

Romans: Verse-by-Verse

Romans 12:17-21 (B)

Study Notes

Paul's first encouragement about not living as non-Christians do: "Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody."

As Paul continues this theme, he writes, "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."

Two prohibitions: 1. "Do not take revenge." 2. "Do not be overcome by evil."

- **Do Not Take Revenge:**

"Do not take revenge." That's the hard and fast rule Paul tells them to apply to their lives in a fallen world.

Like the Jews, believers who lived a godly life simply did not fit in the Roman culture. They would be made the subject of personal attacks. They would often have legitimate reasons to want to retaliate against those who abused them.

Paul is fully aware that, in many instances, taking revenge was an option. So, what are they supposed to do instead? Paul balances out the negative command with a positive one. He says, "... Leave room for God's wrath."

Paul is not suggesting that justice is out of the question. The Greek sentence literally means to "move over and let God's wrath have

room to work." See: Romans 1 on God's Wrath.

Revised Standard Version: "... Leave it to the wrath of God". In other words, when you have been wronged, get out of the way, and leave justice to God.

Paul quotes from Deuteronomy 32:35. It says, "It is mine to avenge; I will repay. In due time their foot will slip; their day of disaster is near and their doom rushes upon them."

The overall point: A day is coming when God will judge all people for their deeds. If non-believers neglect us, or worse yet, attack us – we are not to take revenge.

This is a patience game. We must patiently wait for God to judge with impartial judgment.

James' advice: "Don't grumble against each other, brothers, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door!" - James 5:9

Paul is not suggesting that evil should not be punished. We live in an imperfect world with an imperfect justice system. At times, evil may be punished by human authorities. Paul states this clearly in Romans 13:4 when he describes them as "God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer."

- **The Converse Side of Wrath:**

"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." – Romans 13:20-21

A strong balance: "Do not take revenge" ... "Leave it to the wrath of God" ... "On the contrary serve your enemy.

The only way this is possible: Romans 12:2

“Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.”

If we conform to the world around us, we are going to retaliate against others. We are going to exact revenge on those who do evil to us. We are going to take justice into our own hands.

Paul’s quotes Psalm 25:21-22: “If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat; if he is thirsty, give him water to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head, and the LORD will reward you.”

“Heaping hot coals” - Three Views:

1. An Old Testament reference to God judging the wicked. Psalm 11:6: “On the wicked he will rain fiery coals and burning sulfur; a scorching wind will be their lot.”

2. An ancient Egyptian writer, Khaemwaset, recorded how a thief returned a book he stole from a grave. He carried a pan of hot coals on his head to show his shame and repentance.

Paul’s point: Our attitude and response to being treated unfairly is not to imitate the worldly pattern of revenge and retaliation. Instead, we are to seek to win them to Christ by our unworldly kindness.

- **Do Not Be Overcome By Evil**

Verse 21: “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”

Paul is rounding out his argument by making a statement that really covers all that he has previously said.

An “either/or statement”. There is no middle ground here. There is no neutral path. It is one or the other. Paul is giving us a better path, a better response to those unbelievers who hurt us. We feed our

enemies. We give water to our enemies. We show kindness to our enemies. These actions do not promote further evil; they demonstrate something much better.

These are tall orders, aren't they? They cannot and will not be carried out if we are emulating our world. Paul makes this charge against the Corinthians when he writes:

Brothers, I was not able to speak to you as spiritual people but as people of the flesh ... In fact, you are still ...fleshly. For since there is envy and strife, among you, are you not fleshly and living like unbelievers?" – 1 Corinthians 3:1

- **Do Not Repay Anyone For Evil**
- **Do Not Take Revenge**
- **Do Not Be Overcome By Evil**

The only way we can live out what Paul is telling us is to have an "otherworldly" mindset. We must have our minds transformed by the Word of God and the Spirit of God.

Without that process continually taking place, we will fall back to our worldly perspectives and act accordingly. We will curse those who hurt us. We will repay those who injure us. We will take revenge on those who oppose us. We will be overcome by the very evil others intended for us.

But if we have our minds continually transformed by the Word of God and the Spirit of God, we can fight the good fight of faith. We can bless those who curse us. We can leave judgement to God. We can serve those who oppose us. We can overcome evil with good.