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Romans 12:14, 17-21 “How to Respond to Hatred and Hurt”

Intro. We have all been hurt by others. When was the last time someone hurt you with their words? When was the last time you were hurt with rejection, or some thoughtless deed? Sometimes the deepest hurt can involve family and close friends. Some of you have been hurt from marital conflict, and some have experienced the pain of divorce. Sometimes your own children have hurt you. A friend may betray you. A co-worker or fellow student can act in hateful ways toward you at times.

The Christians in Rome evidently experienced painful conflict within the fellowship, for Paul addresses the problem of disunity in this letter. Yes, even in churches people say and do things that bring hurt unto others. Furthermore, the Bible says that if we live godly in Christ Jesus, we will be persecuted and hurt by the unbelievers of this world. History tells us that shortly after Paul wrote this letter, the believers in Rome faced severe persecution by the Emperor Nero. Like Jesus, they were despised and rejected of men. Paul himself wrote these words having experienced multiple attacks, even upon his life.

As long as you associate with people, you run the risk of getting hurt. So we need to know how to respond to hatred and hurt. I learned a principle a long time ago that has been very helpful to me and that is this: you and I have little control over what others do to us, but we are responsible for how we *respond* to those who hurt us, and that’s the core issue that were going to talk about this morning. The answer to the problem of facing hurt is not withdrawal or throwing up defensive mechanisms. The answer is not to get even and thus attempt to make the person regret ever hurting us. Rather, Paul teaches us in this text of Scripture the gracious way God wants you to *respond* in such cases.

A lot of what Paul says here is reminiscent of the Sermon on the Mount. What he says here is contrary to the way the world lives and is contrary to the way we might naturally think. Most everyone says you have to fight back or get even. But don’t reject what the Bible teaches just because it goes against your natural thinking. In Isa. 55:8 God says, “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways” (NKJV). Also Prov. 3:5 says, “Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding” (NKJV). And right here in this chapter, v.2, Paul says that our lives are not to be conformed to the world but be transformed by the renewing of our minds. The Christian life involves a new way of thinking, that leads to a new way of living. So it is my heart’s desire that the way you respond to hatred and hurt will be transformed by God’s Word today.

So notice first of all that we should:

I. REJECT THE WRONG WAYS TO RESPOND TO THOSE WHO HURT US

When people say hurtful words to you, or when they do something to you that demonstrates animosity, how are you to respond as a Christian? Do you feel that someone should pay for the pain they have inflicted? Well, notice what Paul says:

A. Don't Respond with Cursing – Paul says in v.14, “Bless¹ those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.” There Paul is not primarily talking about using profanity against someone. The Greek word for “curse” (*kataraoimai*) is used of Jesus cursing the fig tree so that it withered (Mk. 11:21). I'm sure Jesus did not use profanity when He cursed the fig tree. So what Paul specifically has in mind is wishing or invoking harm upon someone, usually by means of some spiritual or divine power. You are not to pray a curse upon them or use profanity to wish that they would experience eternal damnation. That is such a common practice of non-Christians, but we see here that no Christian is to engage in such a verbal assault.

Anyone can control their tongue in *certain* situations, but the real test is when you are angry from being hurt. If you have been born again, and if you rely upon the help of the Holy Spirit, you *can* obey this command. So when you are hurt, control your tongue! Don't curse your adversary. Secondly:

B. Don't Respond by Doing Wrong in Return - Paul says in v.17, “Repay no one evil for evil.” Actually, like the Old Testament word *ra*, this word can refer to the harm that results from evil.² So the Greek here can be translated, “To not even one pay hurt for hurt,” or “harm for harm.” When someone does wrong to you, and hurts you, does that give you the right to do hurt them in return? It is wrong to do wrong. We are not to indulge in vindictive retaliation. This is not just an isolated teaching. We find this same specific instruction at least 2 other times in Scripture (1 Th. 5:15; 1 Peter 3:9). Jesus taught in Matthew 5:38 that we are to live a better life than extracting an “Eye for an eye and tooth for tooth.” We are not to engage in tit-for-tat. This is the way we are to live.

