

Romans 12:17-21

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[0 : 00] Please turn in your copy of God's Word to Romans, chapter 12. We'll continue our journey, our march together, verse by verse, through the book of Romans.

! And we have come now to the practical part of the text. As Paul has in the first 11 chapters, given us the great doctrine of the gospel, the gospel that comes by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, forever, he's turned now at the end of 11 and the beginning of 12 to help us, to show us what that now looks like in practice.

What are the practical implications of all of these great truths? And lest we forget, he begins by saying, verse 1, verse 2, that we are to, now as our reasonable service, as the obvious thing we should be doing in response to the glorious truth of the gospel, we should be giving ourselves, all of us, as a living sacrifice.

Offering ourselves up to his service. And we do that by the renewing of our mind, so that we'll be transformed, so that we'll know what is good and acceptable and perfect.

And I've been asserting to you that he doesn't leave that in the wind for us, but that he goes on to talk about what is good and acceptable and perfect. He lays out for us the model of Christian living.

[1 : 33] We've talked about verse 9, about letting love be genuine. Genuine love. Unhypocritical love. The love that is characterized by abhorring evil and holding fast to good.

That this is the summary. This is the probably oversimplified summary of what godliness looks like. What a life offered holy to god looks like is a life that expresses that reality in genuine, unhypocritical love.

And as we've tried to look at and kind of break down, we've got this overarching exhortation to genuine love, merciful, self-sacrificial, subservient love.

We've tried to break down these exhortations and look at them piecemeal, as challenging as that is often, as we look at the scriptures, to see that he calls us to genuinely love the saints, verses 10-13.

Last week we talked about genuine love to all people, generally, in verses 15 and 16. And so we see the scope then of the church and the world.

[2 : 48] But then he narrows it back down for us a bit to talk about the group that would be most difficult to love genuinely. And that is your enemies.

You see this in verse 14 and then 17-21, which I recognize is a bit of an odd way to break this up. I wrestled immensely on doing it this way. But I think you'll see the tie-in.

I hope you'll see the tie-in together in just a moment. So let's read together, beginning in verse 14 through the end of the chapter. 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.

Never be wise in your own sight. 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.

[3 : 48] 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 heat burning coals on his head. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Let's pray together. Father God, we thank you for the blessing of your word. It is a grace to us.

Thank you also for the church, the office of pastor, the gift in varying levels to teach.

And because the realities of the gospel exist, we all have, those of us who have placed faith in Christ, your spirit abiding within us.

So I pray this morning that by your spirit, I will preach well. I will unfold the meaning of this text well. And that by your spirit, we will hear it. And we will have it applied to our hearts that they might be

tenderized towards those we may consider our enemies.

[4 : 58] I pray this in Christ's name. Amen. So verse 14, we have the exhortation to bless those who persecute you. Bless and do not curse them.

The most difficult group of people to love. Those who hate you. Those who persecute you. Those who ridicule.

Who potentially, as you may be sent out all over this world, physically would harm you, imprison you, beat you. Right? The call is a high call.

It's not particularly complicated. It's a fairly simple concept, but it is incredibly profound. It flips humanity, who the fallen human state is, it flips it around.

Right? Because what we tend to do as people is we tend to stand our ground and defend our rights. Somebody pokes us, we hit them back. Right?

[6 : 02] And that is not the calling to the Christian. Right? The calling to the Christian is to turn the edge of the cheek. The calling to the Christian is to go the extra mile.

Right? The calling to the Christian is to give what hasn't even been asked for to those who are persecuting us. And you'll remember last week, if you weren't here, we talked extensively about verse 15 and 16 and 17 about humility, about proper, actual, real humility and what that looks like and how real humility accompanies faith.

If you are a Christian, if you are in fact a Christian, you must be humbled. A humble person recognizes that apart from the saving work of Jesus Christ, we are nothing.

Our nature has been utterly spoiled by sin. There's no good thing left in us. Now because of Christ, we are sons and daughters of the Most High.

There's infinite value in that. But apart from that, we're nothing. Faith and humility work together hand in hand. And if you're humble, you also recognize that you really have no rights.

[7 : 30] We are Americans. I believe everyone in here is an American citizen. And as Americans, we have rights. Certain things that are given to us inalienable, glad I said that right.

I was worried as it was coming to my mouth. Inalienable rights granted to us by our founding documents. Praise God for that. We live in a great country.

The best country, I would argue. And there's lots of debate right now about our rights being taken from us. And they shouldn't be to be political for a moment. They shouldn't be. But in reality, in all actuality, we have no rights.

