

All of the wisdom that exists... calls you to cast-off and throw away everything that I am about to preach ... (and no one would be able to find fault with the soundness of your judgment) ... unless you have a relationship with God that clings to the truth that He will never leave you nor forsake you. ... [P A U S E] ... This sermon will be total nonsense... absolute gibberish... so reject and ignore it completely... unless you can see yourself as having (or at the very least – God is developing in you) a deep-seated trust in His personal care of you. ... [P A U S E] ... There is no hope that this message will benefit anyone at all – who is unwilling to latch onto the certainty... that God always has their best in mind... and will continually take care of them.

Paul's earlier question... (which we saw in chapter 8) demands an answer before we can apply today's passage: "*If God is for us, who is against us?*" (8:31). It's a faith question. ... [P A U S E] ... Do we really believe that God is in control... and that He will preserve us through any danger of what anyone might do to us? ... How we answer that will determine whether we will accept what our passage today teaches us to do. ... Do you have an answer for Romans 8:31...? "*If God is for us, who is against us?*" Is your answer a strong conviction...? ... [P A U S E] ... Because... look (now) at what comes up in today's study!:

"Bless those who persecute you. ... Don't curse them; pray that God will bless them" ... "Never pay back evil with more evil" ... "Do all that you can to live in peace with everyone" ... "Never take revenge" ... "If your enemies are hungry, feed them. If they are thirsty, give them something to drink" ... "Don't let evil conquer you, but conquer evil by doing good."

The desire to avenge ourselves on those who harm us is deeply rooted in human nature. It is celebrated in books and in movies (movie theaters erupt in cheers when “the bad guy” gets his due)... and it is displayed in antagonistic road rage on our highways every day. ... But God calls us (as his children) to be different. We are to imitate Christ... Who... when “*they hurled their insults at him,*” “*did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats*” (1 Peter 2:23). ... As Paul will make clear... we are to go beyond refraining from doing evil to those who harm us. ... We are to do something good for them.

Here we find one of the most distinctive of all the characteristics that are to mark Christians. ... You and I live in a world of unbelievers. And the subject of our Bible text today is: “*What is to be our relationship with them?*”

(Briefly) God expects every follower of His to control himself and to gain complete victory over his flesh. He expects the believer to give a strong testimony to the love of God... to demonstrate the love and forgiveness of God for all men.

This (of course) is all total nonsense... absolute gibberish... so reject and ignore it completely... unless you are a follower of Christ. If that is the case... then latch onto the certainty... that God always has your best in mind... and will continually take care of you. Because God is for you... no one can stand against your obedience to Him. ... Such a peaceful response seems (strangely) out of place in the modern world... where everyone is encouraged to stand up and demand their rights.

Paul will say **three** times that we are not to return evil for evil. Verse 14 commands: "*Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse.*" ... Verse 17 urges: "*Do not repay anyone evil for evil.*" ... Then... verse 21... (the last verse in the chapter) demands: "*Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*" ... Do not seek revenge is Paul's overriding theme in these verses. ... (It is why he repeats the idea.) ... But also notice how these verses establish a progression.

Here is how it develops: Verse 14 tells us that we are not to **SPEAK badly** of another person but rather to speaking good instead. ... Next verse 17 tells us that we are not to retaliate for evil done to us. (It has now moved from speaking to our actions.) ... Finally at the end (in verse 21) Paul takes us beyond anything we might **anticipate**... and tells us that not only are we not to retaliate for evil done to us... but that we are actually to do good to others and... (amazingly!) actually to **overcome the evil** of those other persons by our good conduct.

But... go ahead and ignore all of this... **unless** you are a Christian!

(You see) Paul is (in this section of Romans) is explaining how Christians are to behave toward **un**believers. (This should be normal!) ... In the two passages (just before) which we have already looked at... it was how believers are to behave toward fellow believers in the church. ... Today's focus is primarily on outsiders... BUT **ALSO** those inside church... because fellow believers sometimes hurt us (too)... and we want to retaliate. ... So let's go to our passage now...

Romans 12:14

The word for "bless" here is the same word from which we get "eulogize." When we eulogize a person at their funeral we speak well of them.

