

Paul's Letter to the Romans:



THE PINNACLE OF
CHRISTIAN THOUGHT

Love...Even Your Enemies

Romans 12:14-21

"My name is Inigo Montoya. You killed my father. Prepare to die."

There is something wonderfully satisfying about watching Inigo Montoya run the six-fingered man through with a sword at the end of the movie *The Princess Bride*. Now I know that the story is fiction, of course. I say that because my wife sometimes asks me when I am watching a movie if I remember that I am watching a movie. I do...still there is something about Inigo's passion that touches my soul and makes killing the six-fingered villain in the story seem right and proper. It is good that such a rascal receive justice. It is right that he get his comeuppance...that he is struck down like the dog that he is...that Inigo's lifelong thirst for bloodlust be quenched. It is so right and so proper that any other climax, any other ending, would have left me a vacant-eyed, hollowed out shell of a man desperately longing for justice.

That same emotion in me is appealed to, of course, in less violent movies like *The Heiress* where the deeply wounded, vindictive Olivia DeHavilland leaves the gold-digger Montgomery Clift pounding the knocker at her front door pleading to be reconciled to both her and her money after having jilted her earlier when he thought she was only going to get a portion of her inheritance.

As she slowly ascends the staircase at the end of the movie and leaves him whining pitifully at the front door and you realize that she is actually not going to give him a second chance, there is something so delectable in the justice of the thing that it makes you glad you were there to see it.

There is something about the acquisition of justice that satisfies our souls. It doesn't matter whether it is watching William Wallace catch up with the men who killed his wife or watching the magnificent Count of Monte Cristo as he reaps havoc on the men who stole his youth. There is something in us that needs to see, needs to be a part of obtaining justice. There is a ravenous longing in our hearts that refuses to be satisfied until we see justice dispensed. It doesn't matter whether we are injecting ourselves into a movie, a novel, or a fairy tale or whether we are thinking of that last tiff at the office with a co-worker at the water cooler, we long for justice and when we are denied it we seem unable to stop thinking about what we might have said or should have said or wished we had said. We want justice, or at least what we think is justice, even if it is irrational.

Abraham Lincoln was once approached by a man who insisted Lincoln represent him in a lawsuit against a man who was unable to repay him \$2.50. Lincoln tried to dissuade the man but he was bent on revenge. When Lincoln saw that the man was not going to be but off, Lincoln agreed to take the case for a fee of \$10, which the plaintiff promptly paid. Lincoln then gave half the money to the defendant, who willingly confessed to the debt and paid the plaintiff the \$2.50. Now what is remarkable about Lincoln's arrangement was that bringing the suit was satisfied with it. ¹

The last few days I have looked at a couple of web pages that I thought were representative of the signs of our times. One of those was called "**revenge.com.**"

At “**revenge.com**” you can buy jinxes and curses or voodoo charms to get revenge on those people who have wronged you. They even have stories on “revenge.com”...great acts of revenge. One story that I thought was particularly unnerving was a story about a man that had fallen out with a friend over a car...the man who wanted to get revenge managed to get a spray bottle of a chemical they use to train cadaver dogs...it mimics the scent of dead bodies and the wounded man sprayed it into his ex-friends car day after day after day until he man could no longer drive the car or sell the car or even be near the car.

Revenge, sometimes we want it even when it is irrational.

Of course, one of the problems we face in seeking after justice is that justice and her two uglier sisters, revenge and vengeance, is that it is sometimes impossible to tell apart in the dark. Still our inherent longing for justice constitutes such an innate part of our psyche that it is almost impossible to control. We are willing to go into the tent after Rachel even if it means there is chance we might come out with Leah.

Now I have gone on a bit about this innate human longing for justice and revenge because Paul’s exhortation, the one before us this morning in Romans 12:14-21, speaks directly to the issue of justice, revenge and vengeance. **Paul’s central concern in Romans 12:14-21 is that the Roman believers not consume themselves with chasing after their own justice but that they leave the pursuit of justice to God who in the end will dispense justice as He sees fit.**

Now I made the point last week, that most commentators see Romans 12:9-13 as Paul’s admonition to the Romans concerning how they ought to deal with other

Christians. In the same way, most commentators see Romans 12:14-21 as Paul's admonition to the Romans concerning how they ought to deal with unbelievers. I made the point, however, that verse 9, which contains Paul's reminder that, "**Love must be sincere**" is probably an overarching principle that ought to be applied both in our dealing to believers and unbelievers alike. In other words "**Love must be sincere**" as we deal with believers and "**Love must be sincere**" as we deal with unbelievers.

