

Normal Christianity is Radical

Romans 12:14-16

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In case you think you've skated by unscathed and unchallenged by Romans 12, now Paul puts the gospel right where it is the most difficult. Relationships with other people. Particularly, difficult people. It's hard to be around sinners all the time. How's that quarantine going for you and those with you? That family member will be crying at your funeral, but right now they're driving you crazy. You are driving her crazy. And these are the people we love and that love us. What about in the church? Is everyone in the church super-easy to get along with? Is every single person in church the kind of person you'd like to go camping with for a week?

What about people in the general society around us? There are quite a few knuckleheads running around. How long can we go before someone wrongs us? Hurts us? Mocks us? Takes advantage of us? Or commits straight up evil against us? Any names come to your mind? Some of you are going all the way back to high school. You haven't forgotten or forgiven. I have a really good friend who was bullied in middle school by one particular guy. My friend is now 6'2" and 220 pounds, and 35 years later, I think he would still relish finding that guy in a back alley.

Against the backdrop of normal human conflict and retaliation shines the light of the life of Jesus. Jesus was radical. Whatever expectation you'd have for how someone would react or retaliate, Jesus did the opposite. Just think of the 24 hours leading to his crucifixion as a snapshot. Betray him, he washes your feet. Arrest him, he heals your severed ear. Deny you know him, he restores you. Beat him, he says nothing. Crucify him, he asks God to forgive you. Who does that? This is in part why Jesus' life has a shock and awe effect in a fallen world. It's so unnatural. So countercultural. Indeed, radical.

Our passage today describes normal Christianity doing its thing in a sinful world.

"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" (Romans 12:14-17 ESV).

If you look forward from here, you see the content for next week. What should we do when we've been wronged? How should we respond? See you next week for a very practical message we can all relate to.

If you look at verses 14-17 you see that all of these commands except one deal with my response to difficult or hurtful people. It goes without saying that we should strive not to be the difficult or injurious person. There are some people who leave a trail of tears wherever they go. The assumption behind these verses is that we are not the cause of the conflict but rather are in the role of responder. There is no "if" in these verses. This is not fantasy land. Live as a Christian in a fallen world, you will have trouble, and the hardest troubles are people troubles. We cannot avoid them, but we can manage how we respond to them. How should Christians respond? To what? See the list: Persecution, success, sorrow, or low status in society.

The Christian Response to Others' _____

Persecution

"Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them" (v. 14)

What is persecution? Injurious actions or words done against us because of our faith in Jesus. A look at history shows that sometimes this persecution is official governmental policy. These Roman Christians who received this letter would be severely persecuted in the coming years under Roman emperor Nero. Terrible atrocities. To this day the Coliseum in Rome has a giant cross on one end in remembrance of all the Christians torn about by lions and other atrocities done there. At the time of the writing of the book of Romans, it wasn't at that level yet. But from the beginning, Christians in Israel and the Gentile world were shunned and ostracized. Christianity was a threat to both Pharisaical Judaism and Roman emperor worship. Remember Pilate's question to Jesus, *are you a king?*

At the time Romans was written, the persecution was mockery, loss of business or social standing. There are many places in the world where this is still true. There is soft persecution from family or community. Then there is hard institutional persecution like is found against Christians in North Korea or Pakistan to this day.

How should Christians respond? There is something not to do and something to do. Don't curse them. Rather, bless them.

To "curse" them is not to engage in profanity. It means, *don't seek God's damnation or severe punishment on them.* To curse an enemy would be to pray, *God, would you pay them back? Punish them God! Ruin their lives for what they have done to me!* That's cursing.

What is wrong with cursing our persecutors? I don't know of any verse where God gives over his right as Judge to us. Have you noticed when you pray for revenge, how do you feel afterwards? Uplifted? No. This is an important truth for this whole section. One reason we are commanded to respond in these ways is to avoid becoming the very thing we dislike in others. To curse them would be to become them. To turn into the persecutor and the prosecutor. Don't curse them.

Bless them. This blessing isn't a blessing we convey, although he's going to get to that later when Paul urges us to overcome evil with good. But here in verse 13, rather than going to God and asking him to ruin them, we go to God and ask God to favor them. The *Good News Bible* translates it, *ask God to bless.* It's not a snarky word; God bless you.

