

## When We've Been Wronged

### Romans 12:17-21

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Imagine with me that someone in your orbit does something that hurts you. That's not so hard to imagine, is it? Why none of us escape being wronged? If you're young, it's the mean girls. If you're old, it's the golden girls. In between, life is unfortunately filled with people wronging us. The hurt we experience comes on a spectrum from small slights and offenses all the way to theft, fraud, violence, and outright evil. One look at the Bible and we see that this is the way it has been since Adam and Eve sinned. Genesis 3, Adam blames Eve; Eve blames Satan. Genesis 4, Cain murders Abel. And the wronging has continued unabated ever since.

The English language has many synonyms for "wrong" including cheat, defame, defraud, abuse, discredit, afflict, injure, swindle, victimize, malign, maltreat, oppress, deceive, persecute, and on and on. There are a lot of synonyms because it takes a lot of words to describe all the wronging going on.

Anyone coming to your mind, yet? Just wait, this sermon is going to resuscitate things you'd just as soon forget and resurrect people to your mind you'd just as soon, do what? What would be the natural, fleshly thing you want to do to so-and-so?

That is what our text today gets at. *What are we to do?* We cannot avoid injurious actions by others. We cannot control others but we can control our response. There's a path to winning that frees the heart and can set the offending party free as well. I told you last week that normal Christianity is radical. How? In Romans 12:14-16 we are called to bless those who curse us, rejoice with those who outshine us, weep with those who are weeping, and offer ourselves with love and friendship to the lowly in society. That's a totally radical life. But they pale in comparison to our text this week. If you are choking on last week, you're going to drown this week. Here is what it says,

*"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).*

This may sound like crazy talk to you but let's first see this in its broader redemptive context. How did Jesus conduct himself? How did he respond to people who maligned him and even those who did violence against him? Did he retaliate? No. To the contrary, his response was somewhere between silence and doing good to his enemies. I could give the examples but for the sake of time, I think you have those examples coming to mind. The founder and hero of the story did not use the power at his fingertips for revenge or to get even. He prayed for his executioners asking God to forgive them for they knew not what they were doing.

It is this Jesus who summons us to follow him. How do we follow? In faith. Trust. And in following his life example. Underlying this whole section is a Christology both in what Jesus

taught and how he lived. Jesus was a non-retaliatory Messiah and Christianity is a non-retaliatory faith.

One of my quarantine book readings is an autobiography by John Paton who was a pioneer missionary to the islands we now call Vanuatu. The native peoples practiced a kind of retaliatory religion in which their dispute with other tribes suddenly erupted into a mini war, each war requiring the losing tribe to get revenge. A cycle of violence over generations. Their practice after killing their enemy was to literally eat them. Imagine introducing Christianity's worldview when the starting point is retaliation and cannibalism. No two things could be further apart. You may think that uncivilized, but are we so different? Napoleon once quoted a Roman emperor who said, "The corpse of an enemy always smells sweet."<sup>1</sup> Who says things like that? That depraved inner part of us.

The gospel calls us out of the retaliatory life. In fact, it is a call to relinquish our rights to retaliation and replace them with Christlikeness. How to do that is the point of this passage. You will see there are don'ts and do's. There is something a Christian must not do along with a corresponding positive alternative. Don'ts and Do's.

### **Don't Retaliate; Do Live Honorably**

*"Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all" (v. 17).*

This verse serves as the foundation of the others and introduces the basic Christian ethic of non-retaliation. Paul did not create this; Jesus did in both his words and his actions.

- *"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God" (Matthew 5:9).*
- *"But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 5:44).*
- *"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. And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles" (Matthew 5:38-41).*

In each of these examples, the emphasis is on valuing something more than whatever debt the evil done against us creates. What is it? In conflict, the Christian must value the reputation of Jesus and our testimony as Christians above winning the argument or fight. *"Give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all" (Romans 12:17).* The Greek word for *thought* is "to think ahead; pre-thought." Be controlled. Be measured and intentional.

Retaliation is unmeasured and escalates the conflict. It pours gas on the fire. How easily silly things can take on a life of their own. I read two days ago about two neighbors here in Indiana who went to war over grass clippings on the wrong side of their property line. The one Hoosier attacked the other with his weed trimmer. This man is now infamous for grass clippings.

Pre-think your response. We say things in retaliation we would never say if we took some time to think about it. Here is a good tip when emotions erupt—don't be quick to respond.

