

When We Are Wronged: Unconditional Kindness Romans 12:17-21

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How good it is to look at people as I speak and not just a camera. It is great to get back to a little bit more normalcy. And to hear an amen along the way would be great too. I noted to someone on staff that I haven't heard anyone in the room laugh at any of my humor in two months. He said, "So at least that part is normal." Nice people we have that work here.

Today is our second message on the subject of "when we have been wronged" from Romans 12:17-21. I'm going to read our text again, do a brief recap, and then address common challenges to the Christian ethic of non-retaliation.

"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. 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 heap burning coals on his head.' Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." (Romans 12:17-21 ESV)

Becoming a Christian is a glorious experience. *Being* a Christian in a broken world is difficult and dangerous. It's like a description I heard of marriage: marriage is like a walk in the park—*Jurassic Park*. Fulfilling our call to follow the teachings and example of Jesus in a world like this is like a walk through *Jurassic Park*. Eventually, you are going to get bit. These wounds come on a spectrum from small slights and offenses to extremely painful betrayals, persecution, and even physical violence. This text and many others emphasize that avoiding wrongs against us is impossible; how we respond is entirely our responsibility. *"Repay no one evil for evil."* Our natural response is to give people what's coming to them, to get even, to relish the payback.

Romans describes God's salvation as God *not* giving us what we deserve. He gave Jesus what we deserve. Mercy is not getting what we do deserve. Grace is getting what we don't deserve. The gospel is both mercy and grace. In this, God gives us the ethic of how to live in an offending and wronging culture. *"If possible...live peaceably.... Never avenge yourselves."* Why? God has promised *he will repay*. He does so through governmental authorities, the cross, and hell. The believer trusts God to make things right so we don't have to take matters into our own hands. We are freed from the responsibility to get even. Freed to treat people with mercy and grace like God has treated us.

Let's just admit, that's a lot easier to say than to do.

Paul summarizes what he is saying in verse 21, *"Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."* *Overcome*. We saw this same Greek word in chapter 8. *We are more than conquerors*. We are more than overcomers through him who loved us. *Nike*. Yep, as in the shoe company. *Nike* means "to win." To overcome. Do not let evil win but gain victory over evil by doing good.

What is Paul's concern here? Note he doesn't say, *let evil win*. Not retaliating is not letting evil win. It may feel that way and our opponent may do a victory dance, but not retaliating

is a way to fight evil without giving in to evil. How does evil win? Evil wins when it assimilates our hearts and actions into its own malicious intent. Evil wins when it makes us do evil too. It overwhelms us by turning us into the very thing we despise.

We overcome evil by responding to evil with the opposite of evil. You say, *that won't work*. How did God ultimately overcome evil? Did he sue Satan? Did he punch out some demons and slash their tires? No. God defeated evil with love on the cross. He overcame evil with good. That ultimate victory is a paradigm for the small skirmishes we have with evil in our lives. Overcome it with good.

The Christian Ethic: *Unconditional Kindness*

Here's my summary of the Christian ethic when we are wronged: ***Unconditional kindness***.

Is this a good summary of the language of Romans 12:17ff?

- "Do what is honorable" (v. 17)
- "Live peaceably" (v. 18)
- Provide food and drink for your enemy (v. 19)
- "Overcome evil with good" (v. 21)

What is normal human behavior? Payback. Settle the score. Get even. He's gonna get what's coming to him. *One of these days, Alice!* In big and small ways, the currency of our world is payback.

It's part of what makes Christianity so radical. God pays back by paying for our wrongs himself. Jesus is God's payback. The one who didn't wrong God took God's wrath for all our wrongs upon himself. We express that same gospel ethic when we choose kindness instead of revenge. Unconditional kindness.

Let's get practical with categories of wrong.

I've been physically injured by someone, what should I do?

Time to sign up for MMA training and hope you run into him on the streets, right? Wrong. The Christian way is non-retaliation; unconditional kindness. Jesus said it this way:

"You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well." (Matthew 5:38-40)

If someone slaps you, turn the other cheek. This famous phrase is debated. I think we have to understand the broader point, which is the same one Paul makes: unconditional kindness means not returning evil back. We hear this sort of thing at our house. Kiralee whacks Madeline. We reprimand her. What is her justification? Madeline hit me first. Get that? It's okay to do evil if evil has been done to me.