Once again, this is opposite from the behavior of the world. They say, “If you slit my tires, I am going to slit yours. If you burn my house, I am going to burn your house.” So often people get caught up in a never-ending cycle of paying back evil for evil. This is one reason why gang violence in the streets of America never ends and seems to be getting worse and worse. They have been fighting in the Middle East for centuries because they keep paying evil for evil.

I remember an incident when I was in high school. We were sitting at the lunch table, and a boy took my milk and poured it into my soup. Well, I wanted to take his milk and pour it into *his* soup, or better yet, I wanted to pour his milk on his head! But at that point in my life I had begun studying the Bible, and I knew that I should not pay back evil for evil, so I didn't do it. Besides, I only weighed 120 pounds and thought the better of it! But even if you are in a position to successfully pay back evil for evil, don't.

One of the finest illustrations of this truth in the Bible is from the life of David when he was treated so shamefully by King Saul. In fact, Saul tried to murder him on several occasions, and often persecuted him. Yet when David and his men came upon Saul's camp, they were all sleeping. David and his commander Abishai had the opportunity to kill him with one thrust of his own spear. Yet David would not take advantage of his enemy. He did not pay evil for evil, but rather good for evil. That was the second time David had the opportunity to kill his enemy and refused to do so [1 Sam. 28:5-12; 24:3-7].

So the next time someone hurts you, and does evil to you, resist the temptation to respond in like manner. Don't continue or escalate the evil and hurt but put an end to it.

Furthermore, we see a similar concept in v.19, where we see another way we should not respond to hatred and hurt:

¹ While vv.9-13 may be viewed as exhortations, beginning in v.14 Paul gives direct commands.

² Luke 16:25; Acts 9:13; 16:28; 28:5; Rom. 13:10; 2 Tim. 4:14; Jas. 3:8; Rev. 16:2.

C. Don't Respond with Personal Vengeance – There Paul says, “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.’” Here he is saying that we are not to take justice into our own hands. You are not to take it upon yourself to judge, convict, and punish those who hurt you.

Instead, notice that Paul also says we are to “leave it to the wrath of God.” The words “of God” are not even in the Greek text, but it is clear from the quotation from Deuteronomy (32:35) that follows that Paul *is* talking about God’s wrath.³ Paul literally says, “give place to wrath.” Based on how that little phrase is used elsewhere,⁴ “to give place” to God’s wrath means to yield to God, recognizing it is *His* place to judge and inflict wrath. The essence of ungodliness is that we presume to take the place of God, to take everything into our own hands. The way of faith is to recognize that God is judge, and to trust Him to take care of the execution of vengeance and retribution. He is a perfectly just God, who will not ultimately allow evil to go unpunished.

So in order to avoid violating this principle of Scripture, you need to control your anger. You see, if you respond to hurt with anger, you will be more likely to respond in the wrong way. Now it’s okay to rebuke them, and give them an opportunity to explain or defend themselves, but you are not to rush to judgment and take vengeance upon them.

Think of the example of Christ: “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; cf. Psalm 37:5-13). We know that God will either protect all who are His own or at least bring justice to bear in His own time.

Argumentation: There are several ★ reasons why it is best to leave vengeance to God and others. First of all, you do not know the heart of that person and all of the circumstances involved, but God does. You and I can misjudge people, but God does not. He knows if that person meant to hurt you, or it was meant as a joke, or whether it was just a moment of weakness. Secondly, you cannot be an impartial judge and jury in your *own* case. The main point is that we are to leave it to others to inflict punishment, starting with God Himself. Yet he has ordained the process to follow. If the person who hurt you is a Christian, follow Mt. 18:15-18 and if need be, have the elders of the church decide (see also 1 Cor. 6:1-8). If you are dealing with an unbeliever who has likely broken the law, then you can have civil authorities decide. Paul talks about their role in chapter 13. In v.4 of that chapter, we see that the magistrate is even given the power of the sword to avenge the evil-doer. Criminals need to be stopped or they will hurt or even kill other people. But if the civil authorities let him off without punishment, then remember that God is the final judge and He will inflict wrath in due time.