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<sup>1</sup> An unknown Roman emperor (as quoted by Napoleon), as quoted by Susan Punzel Conner, *The Age of Napoleon* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2004), 95.

How often have I written an email in anger and something inside says, *why don't you think or pray about this before you hit send?* I rarely regret sleeping on it.

When we refuse to retaliate, it tamps down the volatility. Proverbs says, "*a soft answer turns away wrath*" (Proverbs 15:1). People notice. It's honorable and it actually serves to make the gospel attractive. If we can, we must see conflict as opportunity. We can make great headway *relationally* and *reputationally* in the way we respond in conflict.

Many, many years ago, a now former member of our church didn't realize I was in the grocery line behind him. He loudly berated the checkout lady for a mistake on his bill. He made a huge scene. I don't know how much her mistake was but how bad could it be? A double-charged jar of peanut butter or a gallon of milk? He left in a total huff. What price did he have on his reputation, Christ's reputation, and his ability to share the love of Christ? I would put it at about \$2.99.

This verse urges us to take a deep breath, sleep on it, go slow, and be measured. I think of that powerful scene in *To Kill a Mockingbird* when Bob Elwell goads Atticus Finch into fighting him. Elwell actually spits in his face. With great dignity, Atticus slowly pulls out a handkerchief, wipes his face, walks past him and leaves. It stands out because it's so unusual.

But wait, didn't Jesus get spit on? Didn't Jesus get beaten? Did Jesus have the power to clear the room of the legion of Roman soldiers? What would Son-of-God-level retaliation have looked like? He hinted when he said he could in an instant summon 10,000 angels to protect him. But he didn't. Was that weakness? Was Jesus not manly enough? Or is true strength power under control? "*Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation*" (1 Peter 2:12).

### **If possible, live peaceably with all**

*"If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all"* (Romans 12:18).

This is a precious little verse which I have gone to so many times in ministry over the years. I love it because it has both law and grace in it. The law is we must live peaceably with all. Within the church. Outside the church. We should be peaceable-type folk. Slow to anger, abounding in love. Christians should be peacemakers not peace breakers. Why? The gospel is a message of love and it creates in us a kindness and softness. The problem person in the neighborhood shouldn't be the Jesus follower. We won't go to war over grass clippings. We shouldn't be the prickly person in the office or the agitator at the school board meetings. Why? "*Strive for peace with everyone*" (Hebrews 12:14).

But Paul has no utopic view on things. Notice the first part, "***if possible, live peaceably.***" Disney can tell us, *and they lived happily ever after*, but we all know that's a lie. Why? Whenever people are involved, there will be conflict. It is inevitable. Even the early church with incredible miracles and thousands turning to Jesus struggled to get along with each other. Paul had famous conflicts with Peter and Barnabas. in Philippians, he urges Euodia and Syntyche to get along—two women in the church who had a falling out.

The reality in this fallen world is that sometimes peace isn't possible. There are situations that are so tangled and filled with so much hurt, that peace is impossible. But here's the thing—it must be impossible because the other person refuses to reconcile. The door for peacemaking should always be open on our side. But it takes two to make peace.

This verse should only be applied after sincere and prolonged efforts to resolve matters. Sadly, these do happen. After coming on 30 years of pastoral ministry, I've seen it many times where one party is willing but the other is not. Make sure if there's no peace, it's not your side keeping it from happening.

### **Don't Seek Vengeance; Do Let God Make it Right**

*"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" (Romans 12:19).*

Avenging. Americans like avenging. The top-grossing movies of the last several years had as their heroes *The Avengers*. This theme of vengeance appeals to us. There is something about people getting their comeuppance, the chickens coming home to roost, people getting what's coming to them. We like that. It feels good to us especially when the chickens aren't coming to our house to roost.

But look what it says, *"Beloved."* It's as if Paul knows this is a hard truth. *"Never avenge yourselves."* *Did he just say, never?* *"Never avenge yourselves."* *What? I have to do something. It is so absolutely frustrating when \_\_\_\_\_ does \_\_\_\_\_ and it makes me want to \_\_\_\_\_.* He doesn't say, *don't struggle with frustration or annoyance.* That would seem impossible. But he does say, *don't take matters of revenge into your own hands.*

Well what am I supposed to do? *"Leave it to the wrath of God."* The language literally means, "make room for wrath." The wrath of God is a key theme in Romans. It was introduced in chapter 1: all of us deserve the wrath of God. We are all sinners who fall short of God's glory. Yet God's wrath was satisfied in Jesus' atoning work for us on the cross. Trust in Jesus and God's wrath is not set against you anymore.