If someone slaps your face, there are many options that don't include punching back. Stand your ground but don't retaliate. Walk away. Run, if necessary. You can turn the other cheek, but it might be best to get your cheek out of there as fast you can.

A cheek slap is different from a knife or a gunshot. If someone is trying to kill you, do you have to let them? No. If someone is doing violence against a family member, do we sit idly by? No. Other principles also apply like the 6th commandment that human life is precious and should therefore be protected. Human life is valuable—including your own.

Turn the other cheek is not an absolute in all situations. It does point out that evil against us is not permission for us to do evil back.

I've been swindled, what should I do?

It's not hard for me to think of a handful of fairly significant financial wrongs done against me over the years. Dishonest people taking advantage of the nice young pastor. *What will he do?* None have taken me under, but there have been some doozies along the way. Was I happy about it? Did I burst into the Hallelujah Chorus? No. I was angry. Hurt. Tempted to mention what their business did from the pulpit as delicious payback. When people defraud you, it's hard to get over it. We remember financial wrongs.

Defrauding comes in various forms of stealing: theft of possessions, embezzlement, identity theft, unjust estate settlements, family money squabbles, dishonest money managers, and failed integrity on many levels. Many years ago, at no fault of our own, our church suffered a very significant financial loss in a construction project. It was money lost that we are still paying on. These things happen. They can be complex matters and I don't want to gloss over the challenges of it.

What should you do when it happens? Does unconditional kindness mean you keep doing business with them? No. Does it mean you trust them still? No. Endorse their business on Facebook? No. Do you keep the embezzling employee on staff because you want to be kind to them? No. Are you required to send them Christmas cards? No.

Does Romans 12 apply when I have been defrauded? Yes. Does this mean we cannot seek legal avenues because I have to be kind? That depends. Again, in a few verses Paul identifies government as one means of justice in this world and legal avenues of how Caesar rules over us. Here's another factor: is this person a Christian?

Tucked away in 1 Corinthians 6 is a passage that says,

"When one of you has a grievance against another, does he dare go to law before the unrighteous instead of the saints? Or do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if the world is to be judged by you, are you incompetent to try trivial cases? Do you not know that we are to judge angels? How much more, then, matters pertaining to this life! So if you have such cases, why do you lay them before those who have no standing in the church? I say this to your shame. Can it be that there is no one among you wise enough to settle a dispute between the brothers, but brother goes to law against brother, and that before unbelievers? To have lawsuits at all with one another is already a defeat for you. Why not rather suffer wrong? Why not rather be defrauded?" (1 Corinthians 6:1-7)

There's more here than time allows, but Paul has a perspective on wrongs Christians do against each other. Paul is not saying Christians shouldn't ever use the courts or the judicial system. Paul himself did so when he appealed to Caesar (Acts 25:11). Also, Paul is not talking about criminal matters. That is a role the state must play in punishing the evildoer. He is talking about civil matters. Grievances. Disputes between two parties. Most of these fall into the categories of *my rights, my name, my money, my property*. Is it right to sue

another Christian in the public courts? This is a complex question. Peacemaker Ministries has done an excellent job working through them. Check them out online. But the broad answer is no. Christians should not sue other Christians. Does that mean we can't have justice? No. Paul urges these disputes settled with Christian mediation in the church. It's not that there is no recourse when it's a fellow Christian. God cares about justice. But Paul ends with the same point Jesus makes in turning the other cheek, why not suffer wrong? Why not choose to be defrauded?

The Christian ethic here is the opposite of the litigious culture we live in where people will sue whether they have standing or not in hopes of gouging any dollar they can out of anyone they can. When the dollar is your god, you sue any chance you get. But when God is your God, you are willing to suffer loss for the sake of Jesus' name. Where does our heart go for justice when we choose non-retaliation? Romans 12. God will repay. It's his promise. How? Jail. Cross. Hell.

I remember I once had a situation where I was convinced I was being taken advantage of. Yet, to not pay would potentially reflect badly on me and the church. I took a deep breath, wrote the check, put it in the mailbox. Was I smiling? No. Singing the Halleluiah Chorus? No! I got back into the house and a few minutes later, my phone rang. It was my tax preparer. He said, "Hey, I just realized I made a mistake on your taxes and I'll amend them. You are going to get [this much more] back than I had told you." He said the amount; it was within a few dollars of exactly the amount I had just put in the mailbox. That's when I broke into the Hallelujah Chorus. God blessed in that situation. I have experiences where that never happened. But it illustrates that God has plenty of resources to make up for losses we incur to others when we choose unconditional kindness to glorify Him. We can trust him.