Christianity does not promote an easy-going tolerance of evil. After all, Paul said in v.9 that we are to abhor evil.⁵ While avoiding harm to people, we must always be ready to battle against evil, especially with the truth of the Word of God (Eph. 6:17). Paul is not addressing the issue of self-defense, or defending the innocent, but mainly how we should respond after the harm has already been done. Paul did use his Roman citizenship and the rights that afforded him for his own defense on more than one occasion (Acts __:__).

There is another reason why you should not pay evil for evil, and take vengeance into your own hands that is given right here in the text. Paul says in v.21, “Do not be overcome by

³ Also, “wrath” is preceded by the definite article, and points to a special wrath, God’s wrath.

⁴ Eph 4:27 says, “nor give place to the devil.” In Luke 14:9 it refers to yielding your seat to someone else. So it is translated “give way” (Weymouth) and “leave room” (NASB).

⁵ Though that is a stronger word than the one used here in *this* text.

evil....” When you do evil in response to evil, then evil has just been multiplied by two and perpetuated. Don’t let a sinful person bring you down to their level. Don’t let evil have the victory in your life. When you respond with animosity, unforgiveness, and vengeance, you end up poisoning your own soul.

So the next time you are hurt by someone, don’t respond with vengeance. Don’t pay back evil for evil.

It is not enough to simply reject the wrong ways to respond to those who hurt us. Instead, we should also act in positive love toward our enemies. After all, this was written in a context that began with an exhortation to practice genuine love (v.9). Jesus said in Matthew 5:44, “love your enemies, ... do good to those who hate you...” (NKJV). So I also call upon you to:

II. FOLLOW THE RIGHT WAYS TO RESPOND TO THOSE WHO HURT US

First of all, let’s consider what our goal should be:

A. We Should Strive to Live at Peace with Everyone – Paul says in v.18, “If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.” Peaceableness of disposition and behavior is a virtue to be cultivated in our relationships with all men. And notice that we are to live in peace “with all.”⁶ While we are especially admonished to live in peace with our family and fellow believers, we are also to live at peace with non-believers. We are also to do nothing to stir up strife among others. Instead, we are to be peacemakers (Mt. 5:9).

But notice the two qualifying phrases here. First, he says, “If possible....” At times living in peace is impossible in this old sinful world. At times others just will not allow it. Some are bent on conflict. Furthermore, there are times when we are to stand up for what is right, even when we know it will result in conflict. For example, beginning in 1979 we fought for changes in our Southern Baptist seminaries and other institutions, even while the liberals in power at the time were calling for peace. We felt that affirming the truth of the fundamentals of the Christian faith was more important than maintaining a peace that compromised with doctrinal error. How can we live at peace with wolves and sheep’s clothing who undermine the gospel (cf. Matt. 10:34-36; Luke 12:51-53; Gal. 1:6-8).

Our goal of living at peace with others is further qualified by the phrase, “so far as it depends on you.” We are commanded to exercise every means within *our* power to maintain peace with our fellow-men. The responsibility for discord must to no extent be traceable to failure on our part to do *all* that is compatible with truth and righteousness. Be sure that, if there is to be enmity, it is all on the other side. We have little control over the conduct of others; but the initiative in disturbing the peace is never to lie with the Christian. Nor are we the ones who are to *perpetuate* conflict. There may be some who will quarrel with you. Don’t quarrel with them.

Are you a peacemaker? Or are you a troublemaker? Clearly Paul teaches here that we are to pursue peace with others. Don’t initiate conflict, and when conflict is initiated by others, remember Proverbs 15:1 says, “A soft answer turns away wrath...” (NKJV).

Secondly:

⁶ The Greek adds *anthropos*, all men in the sense of all people.

B. We Should Respond with Blessing - Paul says in v.14, “Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.” Instead of responding to hurt with cursing, we are to bless. The word translated “bless” (*eulogeo*) has two meanings. First of all, it literally means to “speak well of, praise, extol.” It is hard to speak well of your enemies, isn’t it? But one way to win over an enemy is to speak well of them, complement them as much as possible. Most everyone has at least some good qualities. By doing so, you can really disarm their hostility.