I remember years ago I spoke at a Christian high school graduation. The principal had been forced out and this graduation was his last duty. I spoke. Sat down in the front row. The principal got up and said to the school community, "As you know this is my last responsibility before I leave. For those of you who have supported me, I want to thank you. For those of you who have fought me at every turn and made my life miserable, I'm praying for you." That was one of the most awkward moments I've ever experienced. I wanted to crawl under the carpet.

This isn't the spirit at all here of blessing. This is a heartfelt prayer that seeks blessing for them and spiritually protects my heart from giving in to bitterness or hatred.

Over the years as a pastor and leader, I have been injured by others more times than I care to remember. Some of the most painful people I have purposed to pray in this way for them. *God bless them, please.* Why? Because my natural self wanted them blessed? No. But it was a way out of the darkness of anger and resentment. It's hard to hate people you are asking God to bless. Give it a try.

"For if we refrain from retaliatory actions, how ready we are to indulge vindictive thoughts. It is not, however, mere abstinence that is here required nor is it simply endurance of the persecution but the entertainment of the kindly disposition expressed in blessing"¹ (John Murray).

Dear church family, think of your worst enemy. How about as you continue reading this, you offer a prayer asking God to forgive you for resentment and to bless them according to his will?

Success and Sorrows

"Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep" (Romans 12:15).

Our natural selves more easily connect with people in sorrows than in successes. When people suffer a loss, a loved one or life-altering event of some kind, our hearts naturally relate to them. Funeral homes are found everywhere as gathering places to weep with those who weep. What is more Christian than entering into the pain of others and sharing that pain with them?

Shared Christian weeping is a powerful ministry. Think of a painful time in your life. I hope God brought someone to join with you in that pain. Perhaps they shared counsel, but the greatest blessing is simply presence. I remember somewhere in my training for ministry being admonished to not feel the need to always say something. We pastors feel a duty to have the right word to say. Reality is when the trial is over, very little of what was said will be remembered. But people never forget that you were there for them.

When people are weeping, we don't have to say something. Give them an embrace. Sit with them in the room silently. Quietly help behind the scenes. These are powerful when people are weeping. It doesn't say, *speak to those who weep.* It says, *"weep with those who weep."* Enter into their pain. See the word "with." Weep WITH them. Show up. Show you care. I personally think this is a legacy strength of Bethel Church and thank you to so many who practice a ministry of presence and weeping with those who weep.

The struggle in this verse is not the weeping, it's the rejoicing. *"Rejoice with those who rejoice."* This is joining with other's joys in the successes of their life. The wins. The unexpected blessings. The happy stuff. Rejoice with others. No problem, right? Except, there is this thing in the human heart that goes all the way back to Cain's jealousy that God accepted his brother's sacrifice and not his. He didn't rejoice with Abel, he murdered Abel.

We may not murder, but how do we feel when a sibling has some financial windfall? Or the coworker is honored above us or gets the promotion we hoped for? How about our best friend's bumper sticker, *my child is an honor student?* Or the new kitchen proudly displayed on our sister's Facebook page? Or the trophy wife your 44-year-old brother married in 2012? (Sorry, Scott.) Or the dandelion-free yard our neighbor has and ours looks more like a dandelion farm? Whatever it is. Is it easy to rejoice when others rejoice?

¹ John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, p. 134.

Envy and jealousy so easily creep in. We congratulate and fake our smiles, but inside, we aren't that excited. We often reverse this verse. When they rejoice, we weep. When they weep, we rejoice. Such is the sinful brokenness of our hearts.

Envy wants what others have. Jealousy doesn't want them to have it. How do we break this cycle? The gospel. The gospel is God giving us what we don't deserve. We don't deserve salvation, forgiveness, love, or adoption. Go back to chapter 8. What in there do we deserve? Envy wants to return to the "deserve" currency, but Christianity celebrates having what we don't deserve.

Whether I think my sister deserves the new kitchen or my neighbor deserves his boat, in view of God's mercy to me I realize that I don't deserve anything but hell, yet I rejoice in my rejoicings. It's a small step to see other people's successes like I see mine. If I'm free to rejoice in my rejoicings, the gospel sets me free to rejoice in others' rejoicings too.