I bring that up because I think in the passage before us this morning you are apt to think that what Paul is saying could be equally applied to believers and unbelievers alike. In other words, I think you are likely to come to the conclusion that much of Paul's instruction concerning revenge and vengeance and justice could be applied both to our dealings with Christian brothers and sisters and to our dealings with unbelievers and if you think that you will be right. Still, I want to maintain the distinction between the two sections.

The first section, Romans 12:9-13, relates the manner in which Paul wants the Romans to regard other believers and the second section, Romans 12:14-21, relates the manner in which Paul wants them to regard unbelievers. Sometimes, however, aspects of how we relate to the two groups two groups necessarily overlap.

Now having said that let me take just a minute and review what we have seen in our study so far. You will remember that in Romans 12:1 Paul called the Romans to present their bodies as living sacrifices and he did so because he thought presenting their bodies as living sacrifices was the only rational, logical response

to the great doctrine of justification, to the great justifying work in Christ which he described in chapters 1-11.

In Romans 12:2, we saw Paul explain exactly what he meant when he admonished the Romans **“to present their bodies a living sacrifice”**.

^{NIV} **Romans 12:2**...Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.

Now the interesting thing is that Paul not only tells the Romans how to present their bodies as living sacrifices, which he wants them to do by not conforming to this present evil age but by being transformed by the renewing of their minds, but he also tells them what the result of their presenting their bodies as living sacrifices will be. You can see that in the last part of verse two.

^{NIV} **Romans 12:2**...Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is--his good, pleasing and perfect will.

You see Paul's point was that by presenting their bodies as living sacrifices, by ceasing to conform to this present evil age and by being transformed by the renewing of their minds, that the Romans would actually grow further in their ability to understand and approve the will of God.

Then starting in verse 3, Paul begins to flesh out for the Romans how they are to set about being transformed by the renewing of their minds. He tells them in verses 3-8 that they are to think of themselves correctly. He tells them that they are not to think too highly of themselves but to think of themselves rightly as gifted and important to the body of Christ.

In verse 9, he reminds them about how they ought to think about other believers. He tells them that they are to love other Christians sincerely. He tells them that they are to esteem them as more important than themselves. He tells them that they are to share with other Christians and to practice hospitality

Now this morning, we are going to see Paul tell the Romans how they are to think about unbelievers and his central point is that they are to love them without hypocrisy (from verse 9) and that they are to demonstrate the sincerity of their love by not seeking revenge when they are mistreated or even persecuted.

Now with that in mind, let's put in at Romans 12:14.

^{NIV} **Romans 12:14**...Bless those who persecute you²; bless and do not curse. ¹⁵ Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. ¹⁶ Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited. ¹⁷ Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. ¹⁸ If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. ¹⁹ 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. ²⁰ 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.**" ²¹ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Now the first thing I want you to note is the connection between verse 14 and what has gone before. The connection is hard to see in English but the last verb in verse 13, the one translated "**practice**" in English is the exact same word translated "**persecute**" in verse 14. Now if it is hard to understand how the same word can be translated two different ways, think of it like this. Most words,

English or Greek, have a couple of nuances built into them. For example the word **“hunt”** has more than one nuance. It can be used to mean **“hunt with intent to kill”** as in **“we were hunting for pheasants”** or it can mean **“hunt with intent to purchase”** as in **“we were hunting for a house”**. The word translated **“practice”** in verse 13 means to pursue with intent to do something good like **“be hospitable”**. The word, which is the same word in Greek, and is translated **“persecute”** in verse 14, means to pursue with intent to do something evil like **“persecute or be cruel”**.

It might help to think of the two verses being related like this.

TRB Romans 12:13...Share with God's people who are in need. Pursue hospitality.

TRB Romans 12:14...Bless those who pursue you with intent to hurt you; bless and do not curse

You see Paul wants the Romans to realize that even as they pursue hospitality and kindness that there are going to be people that are going to mistreat them. I think that is a revelation to most Christians, that there are going to be people who will never like you, who will never be pleased by what you do or what you say or even how you say what you say.