But its meaning here probably has to do with the opposite of “to curse,” and that is to invoke God’s blessing, goodness, mercy and grace upon someone. What Paul says here is reminiscent of the Sermon on the Mount. Again, Jesus said in Matthew 5:44, “But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” Pray that God would grant the blessings of repentance of sin and forgiveness, so God would be able to bless them with other blessings as well.

Jesus is our great example. From His cross of suffering He asked God to forgive His enemies, “for they know not what they do” (NKJV).

So the next time someone curses you, or speaks evil to you, respond with blessing. No practical exhortation places greater demands upon our spirits than to “bless them that persecute” us.

Furthermore, when people hurt us:

C. We Should Do Good Instead of Evil – Paul says in v.17, “give thought to do what is honorable in the sight⁷ of all.” The word translated “honorable” (*kalos*) is often translated “good.” Yet this particular word refers to goodness or acts of goodness that are viewed as beautiful, noble, admirable or honorable. Do what even unbelievers will view as admirable conduct. Remember, you represent Jesus in this world, who went about doing good (Acts 10:38).

Now when dealing with people who hurt us, this is not likely going to be spontaneous behavior. So Paul literally says that we are “to think beforehand” (*pronooeo*), or plan ahead to do good or admirable things before and for men. When dealing with an evil or hurtful person, we have to make a choice to plan to do something good for that person. After all, the *spontaneous* reaction would be to hurt them back. The idea here seems to be that the true follower of Christ is to face life with definite consideration of all that he must do; to ponder the effects of his actions on other people; so unbelievers will at least respect and admire his goodness and love. By obeying this command, we can disarm their hostility.

Finally, in v.21 we see a similar concept:

D. We Should Overcome Evil with Goodness – Paul says in the last of v.21 that we are to “overcome evil with good (*agathos*).” The world tries to overcome evil either with weak compromise, or with strong retribution. Neither will work. If hatred is met with hatred the result is only more hatred. We Christians are to overcome evil with good, for God is good, and God is stronger than the devil and all evil.

In the quotation of v.20 Paul gives two examples of good we can do: “if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink....” The best way to get rid of an

⁷ Or “before” (*enopion*), “in the presence of.”

enemy is to turn him into a friend,⁸ and so “overcome evil with good.” We are not to be vanquished ethically by the evil heaped upon us. On the contrary, by well-doing we are to be the instruments of quenching the animosity and the ill-doing of those who persecute and maltreat us. In so doing we bless that person in obedience to v.14.

It is reported that a man in Massachusetts many years ago found his neighbor’s horse in his field. He was angry about it and took the horse to the public pound. Meeting the owner soon after this, he told him what he had done, and added, “If I catch him there again, I will do the same thing.” The neighbor replied, “Well, the other night I looked out of my window and saw your cattle in my field. I took your cattle and drove them over to your house, and put them in your barn, and fixed the gate. If I catch them there again, I will do the same thing.” That man was so struck with his neighbor’s kind reply, and so ashamed of his own behavior that he at once took the horse out of the pound and paid the charges himself.⁹ Oh, how much better our world would be if we all extended such grace.

Argumentation: Paul gives a good reason why God’s way is better: In the quotation from Proverbs 25:21 he says, “for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.” Paul is probably not talking about adding to their punishment. That just doesn’t fit the overall context, though it can relate to the last of v.19, where he refers to God’s judgment. Coals of fire are associated with God’s wrath a few times in the Old Testament (Ps. 18:8-13; 140:10). So the meaning could be that if your enemy continues his animosity in spite of such kind treatment, they would only add to their condemnation. However, it seems more likely that the original force may have been, “Treat your enemy kindly for that will increase his sense of burning shame.” There was an ancient Egyptian ritual that a man would perform when he wanted to demonstrate his public shame and his spirit of repentance. He would do so by carrying a pan of burning coals and ashes on his head, which was supposed to represent the burning pain of shame and guilt.¹⁰ Paul is saying that when you treat an enemy with love by showing kindness to him, you create a burning shame in him for the evil he has done and lead him to his repentance. The hot coals of love and goodness will often melt a hard, cold heart, and will lead the sinner to question the reason for such kindness. One purpose for our kindness is to allow the conscience of the enemy to do its job.

