

Romans: Verse-by-Verse

Romans 12:17-21 (A)

As we finished last time, we noted that Paul has given us a truly comprehensive picture of both healthy Christians and, subsequently, healthy churches.

There is a progression in this chapter that we can miss. In verses 1-2, Paul began by telling us to offer our bodies as a living sacrifice. In verses 3-8, he told us to have our minds transformed and to embrace a sober self-image. In verses 9-16, he described a healthy, functioning local church.

As we recognize the grace that has been shown by God to us, we are called to have our worldly thinking transformed. This is Paul's foundational teaching in this chapter.

What he is about to say in verses 17-21 will require all of this because now he wants to deal with how we respond to those who are not our brothers and sisters in Christ. In fact, he will tell us how to deal with those who are our enemies.

It would be good for us to be reminded that when Paul wrote these words, Christians faced a lot of opposition from the Roman world.

Both Christians and Jews were treated harshly by their culture. What Paul is about to say would have touched on a daily reality for many believers – especially those of the lower classes.

Paul is going to highlight two groups of the believer's enemies. He will call them "evildoers" and "persecutors". This should set the stage for us as far as the real opposition Paul is citing.

Before we read verses 17-18 again, let me point out something else. If

we combine what Paul said in verse 14 with verses 17-21, we find four statements that are all written in prohibitive language:

- v. 14: "Do not curse".
- v. 17: "Do not repay anyone evil for evil".
- v. 19: "Do not take revenge".
- v. 21: "Do not be overcome by evil".

The fact that Paul says something similar four times in 7 verses ought to make us think about the environment these Christians must have been facing in Rome.

After all, they were living in the very heart of the Empire. They were, by all accounts, the enemies of Rome. Their treatment would be reflective of their status in the Empire.

John Stott sums up these four prohibitions well, when he writes,

"Retaliation and revenge are absolutely forbidden to the followers of Jesus. He himself never hit back in either word or deed. And in spite of our inborn retributive tendency, ranging from the child's tit for tat to the adult's more sophisticated determination to get even with an opponent, Jesus calls us instead to imitate him." – John Stott

Don't forget, Jesus lived under the Romans. He never downplayed the injustices that would happen to his followers. He didn't sugar-coat the truth about what it would be like to be His follower while living under Rome's authority.

- In Matthew 5:10, he said, "Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."
- In Matthew 5:44, he said, "But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."
- In Luke 6:22, he said, "Blessed are you when people hate you, when

they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man.”

If ever there was a time American Christians needed to be reminded of all of this, it's now.

When I was a young believer, from time to time I would hear one of the old preachers say that a day was coming when Christians would experience what it was like to be a believer in Paul's day.

Frankly, I thought, “Yeah, yeah. We don't want to hear all of that. We don't have that situation now, and I can't see it happening in my lifetime.”

I don't feel that way any longer. In the last decade I have been watching liberal America heading that direction. I have watched many Americans move from supporting Christianity to becoming its adversaries,

During the Covid-19 pandemic, we have witnessed the far “left” attempting to push Christians further and further to the fringes of society. While claiming a historically false picture of separation of Church and State, many government officials have tried to control local churches.

So listen up! What Paul says here in Romans 12 may indeed become our reality. We should know what God expects from us if we find ourselves in an increasingly hostile environment. It will also help us have a perspective on what to do with the much smaller issues.

With all this information as a backdrop let's see what Paul has to say about our attitudes and actions in the face of evildoers and persecutors.

- **Don't Repay Anyone For Evil**

Paul starts by saying: “Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to

do what is right in the eyes of everybody.” Another ending to that last sentence is, “See that your public behavior is above criticism.”

Depending on what translation we use, such as the NIV, this might appear to be two unrelated statements. It’s more likely that Paul meant this to be one statement, joining two thoughts.

The Aramaic Bible in Plain English translates it as, “Repay no person evil for evil, but be concerned with doing good before all people.”

Before I explicate this, I want to mention something. There is a definite balance in what Paul tells us. Is there a place for justice? Yes. In Romans 13 Paul will make it clear that authorities exist to “curb” and punish members of society. So, he is not suggesting that believers are to ignore these systems.

What he is dealing with in this passage appears to be much more of the day-to-day situations that a 1st-century believer would encounter.

In the Roman Empire, most non-Christians would treat believers with indifference at best. At worst, they would submit them to a range of persecutions and injustices.

Paul is zeroing in on their personal conduct. He is telling them they are never supposed to injure those who injure them. As John Stott notes,

“Non-retaliation was a very early feature of the Christian ethical tradition, going back to the teaching of Jesus, and beyond this to the Old Testament.”

Paul says, “Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody.” This is not just a prohibitive statement. Paul provides the antithesis when he writes, “Repay no person evil for evil, but be concerned with doing good before all people.”

Doing what is right before everyone is the countermeasure that Paul tells us to adopt. Here’s why: If we retaliate, nothing is gained –

especially with respect to our Christian testimony. We have simply reacted at the same level as our opponent. What does that accomplish?

Listen to what Peter says in I Peter 3:9: “Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult, but with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing.” – I Peter 3:9

Rather than presenting us with a purely negative imperative, Paul gives us a positive counterpart. This is continued in the next statement Paul makes. He writes, “If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.”

Now, I think what he just said is very important to the prohibition of not returning evil for evil. Let’s focus in on the words, “... as far as it depends on you...”

I like the Phillips Translation of this verse. It says, “As far as your responsibility goes, live at peace with everyone.” That really states what Paul is saying.

Recently, I saw this unattributed quote: “We all want a word that always works, an easy solution, a quick fix. But some things in this broken world can't be fixed no matter what we do.”

Paul recognized that some situations were not going to be solved. He uses the word “Dunamis” – the Greek word for “power”, when he says, “As far as it depends on you....” In other words, when it is in your power to live in peace with others, take responsibility for it.

Can we always have peace? No! Sometimes, it simply is not in our control. Others may be determined to not have peace with us. In fact, they may be determined to do just the opposite.

Paul certainly understood this. Let me read a description of a moment in Paul’s ministry from Acts 17:13: “But when the Jews in Thessalonica learned that Paul was preaching the word of God at Berea, some of

them went there too, agitating the crowds and stirring them up.” – Acts 17:13

In that situation, how much of the circumstances depended on him? Evidently, not very much. These Jewish agitators were determined to cause Paul as much trouble as possible. They were literally following him from place to place causing riots.

The same thing happened just days earlier at Thessalonica. Luke tells us, “The Jews, however, became jealous. So they brought in some troublemakers from the marketplace, formed a mob, and sent the city into an uproar.”

There is just something volatile about some elements of the Mid-Eastern culture. It was true in Paul’s day and its true in ours. Crowds being “sent into an uproar” is a common occurrence.

Paul faced this repeatedly. He knew that living in peace with everyone just wasn’t possible. It hadn’t been for him, so why would he suggest it would be that way for us?

So, it comes back to the phrase, “as much as you are responsible”. We cannot control peace with everyone else, but we can do what is possible.

- Proverbs 15:1 says, “A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.”
- Proverbs 15:18 says, “A hot-tempered man stirs up strife, but he who is slow to anger calms dispute.”
- Proverbs 25:15 says, “Through patience a ruler can be persuaded, and a gentle tongue can break a bone.”

“Don’t Repay Anyone For Evil: That’s the first requirement of a believer when facing a hostile world. Next time, we will look at the next one.