Now it is hard to know exactly what the historical situation was going on in Rome at the time Paul wrote his letter to the Romans. Now we do know that the Roman church was made up of both Jews and Gentiles. It may have been that the Romans were still feeling the lingering effects of Claudius' expulsion of the Jews from Rome, the one that sent Aquila and Priscilla out into the Gentile world. It may have been that the Jewish and Gentile believers at Rome were having a hard

time adapting to each other. It may have been that the seeds of persecution against Christians in general had already started to grow. Paul doesn't explain the historical background or basis for his remarks but what he does do is explain how Christians are to respond when they are mistreated. This is what he says:

^{NIV} **Romans 12:14**...Bless those who persecute you³; bless and do not curse.

Now let me ask you, **"Is that hard for you to do? Is that difficult?"**

Now notice he is not saying, **"Don't lash back!"** If he had said that we might be able to understand and even do what he asks. Instead he says, **"Bless them, speak words that are kind to them. Speak gentle things to them. Lift them up."**

I think the word **"bless"** has the connotation of lifting them up before God. **"Bless them, do not curse them."**

Now the funny thing about the Greek here is that the word **"you"** is not in the original text. It is not **"bless those who persecute you."** The command is even more generic. It is **"bless all those who persecute period...not just those who persecute you."**

Now how you doing in that regard? How do you do when people treat you poorly? I'm not talking about to whom you are bound in obligation...husbands, wives, children, parents. You don't have any choice about responding in love there. I'm not even talking about other believers here in the church.

How you doing when the unbelieving world treats you with contempt? How you doing? Where do you lack? I suspect you do lack. I suspect you lack because I lack. I have trouble when people treat me unkindly and hold me in contempt.

Yet the passage is perfectly clear isn't it? It's not, **"Don't respond in anger!"** Instead it's, **"Bless them. Speak words of peace to them."**

Now it is important I think to realize that Paul is repeating the very words of Jesus here. In fact, he is combining two separate admonitions of Jesus taken from Matthew 5 and from Luke 6. I want you to look at them. Turn in your Bibles to:

^{NIV} **Matthew 5:44**...But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,

And then the other half of the phrase comes from Luke.

^{NIV} **Luke 6:28**...Bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.

You see Paul collapses them together, You see Paul's point is that not only are we to speak words of kindness even of those who are treating us unkindly and for those that doubt the authority of what he is commanding he quotes the very words of Christ Himself. And you know that is hard. It is hard to love someone who is unkind to you even if they are believer. It is especially hard when someone is unkind to you and holds the Savior in contempt. But that is what we are called to do.

Now Paul goes on in verse 15, to explain the manner in which we Christians are to bless those who persecute them. We are to emotionally enter into their lives of those that treat us with contempt.

^{NIV} **Romans 12:15** Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn.

You see the way we are to bless someone by being kind to them is to feel what it is we think they feel. I mean it's an old adage. It's hard to understand what a man's life is like until you walk around in his shoes a little bit. But what Paul is saying is, **"I want you to walk around in that person's heart. I want you to mourn with them when they mourn. I want you to laugh when they laugh. I want you to feel what they feel."**

Now I know that sometimes that is hard to do. That is why I love the story from the old Presbyterian Alexander Whyte.

Alexander Whyte quotes from an old diary the confessions of a man who had to share the same house and the same table with someone whom he found unendurable. He betook himself to prayer, until he was able to write, **"Next morning I found it easy to be civil and even benevolent to my neighbour. And I felt at the Lord's Table today as if I would yet live to love that man. I feel sure I will."**⁴

You see we are compelled to enter into the emotional lives of those that mistreat us. Now in verse 16, Paul exposes next the awful reason why we are so slow to be able to do that. Look what he says.

^{NIV} **Romans 12:16**...Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.

Now you know it is the repetition of that, **“Don’t be proud. Be willing to associate with the humble. Don’t be conceited”** that explain the real reason why we cannot deal with those that mistreat us. The real reason is I think, that we think we are better than they are. Don’t you think that is it? I think we think like this, **“I have more understanding. I have more knowledge. I have a better grasp of such things than they do. God is my Father and He is not yours so there must be something intrinsically better about me than there is about you.”**

And the truth of the matter is that that is not true at all. We are what we are by the gift and kindness of God Almighty. How can we do other than be kind to those that do not have the blessing? I think there is something there is something intrinsically sinful about Christians thinking they are better than non-Christians. So we have an obligation, I think, to express ourselves in love and kindness to those we have to deal with.