Though we are sinners deserving of judgment, God has extended His grace and goodness to us. Let us extend the same grace to others. Will you “overcome evil with good” the next time you encounter evil?

Conclusion: You have probably seen the movie, *Fireproof*. In the movie a couple had been married for seven years and their marriage had deteriorated to frequent conflict. She would say something somewhat hurtful to him and he would just dish it back to her. He would say something out of turn and she would just dish it back to him, paying evil for evil. They got to the point where they were heading to divorce. So Caleb’s father challenged him to hold off for 40 days. He gave him the book, *The Love Dare*. He said, “If you’ll just work through that book for 40 days, then we’ll see what you should do after that.” He started reading that book and I remember from the story that he was taught not to respond in like manner. Sure enough, when

⁸ Abraham Lincoln said something similar.

⁹ John F. Brand, *Echoes From the Brierpatch*.

¹⁰ Swindoll (p.266) says this could referred to someone allowing his household fire to go completely out and having to admit that to a neighbor to is shame. Then he would ask to borrow hot coals which she would bring home in a pan.

she started dishing hostile words out to him, he held his peace and didn't dish it right back. Then he started trying to do little acts of kindness and goodness for his wife. At first his heart really wasn't in it and it wasn't very sincere but the further he went through that 40-day journey, the more he really meant it and began doing more and more acts of goodness for his wife, including taking care of her when she was sick. Things didn't change much until he did the ultimate act of selfless goodness. His wife Catherine went to the home care store to talk with a clerk about the unpaid equipment her mother needed. The clerk told her that all the equipment had been paid for in full and was being installed at her mother's house. That equipment totaled over \$24,000. Only later did she find out that her husband made the sacrifice to pay for that equipment. So with the love of Christ and a new kind of a life of goodness, he overcame the hurt and the marriage was restored through forgiveness and love.

That's what God wants to do in our relationships. After all, God is the ultimate Example of One who blesses those who have cursed Him and doing good to those who hate him, giving them showers from heaven for an abundance of food and drink, and giving them His own Son to die for them on the cross. God is greater than evil. Christ overcame the greatest evil with the greatest good we can imagine. If we follow God's way, we will overcome evil with good and with love.

The only way you can live this kind of a life is with the love of God in your heart. It is not necessarily the easy way to live but it is the right way to live. With the world's way you only get never ending conflict. With God's way, you will either win your enemies over to salvation and friendship, or they will typically at least leave you alone and be at peace with you because they will have to admire and respect you for your kindness.

Sources: William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible Series: The Letter to the Romans* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1957); Donald Grey Barnhouse, *Expositions of Bible Doctrines Taking the Epistle to the Romans as a Point of Departure*, vol. IV, "God's Discipline" (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964); F.F. Bruce, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: The Epistle of Paul to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963); Bruce Corley & Curtis Vaughan, *Romans: A Study Guide Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976); John MacArthur, Jr., *Supernatural Living: Study Notes on Romans 12:9-21* (Panorama City, CA: Word of Grace Communications, 1985); Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture*, Vol. 12 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977 reprint); Douglas J. Moo, *The NIV Application Commentary: Romans* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000); Dale Moody, *The Broadman Bible Commentary: Romans*, Vol. 10 (Nashville: Broadman, 1970); John Murray, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1965); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [Ver. 5:80] (Ontario: onlinebible.net, 2021); Charles R. Swindoll, *Swindoll's New Testament Insights on Romans* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010); Kenneth S. Wuest's *Word Studies From the Greek New Testament*, Vol. 1, Romans (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1955). Other sources listed in the footnotes. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Crossway, Good News Publishers, 2001). For further study on this topic, see 1 Peter 2:11-4:11.