What we deserve, what has been granted to us apart from Christ, is eternal death and destruction. Separation from God forever. That's what we have a right to.

We've purchased that with our sin. In all of our sinful activity, we have said to God, I hate you, and what the return of that is, is his wrath. That's what we have a right to.

[8 : 38] In Christ, we have all sorts of beautiful, wonderful gifts and treasures found in God. But the temptation to curse those who persecute us, to do evil back to them, to utter evil in their direction, is the result of us believing that we deserve better.

So humility is what permits us to bless those who persecute us and not curse them.

And I know that not all of you were here last week, but I hope you've been seeing the tie between 14 on through 16 and now into verse 17. As he expands more of what he means, as he says, repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all.

This is not a concept that's foreign to the Scriptures. Paul wrote again in 1 Thessalonians 5.15, See that no one repays anyone evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to everyone. Peter wrote the same. 1 Peter 3.8.9, Finally, all of you have unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart, and a humble mind.

[10 : 01] So humility. Do not repay evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary, bless. For to this you are called that you may obtain a blessing.

Now, he is addressing particularly, in this case, persecutors, right? Verse 14, Bless those who persecute you.

But we certainly can apply the principle out beyond that. I would venture to say that no one here probably really has a persecutor in mind as they're thinking of these Scriptures.

I hope that as you're broadening your faith and you're getting out there and you're sharing it and you're being more radical, that people start to not like you because you're always preaching the Gospel to them. That should be a reality in your life.

I hope, maybe, that you're drawing some kind of persecution into your mind as you live holy in front of students on campus, at your workplace. People begin to shun you.

[11:02] They don't want to talk to you anymore. You're holier than thou. I'm hoping this kind of stuff is drawn to your mind. But beyond that, I think all of us can probably think of an enemy all of us probably have that person that we just really have some distaste for that have in some way brought an injury to us.

They've talked bad about us, tarnished our reputation, have caused some ill fate to happen in one of our classes or maybe at work. I have some of these people.

People I haven't gotten along with too well throughout my life. what am I called to do in Christ as I deal with these people?

I am to give thought to do what is honorable. I am meant to bless them. In this is love.

Remember, we're talking about genuine love. In this is love. that while we were enemies of God, Christ died for us. We're meant to be Christ-like.

[12:15] We're meant to exalt Christ in our living. So the reasonable act, this is what Paul is saying to us, the reasonable response to the gospel truth in our life is that we bless, we genuinely love those who hate us.

it's the reasonable thing to do. Not particularly complicated. Just the thing we should be doing is expressing love in this way.

Giving thought to what is honorable, which means in the Greek intrinsically good, proper, obviously right, outward. It's expressed goodness.

goodness. It's not just that you bottle it up and you don't let out what's really going on inside your head. It's not just that you bite your tongue, but it's that you actually express goodness.

That you're obviously right-acting outwardly towards people who hate you. It's meant to be done in such a way that it's honorable in the sight of all.

[13:23] That people marvel at who we are as Christians. this speaks to those of you who will go around the world and will be persecuted severely for your faith.

But it certainly speaks of us now. As so many Christians try to stand their ground, defend their rights, be right about everything all the time. We ought to be a people who are characterized by our genuine love, even for those who hate us.

if possible, so far as it depends on us, we're meant to live peaceably with all. And I, I mean, obviously I love God and his spirit and his moving and Paul's writing, so as I say this, know that.

I love Paul's writing. Paul always very, very, very carefully articulates what he means, and I appreciate that about him. Right? He gives us our caveat at this point.

If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. There's not a chance that every situation is going to be peaceable. You're going to have people who are going to come at you, and you're to do everything you can to sort that situation, to live peaceably.

[14:47] Peaceable relationships take two sides. There's just no way you can work in the heart of someone else. But as far as it depends on you, your part in it, you are to live peaceably.

It reminds me of when Jesus is giving the woes to the Pharisees, and he talks to them about how they should clean their cup and their plate first. We have no business cleaning up the plates and cups of other people.

We're to clean our own cup, our own plate, as far as it depends on us, that we live peaceably with all. So are you in a situation now where there's disunity, there's a disruption in peace in a relationship you may have?

You need to ask yourself this question, have I done everything I can possibly do to have peace with this person? I am not a political person.

I don't enjoy the politics of relationships. some of you who are in the dating realm right now would say I hate games. Just don't enjoy that. I'm a straight shooter.

[15:54] You tell me how you feel, I'll tell you how I feel, what I say is what I mean. That's the kind of person I am. And often when I get pulled into some situations that I really shouldn't even be involved in to begin with, I have to remind myself of this.