Here are a few questions to ask,

- *Is this worth the time, distraction, and emotional toll to seek justice?*
- *Will doing so shine a negative light on my testimony for Jesus?*
- *Is there a kindness that could draw the other person's attention to my faith in Jesus?*
- *Can I bring myself to do it for Jesus' sake?*

I've been slandered, what should I do?

Swindle is financial wrong. Slander is verbal wrong that besmirches your character. These wrongs are incredibly painful. As a longtime leader, I know this sting well. *Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me.* Is that true? No. People say lots of things but mostly people are cowards and say things behind our backs they would never say to our face. Whispers. Insinuations. Lies. Gossip. Backstabbing.

Sometimes they do go public and the power of social media gives slander steroids. Have you ever been slandered on social media? How does that feel? We all experience this on one level or another. What does unconditional kindness look like in the face of slander?

It is so easy to reply in kind. Let's face it, we all have qualities worthy of slander and the better we know each other, the more ammo we have. This is why family gossip is the easiest; we know each other's dirty laundry. When a family member pretends to have the moral high ground to criticize another family member, boom! *You said that about me, let's talk about how you can't keep a job, and don't make me bring up how much you drank at the family reunion...*

Here is where Jesus gives a powerful example.

"When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly." (1 Peter 2:23)

Jesus is the only one with the moral high ground to verbally assess anyone. In the famous story of the woman caught in adultery, Jesus writes in the sand. Eventually all the woman's accusers leave. It is speculated he wrote in the sand the sins of the Pharisees. Imagine him writing the names of women they had slept with. That would empty the room quickly. We don't know. His response to the woman is kindness: *Go and sin no more.*

"When he was reviled, he did not revile in return" (1 Peter 2:23). Could he? Doesn't Jesus know the secret sins of the human heart? Yes. What did he do? He entrusted himself to his heavenly Father. He cared more what God thought of him than what man thought of him. When people criticize us, we should pause and ask, what is true here? One thing about criticism, it's always sincere. Criticism is free counseling. What is true here? Sometimes slander should lead us to find the truth in it and seek to reconcile with the other over it. Is there even 1% of this that is true? Humble yourself, go to them, and seek the 1% right. Don't use it as pretext to go off on their hypocrisy or how wrong they are with the 99%. Make the 1% right.

But in the end, what people say doesn't matter. It's what God thinks that matters. That may be comforting, but it should mostly be terrifying. God knows us far better than our harshest critic.

But there is comfort as well when we are wrongly accused. Entrust yourself to God's opinion. Cry out to him that your name would be cleared. Read the Psalms which echo this so often. Entrust yourself to God.

And let the character of your life over time silence the slander. Time tends to reveal things. Nobody's perfect, but if your character is consistently toward the things of God, your testimony will be like Teflon. Nothing sticks. Winning a war means losing some battles along the way. We win the war by not returning evil and taking a posture of peace even with those who treat us badly.

I have an over-the-top example which should put our struggles in perspective. On October 2, 2006, in the Amish community of Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania, Charles Roberts entered the one room schoolhouse, told the boys and teacher to leave, and tied up the 10 remaining girls. He told them, *"I'm angry at God and I need to punish some Christian girls to get even with him."*¹ He shot 8 of the 10 girls before killing himself as police arrived. A horrific crime.

To this day, what makes the Nickel Mines school shooting stand out from the many others was the response of the Amish community. How? The Amish culture prizes forgiveness. Before the day was out, Amish women had brought meals to the widow of the man who murdered their daughters. They publicly forgave this man. They even raised money to give to the murderer's widow to meet her ongoing needs. In response, the murderer's widow, Marie Roberts, wrote a letter to the Amish in which she said, *"Your love for our family has helped to provide the healing we so desperately need. Your compassion has reached beyond our family, beyond our community, and is changing our world."*²

¹ Chris Brauns, *Unpacking Forgiveness* (Draft copy), page unknown.

² Ibid, page unknown.

When we are wronged, unconditional kindness speaks more powerfully than our words ever can. Who might God be calling you to such kindness for Jesus' sake? Can you do it? Ask God to help you. "*Do not be overcome by evil, overcome evil with good.*"

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