Dr. Criswell used to tell a story and I think it is a story that is at the heart of how we ought to view unbelievers. He said he once had to do funeral for a man and nobody came to the funeral. Not one person came. He was there. The body was there. The funeral director brought the body in and put it at the front of the chapel where they were at but there was not one person in attendance. There was no one to weep over the man. There was no one to mourn his life or soul.

You know Dr. Criswell thought that was wrong. I love this about him. So he said he went out on the street of Dallas and walked up and down the street to see if he could find someone to come in side to witness this man’s funeral. Finally, Dr. Criswell found a man at a hotdog stand and he said, **“Brother, my name is W.A. Criswell and I’m the pastor over here at the First Baptist Church and I am**

trying to hold a funeral for a man that died and I don't know the man and nobody has come to mourn the man and I just think somebody ought to come and show this man a bit of compassion and show this man that his life mattered and I was wondering would there be anyway you might be able to shut down this stand for awhile and come and help me dignify this man's life and passing."

Dr. Criswell said the man agreed and pushed his hotdog stand into the foyer there at First Baptist Church and he and Dr. Criswell held a funeral for this man that had died.

Now to me that is so touching, so humane, so Christian. But brothers and sisters isn't it even more our responsibility to do that for people that are alive...to show them a sense of compassion and kindness...to emotionally enter into their lives...to not be proud...to not be conceited but to engage ourselves in people's lives when they are hurting or even when they have done us wrong?

You know a few weeks ago I was having a pretty busy week. My wife was having surgery and all that and a lady called the church looking for someone to take her to Ft. Worth to visit her son in jail and I told her I would.

So I went and met her over on the north side of town and picked her up at her apartment. She was in her early seventies, I think, and I went and picked her up and took her to Ft. Worth and drove downtown to the jail and dropped her off and she went in to visit with her son for an hour or so. When it was time for her to come out, she didn't come out. I was driving around the block waiting for her to come out and I drove around for fifteen minutes or so after the time she was

supposed to come out and she didn't show up and then thirty minutes passed and she didn't come out and then forty-five minutes and she didn't show, so I parked the car.

I was hot.

I went into the jail looking for this lady and it was probably a god thing I didn't find her because they would have put me in jail immediately. I was going to rip this lady to pieces because it so rude and thoughtless of her to leave me out there driving around the block in downtown Ft. Worth. But I didn't find her, so I went out to my car and decided I'd drive around the block one more time and sure enough there she was there on the curb. She got into the car and the first thing she said, **"I'm sorry I took so long."**

And I said to her, and I confess this as a sin, I said to her, **"You won't ever do this to me again."** That's what I said. **"You have taken advantage of me for the last time."**

You know what? My heart condemns me for that because my reaction was completely contrary to the spirit of this passage. Isn't it? You see when people treat us unkindly or take advantage of us, because we are Christians, we are to bless...bless and not curse them.

That's what we are called to do in this passage. It's the simplest thing, I think.

Look at verse 17.

NIV Romans 12:17...Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. ¹⁸ If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.

Don't be the person that starts the fray. And then verse 19 sums it up pretty well.

NIV Romans 12:19...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. ²⁰ 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.**"

Now what do you think that means? There are really three different interpretations as to what it means to "**heap burning coals on a person's head.**"

The first interpretation I reject outright. It is that a Christian by being kind to someone that mistreats him can insure that that person will receive additional judgment in the Day of Judgment. I reject that interpretation. I think that is so contrary to the spirit of everything that has gone on before that that cannot possibly be the correct interpretation. Now having said that let me hasten to say that there is, of course, a part of that that is true. If we respond in kindness to people that persecute us and they do not repent, there will indeed be additional judgment on them in the Day of Judgment. But I take no comfort in that. My purpose in being kind when someone mistreats me...in being gentle when someone mistreats me is to woo that person to Christ.