You know a situation where somebody has maybe said something about you and somebody else has taken it and they've run with it and they're thinking badly of you and you think to yourself, this shouldn't even be a problem. I don't know if you do that, but I do.

I'm like, I'm going to spend my time on this, are you kidding me? Maybe I can just ignore it and it will go away. Somebody is showing you some disdain for something they heard. This scripture has meant a lot in my life as I've dealt with situations like that to ask myself, have I done everything I can do to be at peace with these people?

Have I gone the extra step? Have I expressed outward goodness in the situation? Not stayed neutral, but actually involved myself and engaged the people that I might have peace with them? It's going to require an effort on our part to do this. And we turn then in verse 19. So as we are seeking the peace, as we are expressing outward goodness to those who are persecuting us, Paul then comes along and quotes from Deuteronomy 32-35 a comfort to us.

[17 : 23] As we're not going to be able to sort every situation out. As we're not going to be able or shouldn't be defending every tit and tat of our rights.

He writes beloved, those who are found in Christ, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God. For it is written, vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.

So here is the final judgment Paul is speaking about here. Paul says in Nathan's simple terms, don't worry about it, I'll sort it out in the end.

Love, outwardly express genuine love to those who are your enemies, those who persecute you, and just trust that in the end, it'll get sorted, they'll get what's due them, and you'll get what's due you.

This ability to trust in the goodness of God in all of these situations, to be able to overflow love on people that from a worldly standard don't really deserve it, is one of the marks of a true Christian.

[18 : 44] That's what Paul is saying here to us. Actually, if you're subtitled the way I am, marks of the true Christian. It's where we start in verse 9. Matthew 6, 14 and 15.

this is the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus says, For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

Is Jesus saying to us that the salvation of your soul is dependent on your works? No, He is not. But what He is saying to us is that if you have been forgiven in Christ, the natural reaction, the obvious outcome, the outflow of that, of a changed heart, will be forgiveness for others.

Isn't that exactly what Paul is saying to us now? Glorious truth of the gospel. Obvious thing is a self-sacrificing love for God, right? that works itself out in genuine love and doesn't hold wrong against other people, that blesses those who persecute, that outwardly expresses love for them, that doesn't repay evil for evil, that doesn't worry about how it sorts in the end.

So the question for you becomes, if you are doing the opposite of this, if you feel like when somebody wronged you, you have to get back at them, are you a Christian?

[20 : 28] It's a test. It's a measure of your faith. Now, we all fail at things like this. So just because you don't do this in a moment doesn't make you not a Christian.

We certainly sin, yet we're secure in God's hand. But take a look at your life. It's the overarching theme in this particular regard that you get back, that you want to deliver evil for evil, that you want to stand for your rights, that you're all about you, your kingdom.

Because if anybody invades your kingdom and tries to dethrone you, you have to defend it. The true Christian says God's on the throne. Vengeance is his.

He'll repay. I'm not too worried about it. I live in a theocracy. I live in a theocracy where I have no rights except to serve my king, and he will deal accordingly.

Listen to Hebrews chapter 10, beginning in verse 26. The author of Hebrews writes, For if we go on sinning deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful expectation of judgment and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries.

[21 : 53] Anyone who has set aside the law of Moses dies without mercy on the evidence of two or three witnesses. How much worse punishment do you think will be deserved by the one who has trampled underfoot the Son of God and has profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified and has outraged the Spirit of grace?

For we know him who said, Vengeance is mine, I will repay, and again the Lord will judge his people. This is Deuteronomy 32, 35. It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

So that language wasn't super simple, so hear what he's saying to you. If we go on sinning, saying that we're Christians, saying that we walk in the light, and yet we persist in our sin.

He used the example of the Old Testament. If we are breaking the law of the commandment, we have two or three witnesses we're condemned. How much more, if we go on sinning, having the revelation of Jesus Christ, we're trampling underfoot the Son of God, we've profaned the blood of the covenant by which we're sanctified.

We've outraged the Spirit of grace. He's saying, how much more will God repay? It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

[23 : 23] So my encouragement in this is that you examine your life. love. I would say that all of us need to do better at exuding love, at living in light of the gospel, at genuinely being concerned for and caring for our enemies, rejoicing with them, and weeping with them.

There's a tie in there. We have a true humility recognizing that we really have no rights. But ask yourself, do you have the capacity for it?

Has your heart been changed at all? Out of the outflow of your heart, this is possible. Who you are at your very core, and without Christ at your core, you're utterly sinful.

