living as if God's coming judgment isn't the greatest of all concerns in the world today.

And the second is because being aware of God's coming wrath motivates us towards urgency and compassion for those who stand under God's judgment.

Perhaps this example may be of some help. On a weekend trip a few years ago, Lisa and I had thought a suspension bridge adventure would be quite a bit of fun when we went to Tennessee.

[24:14] I didn't realize that upon taking a few steps things would get very uncomfortable for me as I walked my way towards the center of the bridge.

Each light breeze that I felt more like a gust of wind every step that another bridge walker would take shook and reverberated in the wooden support.

The bridge swayed a lot stronger than what I could see when I was on the ground. See, the truth is I didn't make it quite far at all on the bridge.

I probably only made it 20 or 30 steps before my body started to panic and to stiffen up. I walked back quite slowly deliberately holding on to the side rope while others passed by me with ease. And while I was safe when I got back to solid ground, I was still feeling the effects of walking out towards that danger. My heart was still beating fast, my breathing remained quick, and the tingling in my body was ongoing.

[25:28] How had I forgotten my great fear of heights? It was a mystery, didn't make sense. Lisa knew I was afraid of heights and yet I had forgotten.

Well, certain fears are intended to reverberate with permanency in our bodies, beloved. See, lesser fears we may feel for just a few hours, a bad dream comes to mind.

Worse fears may last a few days or even a few months, but great fears, eternal fears, that we've been rescued from, ought to leave an impact on the wise for eternity.

You see, God's judgment for rebellion against his authority is a fear that is intended to remain with us and inform every interaction that we have with those who still stand condemned under the weight of their sin.

This is what our text is leading us towards, brothers and sisters. Remember the wrath of God. Live with a present awareness of your deliverance from the darkest of paths that you once walked on.

[26:50] God's So what are we to remember exactly about God's wrath? Here are three quick things. God's wrath is always justified.

God's wrath is always correlated with his anger. And God's wrath is eternal. So it is always justified. We see this from Romans chapter 1 in verse 18. It says, The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.

Listen to Colossians chapter 3. Put to death, therefore, what is earthly in you, sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry, on account of these, the wrath of God is coming.

God's wrath is justified. Every action is accounted for. God's memory is perfect, but not only is it perfect, it sees both the outside and the inside expressions of our rebellion against him.

[28:13] These things are clear and accounted for. Because God is entirely righteous, he will not miss, there will not be any hiddenness to the sins that we thought were kept in the dark.

All evidence is preserved and his justice is applied appropriately at every level. Number two, God's wrath is correlated with his anger.

Romans 2, verse 8, for those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and anger.

May help us to remember that this is not just a picture of justice applied like a third-party courtroom where the judge is unaffected by the offenses.

God himself is personally affected. He has been offended. He has been displeased. His gifts have been desecrated. His grace unappreciated.

[29:20] His sacrificial love has been neglected. His warnings unheeded. His mockery celebrated. His rules disregarded.

And his glory unappreciated. And God's response to these things is his clear, firm, white hot anger. His anger is not like ours which rises and cools. God's displeasure against sin is continual and will remain so without waning.

Number three, God's wrath is eternal. At the conclusion of Matthew chapter 25, Jesus describes the outcome of the wicked with these words.

These will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life. So God who hates wickedness is preparing to demonstrate his displeasure against sin for all eternity.

[30:28] Second Thessalonians 1 in verse 9, they will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might.

One more, Revelation chapter 14, another angel, a third followed and sang with a loud voice, if anyone worships the beast in its image and receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand, he will

also drink the wine of God's wrath poured full strength into the cup of his anger and he will be tormented with fire and sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the lamb and the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever and they have no rest day or night. This is not just a scare tactic although it indeed is scary. There is a future real day that awaits all who have not been saved by the blood of the lamb.

Have you given thought to this brothers? Have this even crossed your mind when you are mistreated? Have you forgotten that you also have been delivered from this same evil? easy to put the wrath of God in the background. After all, we've been saved, delivered from wrath, and I no longer have to worry about my final judgment.

[32:11] But billions still bear their condemnation. And those who have yet to hear the good news of the gospel, even though they may have heard it a thousand times, they still have time remaining to repent.

We cannot forget this. If you're struggling to respond with honorable and peaceful conduct, this text suggests that you may be forgetting what you have been delivered from.

Would you repent today from believing that the greatest offense of sin is those that are against you? Would you forsake selfish expressions of treating your reputation as the highest law of the land? Again, the second reason that Paul connects our conduct to the wrath of God is because it cultivates urgency and compassion for those who have not yet been saved by the work of Christ. Please look again at verse 20 and verse 21. Excuse me, to the contrary. If your enemy is hungry, feed him.

[33:30] If he is thirsty, give him something to drink. For by so doing, you will heap burning coals on his head. Do not be overcome with evil, but overcome evil with good.

These verses imply that every act of love towards an enemy positions them to run away from coming judgment. As effective as coal which sears from the flames is your display of grace represented in your conduct.

Do not underscore the impact that this may have. There is hope yet that remains as long as God has restrained His judgment.

Listen to what Paul says in 2 Corinthians verse 5. Let me just start in verse 11 and I'll go ahead. It says, therefore knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade others.

And down to verse 18 through 20. All this is from God who through Christ reconciled us to Himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation.

[34:52] Therefore we are ambassadors for Christ, God making His appeal through us. We implore you then on behalf of Christ be reconciled to God.

Now if you are with us this morning and you currently hear my words and you know your sin is exposed if it were uncovered by a holy and just God hear this important appeal.

Recognize that all of your sins deserve judgment even one and they will be judged unless you are delivered by someone outside of taking judgment upon Himself.

What good news in the very next verse in 2nd Corinthians that Christ has come for this very purpose. 2nd Corinthians chapter 5 says for our sake God made him to be sin who knew no sin so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Put your trust in him today. Turn from your sin and join us as those who have been delivered from this great judgment.

[36:19] As we close and give thought to final application the great question that remains from our verse is this where does your trust reside when sinful behavior wounds you?

there's only two answers my vengeance or the king of kings the eternal God whose throne stands forever who alone is able to account for all wrongdoing so beloved God is worthy of all of our faith and all of our trust whenever he calls us to walk in opposition for some of us that opposition may be small may receive it within our homes on a day to day basis and for others there are days that lie ahead in loss in J.C.

Ryle's book five English reformers there is a notable description of given of a man named John Rogers who approached his last hours with faith holding out a reconciliatory call to all who would observe and put him to death listen to this description it says up to that day men could not tell how English reformers would behave in the face of death and could hardly believe that they would

actually give their bodies to be burned for their religion but when they saw John Rogers the first martyr walking steadily and unflinchingly into a fiery grave he'd be burned alive the enthusiasm of the crowd knew no bounds they rent the air with thunders of applause even the French ambassador wrote home a description of the scene and he said that Rogers went to his death as if he was walking to his wedding by God's great mercy he died with comparative ease and so the first Marian martyr passed away beloved may we endeavor to put on such faith as John Rogers to approach wrongdoing ahead in the same manner for the glory and the honor of the Lord and for the future deliverance of those that will one day sing the Lord's praises alongside of us in his presence please pray with me