There is a second interpretation that is based upon an ancient Egyptian practice of a penitent person carrying a bowl of coals on their head. The idea is a fairly simple one. You could demonstrate that you are sorry or repentant you could take a bowl of coals and walk around with it on your head symbolizing that your mind has been purified or burned clean of your evil thoughts or deeds. It was a

symbol. The bowl was, of course, thick enough to make sure that it didn't burn their heads. It was a little like that Jewish custom at Shabbat where a Jewish person would lean into a candle and wave the light and flame toward their mind symbolizing their desire for illumination. This second interpretation has at its heart that being kind to someone that persecutes you will help them to change their mind...to see the truth. I like that. I like that idea...now I don't think that is what is going on in the passage but I like the idea of it. I think it is a beautiful metaphor.

The third interpretation is similar and simpler. It is that being kind will change that person's mind or make them ashamed...that it burns on their conscience...that it touches their heart...that it causes them to feel differently than the way they did before. I think that is what Paul is asking us to do, **"If he hungry feed him. If he is thirsty give him something to drink. In doing this you heap burning coals on his head."**

Now the interesting thing about this particular passage is that it is a direct quote of a passage in Proverbs. Did you know that? I want you to open your Bibles to Proverbs 25. We are going to look at verse 18 and following and as I read it I want you to think about what the proverbs passage says that the Romans passage does not say.

^{NIV} **Proverbs 25:18**...Like a club or a sword or a sharp arrow is the man who gives false testimony against his neighbor. ¹⁹ Like a bad tooth or a lame foot is reliance on the unfaithful in times of trouble. ²⁰ Like one who takes away a garment on a cold day, or like vinegar poured on soda, is one who sings songs to a heavy heart. ²¹ If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat; if he is thirsty, give him water to drink. ²² In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head, and the LORD will reward you.

Now what's different? What phrase is added to the Proverbs passage that is not in the Romans passage? Obviously it is, **"and he will reward you."**

Did you notice that it is not in the Romans passage? That little phrase, **"and he will reward you"** is just not there. Why do you think that is? Why would Paul purposely leave it out? Why does he not put that little phrase **"and the Lord will reward you"** in there?

Now obviously we are not to be motivated by reward. We are not to be motivated by greed. We ought to do what we do out of obedience not out of a desire for reward. Let me pose this as a possible answer. What was Paul talking about in Romans chapters 1-11? He talked about our great justification in Christ. He talked about the fact that we are at peace with God that we are no longer God's enemies but are now God's own dear friends.

Now let ask you something. Isn't that reward enough? You see what Paul is saying is this, **"We have already gotten our reward. This is where we stand before the Lord. We have gotten this reward not because of what we have done but rather because of what Christ has done and because He did what He did we are now God's people, justified...at peace with God standing before Him in the spotless righteousness of Christ we have an obligation, a debt to live a certain way."**

What that means is that we ought to treat those who persecute us just like the Lord Jesus treated us when He condescended from heaven to wash away our sin. That is what we are called to do...to think of unbelievers when they treat us wrong that way. Now you know there are all kinds of ethical issues that come up

because of that like, **“What do we do if somebody treats somebody else wrong?”**

Should we get involved? I don't know. I think it depends. You know as a pastor in a church, you know I have an obligation to look out for God's sheep...and you know if somebody mistreats one of God's sheep...if somebody mistreats one of these dear ladies up here I am going after them. If somebody mistreats one of our little kids I am going after them. But the question is different if somebody mistreats me. I think then I am to take it on the chin and bless them, speak words of peace to them...to woo them with the same love of Christ that wooed me and drew me to Him. Isn't that what he says?

Now here's the question, **“Will you do it?”**

Let's pray.

¹ *Daily Walk*, May 22, 1992.

² F.F. Bruce, *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans* (London: Tyndale Press, 1963), 229. Bruce notes a textual variant in which the “you” may be missing implying that Christians are to bless persecutors even when the persecution is not directed toward them personally.

³ F.F. Bruce, *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans* (London: Tyndale Press, 1963), 229. Bruce notes a textual variant in which the “you” may be missing implying that Christians are to bless persecutors even when the persecution is not directed toward them personally.

⁴ Alexander Whyte, *Lord, Teach Us to Pray*, 2nd ed. (London: Oliphants, 1948), pp. 33–35.