You're incapable of doing anything to please God. Even your best effort is distasteful to Him. ask yourself that question this morning.

The beautiful thing is that either way, there's a simple answer. Whether you stand firm knowing you're a Christian, knowing though that you struggle with this, that you must press harder to love your enemies, or recognizing maybe for the first time, I'm not saved.

[24 : 48] I've been doing this church thing for a long time, I've got knowledge in my head, but I'm not actually a Christian. The answer to both problems is to repent and believe.

Turn from your sin and place your faith in Jesus Christ. Let me tell you, that's going to look practical sometimes. Repentance is certainly a change in heart.

It's certainly a recognition that we've sinned against the Most Holy God, and it's a turning away from that to the good things of God. But those good things of God are often practical, particularly in this arena.

Christians, you may find as you repent that there are some things that you need to go get sorted. You need to go do your part for the peace in a situation.

You may be drawn to a situation in your life, in your mind, that God is calling you to work out.

Please let your repentance be complete.

[25 : 51] Don't just turn from the sin. I should really be nicer to that individual. Go be nice to them. Go exhibit genuine love.

Paul says it well in verse 20. I like it when I do accidental segues. Verse 20. He says, to the contrary, rather than repaying evil for evil, rather than hating back your enemy.

He quotes from Proverbs 25, 21, and 22. 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. He says, do the very opposite. That's what we've been talking about. Genuinely love. Don't repay evil for evil.

Genuinely love them. Feed them. Give them something to drink. And then an interesting phrase.

For by so doing, you will heap burning coals on his head.

[26 : 56] Now, I'd like to admit that I did not have the time this week to give this the scholastic attention I would have liked to. However, there's much debate over exactly what he means by this.

It is a quote. Proverbs 25. It's verse 22. Right? For you will heap burning coals on his head and the Lord will reward you. That's exactly how that reads in the ESV.

Right? So, we're called then in our genuine love to do these things, these outward expressions, these honorable things for those who are our enemies for, because, so that, in doing it, we're going to heap burning coals on their head.

I found one commentator. You guys know I like to use the Johns, John MacArthur, John Piper, and Jonathan Edwards. So, the Johns, one of the Johns said that there's an ancient Egyptian tradition that if you wanted to be publicly repentant, that you filled a pan with coals and you put it on your head and you walked around to show people the searing of your mind, the burning of the guilt of something that you had done.

One of the other Johns said that he has never found in any record anywhere that that's a reality. Respect both of them a lot. So, I just really don't know in that case what exactly they mean.

[28 : 24] So, one of the Johns says that the act of heaping burning coals on the head is a conviction to. Right? So, we have enemies that are treating us one way and we do the opposite.

We show them this genuine love and it becomes a conviction for them. It exposes their evil. Our goodness exposes their evil and therefore becomes a conviction to them.

The other says that it has to do with God's judgment. That other places that this phrasing is used in Greek literature, it has to do ultimately with final judgment. judgment. What I would say to you is that probably both are true.

Because it stands between these two verses. Does it not? It stands between 19 where he quotes, Paul quotes Deuteronomy 32-35, vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.

And it moves to verse 21, do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. And maybe rather than saying that it can mean two things, we should really mean that it means one thing, and that is that it brings these individuals to a realization of the wrath of God, which is to them the conviction of their sin.

[29 : 50] Maybe. I bet if I got the Johns in a room, they would agree with me. We'll see. That'll never happen. Never mind, we won't see. But just the same, I think that's where he's headed.

So, quoting from Proverbs, we have these acts of selflessness, this giving to those who really, by all human terms, we ought not be feeding and giving drink to.

We really probably should be letting them starve and die of thirst, but we're instead going to show them this genuine expression of love. And verse 21 says, do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

And I think there's our connection of why we ought to think that this should be a conviction to them, that it should be an exposing element in their life. And verse 21 has two implications, that we shouldn't be overcome by the evil done to us, we shouldn't permit it to overwhelm us, right, because God will judge, we know that we have a good and a just God, that we are his people, that all things are working for our good back in chapter 8 now, right, that we are eternally secure in his hands, that nothing can take us from his hand, chapter 9, right, so we shouldn't allow the evil done to us to overwhelm us.

We shouldn't permit that to happen, because God has made promises, and his promises are good, they're yes and amen in Jesus Christ. first, but secondly, and I think maybe more importantly, we also must not allow ourselves to be overcome by our own desire to respond with evil, right, but instead we should overcome the evil with our good, right, so don't let your enemy's hostility produce hostility in you, but let your love triumph over his hostility, whether or not you see that as a reality now, it will in fact one day be true, God will sort it in the end.