That doesn't mean the wrath of God is gone. Indeed, God is angry with sin and sinners and we have a promise here from God. He quotes Deuteronomy 32:35. *"Vengeance is mine."* Who has the right to avenge? God does. *"I will repay," says the Lord*" (Romans 12:19). There is a promise from God. God is going to make every wrong right. How? It is a function of his wrath, holiness, and judgment.

### **The Vengeance of God**

#### **Civic/government punishment**

In just a few verses in chapter 13, Paul says God uses government as a weapon of wrath. One role of government is to punish the evildoer. When it does, it is living out its God-ordained role of avenging evil. Here it is, *"For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer"* (Romans 13:4).

In June we will explore chapter 13, the clearest teaching in the Bible on the role of government. Does that seem slightly relevant right now?

#### **The cross**

The cross of Jesus was where divine wrath met divine love. The infinite debt of our sin collided with the infinite power of God's wrath as Jesus satisfied that wrath with the infinite righteousness of himself. Jesus experienced God's wrath against sin in our place. The result

is that every wrong or offense any Christian does against us is already avenged on the cross. If that's not good enough for you, then you have a very deficient understanding of the cross.

## **Hell**

Hell is God's wrath absent God's love. It's wrath unabated forever. What does it mean to leave room for God's wrath? It means that when I am wronged, I don't have to avenge anything. God is the avenger and every wrong done against us is either avenged at the cross or in hell. Nobody gets away with anything. Make room, like on a subway where you slide over. *It's like, okay God, giving you space to take care of this one.* God promises, *I will.*

I believe this last Halloween the number one costume of choice among boys was an Avenger. Millions of boys pretending to be an Avenger. When we retaliate, we are all pretending to be the Avenger. We are taking God's role into our own hands. We are vigilantes. We doubt God will take care of it. So we give back evil for evil, insult for insult, lawsuit for lawsuit, dollar for dollar, violence for violence. Why? *Because I'm Ironman!*

No. In fact, how does it go in marriage or family or with neighbors or in the church when we pretend to be an Avenger? It doesn't make things better; it almost always makes things worse. The knot is more tangled. The issues more unresolvable. Now there's more baggage and the other person derives some Machiavellian pleasure in knowing they got your goat. But when we respond with kindness or generosity, it does something to them.

## **Don't Seek Vengeance; Do be Kind to Your Enemy**

*"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'"* (Romans 12:20).

*"Heap burning coals on their head."* It is debated what this means, but in context it must mean that kindness instead of vengeance exposes the other person's hatred even more starkly. This may lead them to shame or remorse and even reconciliation.

Two quick examples. I have counseled brokenhearted women whose boyfriend broke up with them to be nothing but kind. If instead she turns into a crazy woman and chooses to slander him to anyone who will listen, sends him hate texts, and threatens to sue him, he lays in bed and thinks, *I made the greatest decision of my life.* If she is kind to him, kind to his mother, and thanks him for the time they had together, he lays in bed every night and thinks, *I have made the worst decision of my life.* Burning coals.

I have a dear friend who had a key staff member that totally stabbed him in the back. They had a major falling out. It wasn't pretty. Sometime later my friend took his family to a nice restaurant in the area. A little later this former staff member came in with his family and sat in another part of the same restaurant. My friend finished his meal. He paid for his meal and also quietly paid for the former staff member's whole table and left. What did that former staff member think as he realized the generous kindness from his detractor? Burning coals.

That is the power of loving our enemies. And isn't this how God has treated us? Before you say, *it's wrong to not repay evil for evil*, was God wrong when he loved us, his enemies? Was God weak when he gave Jesus hell instead of us? Our whole faith is built on God NOT repaying evil for evil. Instead, he met our spiritual hunger with the gospel of Jesus. He quenched our spiritual thirst with the eternal water of eternal life.

How did God overcome evil? He overcame evil with the infinite good of his sovereign grace and sovereign love given freely to us by faith in Jesus.

This is a two-part message. There will be more next weekend. What situation might God be calling you to apply this to this week? Who has wronged you that you could extend kindness to? Why don't you pray about that and ask God what he would have you do?

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