When I find in my heart a lack of joy in others' success, it's not that they don't deserve it, it's that I have forgotten I don't deserve it. Ask God to help you with this. *God help me rejoice with those who rejoice and give me the heart of compassion that weeps with those who weep.*

I got thinking about Mother's Day on this point. In your whole life, who embodies this more than your mom? When you cry, she cries. When you hurt, she hurts. When you rejoice, she dances with you. Why? Because she loves you and a mom's love looks a lot like what Christian love should look like. Ask yourself, what would Mom do? Persecution? Bless. Rejoicing? Rejoice. Weeping? Weep.

Status

"Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly" (v. 16).

There is a play on words here. The Greek word for *haughty* means tall or high. It's used in the New Testament for mountain tops, like Jesus' Mount of Transfiguration. A haughty person has a high view of themselves. They are the mountain top people. We use words like snobbish, stuck-up, arrogant, superior, elitist. A simple word for it is pride. It was said of Theodore Roosevelt that he wanted to be "the bride at every wedding and the corpse at every funeral."² Teddy had a high view of himself.

Contrast that with Jesus. If anyone could rightly have a high view of themselves, it was the Son of God. Yet he said in Matthew 11:29, *"I am gentle and lowly in heart."* Is it no wonder from that self-perspective he was known as a friend of sinners and tax collectors? He touched the lepers and hung out with the down and out.

There is debate if this means humble people or humble tasks. It could be either and perhaps it's viewed best as both. Those who are willing to do humble tasks, typically are comfortable associating with humble people.

Over the years I have seen remarkable examples of this. I recently noted it to a man in our church who has a high position in society but faithfully runs the PowerPoint slides on Sundays. For Jesus, nothing is beneath him. I remember years ago at my previous church

² Alice Roosevelt Longworth, Source Unknown.

we had a new couple. They wanted to serve somehow. We asked them to fill communion cups. They were so excited and did it faithfully. I later learned that a few years prior he had sold his company to IBM for hundreds of millions of dollars. Yet, there they were in the dumpy church kitchen filling communion cups. Don't be haughty; be willing to do humble tasks and associate with humble people. Is any task in the kingdom of God beneath you? Is any person beneath you or your willingness to be friends?

In some ways we can discover our view of ourselves by who we hang out with, who we associate with. This doesn't mean the lowly are the exclusive category of friendship. But we naturally seek friendship of those we view as equal or above us. We don't need Bible verses urging that. But we desperately need the reminder to get off our high horses and happily associate with people society views as lowly. Who might that be for you?

Let's step back and look at these collectively. Those who persecute? Bless them. Those who rejoice? Rejoice with them. Those who weep? Weep with them. The down and out? Hang with them. Do you see the radical nature of normal Christianity? In each case, it's the opposite of what the natural us would do! If someone persecutes me, I don't want to bless, I want to retaliate. If someone outshines me, a few choice words will take them down. If my enemy suffers, great! How do I view people? Who can help me move up the ladder?

But Christ gave us an example and says, *follow me*. We happily follow him to heaven, but will we follow him as he washes others' feet? Will we follow him as he prays for those who crucified him? Will we follow him in caring for people who have nothing materially to offer us? If so, why? Why Christian, why be radical with Jesus?

"I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship" (Romans 12:1).

The challenges of chapter 12 are for those who get the doctrines of chapters 1-11 summarized as *"the mercies of God to me."* You can read all kinds of books about ministry to the poor and grieving but the number one thing that transforms our responses to difficult people is to realize that God loved a difficult person named Steve DeWitt. As a sinner I opposed him. I am way beneath him on the social ladder. Yet, he loved me. I profaned his name, yet he blessed me with Jesus. I rejoiced in others' failures, yet he blessed me and gave me Jesus. All this? Mercy. In view of God's mercy, all this is simply me treating others like God has treated me.

So, the best Christians are those who never get over God's grace to them. How do you know if someone gets it or not? Do they retaliate when wronged? Are they present in other's pain? Do they extend friendship to people different from them? This is not radical Christianity, this is normal Christianity which seems radical in the retaliatory, jealous, and lost world we live in. Normal Christianity is radical.

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