[32 : 02] Do not let another person's sin make you sin, right, stand as those redeemed, changed by the gospel of grace, right, changed, we're different than the world, and therefore we ought to respond differently.

It is our reasonable service, right, verse 2, it's our reasonable service. It's not a crazy thing he's asked us to do, it's a reasonable response to the goodness of the gospel.

I'm going to read to you just a short excerpt from a great book, if you don't have this, you can get it for free from Voice of the Martyrs called Tortured for Christ, and it's written by a man named Richard Wurmbrand who founded Voice of the Martyrs, lived in, I'm going to forget the country, I believe Romania, during communist oppression, and was imprisoned multiple times for his faith. It's a very simple, really good read, I'd really encourage you to pick it up, but let me just read you a little excerpt, as he writes about a man named Grecu, and he has been, Grecu has been being continually, slowly, beaten to death by his captor, a man named Rek.

So they're intentionally keeping him alive and prolonging the sentence of him being beat to death. They're medicating him and feeding him and then beating him to within an inch of his life and then bringing him back and beating him again.

[33 : 36] And listen to this, just listen to this record. He writes, during the beatings, Rek said something to Grecu that the communists often said to Christians, you know I am God.

I have power of life and death over you. The one who is in heaven cannot decide to keep you in life. Everything depends upon me. If I wish you live, if I wish you are killed, I am God.

So he mocked the Christian. I would imagine that Grecu knows his scriptures at this point, that in his mind he says, vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.

Right? Listen to what he does, his response. Brother Grecu in this horrible situation gave Rek a very interesting answer which I heard afterward from Rek himself. He said, you don't know what a deep thing you have said.

Every caterpillar is in reality a butterfly if it develops rightly. You have not been created to be a torturer, a man who kills. You have been created to become like God with the life of the Godhead in your heart.

[34 : 45] Many who have been persecutors like you have come to realize, like the Apostle Paul, that it is shameful for a man to commit atrocities, that they can do much better things. So they become partakers of the divine nature.

Jesus said to the Jews of his time, ye are gods. Believe me, Mr. Rek, your real calling is to be godlike, to have the character of God, not a torturer.

What did he do? Express the ultimate form of love as he's being beaten in a presentation of the gospel to his very beater.

Probably not the right word, right? Is that how you would respond in that situation? It's hard to imagine it. It's hard to think that that's the way we would respond in that situation.

I think rather we would be furious that we're in the situation, that our rights have been taken from us, that this man is doing this to us is so unfair.

[35 : 45] How dare he? Given the opportunity, what would I do back? How would I defend myself? Grecu preaches the gospel to him. And here's the result.

At that moment, Rek did not pay much attention to the words of his victim, as Saul of Tarsus did not pay attention to the beautiful witness of Stephen being killed in his presence. But those words worked in his heart, and Rek later understood that this was his real calling.

You remember, he said he learned this story from Rek himself. Rek became a believer as a result, and if you read on, Grecu died at his hands. This is the type of love we're meant to have.

It's profound. It really is. It's simple. It's a reasonable act of service. But this is the expression of life changed by the truth of the gospel.

Do you believe this morning the gospel? If you do, this will be your response. And I think it's going to work its way out in different little ways.

[36 : 54] Small example, when that guy cuts you off on the road, what's our response? Even just our emotional response like that. Right, I was in this lane.

What's your problem? Can't see me? Good one. Yep. What is the outflow of our hearts?

I think we all need to examine where we stand positionally and how, to what degree, do we actually embrace the gospel. I pray as we will in a minute that you'll repent and believe.

If you are a Christian, that you will recognize this weakness that I believe we all can do better at.

Maybe for particular situations that you need to go rectify.

Part of your repentance is to actually go do what you can do to make the situation better. Some of you may not actually be Christians in this room.

[37 : 58] I pray that you would allow God to work in your heart. That you would hear his call and that you would respond appropriately. If you grew up in church and you think that there's a special time that that has to happen, you're really wrong.

I don't stand between you and God. I'm just another Christian. We're all saints. You have full access. The temple curtain was torn. It's symbolic.

You get to step right in there. God's working on your heart. Just step in there. Repent. Confess.

Confess that you're a sinner and you need him. That you're dead and you need the life that is in Christ.

I'm here to help you later. After the fact. Come talk to me. Let's get you involved in discipleship.

Let's get you engaged in the church. There's great grace to us that we have to grow together.

Don't think you have to wait for an invitation to do it. You're being invited right now. Respond to the gospel. Respond. The Spirit is inviting you.