Whenever I write a eulogy for someone's funeral... I sit down with family and friends and write down as many happy memories and good character qualities of their "loved one" they can think of. Then during the funeral... I read the resulting article that is filled with good things about them. (Have you ever heard a eulogy that didn't?)

Paul commands that this should be our habitual attitude toward those who treat us badly - "Eulogize them!!!" ... No! Not in THAT sense. Don't picture them dead... ... but focus on all the good that you can think of about them. Let your mind dwell there! Then... when you speak to others... do not put-down the persecutor. Instead... mention some commendable trait. Praise some "good thing" about them. ... Do not tear him/her down.

Romans 12:14 comes directly from Jesus:

Luke 6:28 (ESV)

²⁸ *bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.*

Jesus took it further by telling us HOW we are to bless them... We are to pray for them. ... More than speaking well of one's enemies... we are to pray for their forgiveness and blessing. This is supremely radical. It is one thing not to curse your enemies... but entirely another to pray for their blessing. This is a life-changing call.

But... you don't have to do this. You can ignore it – U N L E S S... ...
... [P A U S E] ...

What happens when we pray for our persecutors? ... We will not permit hatred and bitterness to enter our hearts. Then we can watch for the blessing promised by Jesus:

Matthew 5:11 (ESV)

¹¹ *"Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.*

Think of the impact upon persecutors when an attitude of love and blessing is demonstrated toward them. Every persecutor is not won to Christ... but every persecutor does have a strong witness... (a strong witness that can be used by the Holy Spirit in the persecutor's quiet and thoughtful moments.) ... And some persecutors are won to Christ. This is what God is after.

We have in Stephen (the first martyr) an example of this principle in action. As Stephen was being stoned to death... he prayed for those who were killing him... saying, "*Lord, do not hold this sin against them*" (Acts 7:60). His prayer was heard (*too*)! ... We do not know what happened to everyone who was present at the stoning of Stephen that day... but we do know what happened to one of them. His name was Saul (later known as Paul) the author of this very letter. ... He was profoundly moved by the way Stephen prayed for his persecutors... and Stephen's death won (or at least pricked the heart of) the leader of Stephen's ritualistic stoning (Acts 26:14).

Romans 12:15

*A sorrow shared is
But half a trouble.
A joy that's shared is
A joy made double.*

Believers are to *identify* with the world in the "ups and downs" of human life... to be a healing balm for a *cold* world. ... "The world", says Chuck Swindoll, "is characterized by:

Indifference, non-commitment, disengagement, no sharing or caring... meals eaten with hi-fi headsets turned up loud, even separate bedrooms, each with a personal telephone, TV, and turntable, private toilet, and an it's none-of-your-business attitude. No hassle... no conflict... no accountability. No need to share. Or reach out. Or give a rip. Just watch the numbers and look at nobody.

Enter the loving believer—he who weeps with those who weep and rejoices with those who rejoice. He is a tonic for life—a light leading to Christ!"

Verse 15 describes "empathy." Empathy is the ability to identify closely with someone else... to make *their* case your own... and allow what has happened to *them*... to affect *you* also. ... But this is not easy to do. We often do it superficially.

(For example)... sometimes we have a difficult time in rejoicing over another person's success. ... But the believer is to *feel and act* differently than the world. So the believer is to conquer his nature. ... We are to put away both partiality and pride... so that we can feel joy over the success of others... and show our joy by congratulating and joining them in their moment of joy. ... Here (again) is what we need to do...

Romans 12:16

"Live in harmony with each other" literally means: "Be of the same mind," and here is the overall meaning of this verse: The believer is to strive to *get into the very mind* of others in their life... and to understand them. He is

to strive to understand their lives (their person and being)... their lot and condition in life... their status and position... their needs and feelings.

The believer is to understand the other person to such a degree that he can completely identify and feel with the person. Paul starts this verse with: the believer is to be "*of the same mind*" as the other person. Just think of the enormous impact such love and empathy would have upon our community and all of Central Oregon!

"Associate with the lowly" in Greek means (literally): "*Allow yourself to be carried away by people of low rank.*" (You see)... in secular Greek and Roman culture... to be seen with people of much lower rank could be fatal to one's ambitions. ... Not only were they socially undesirable... they were thought to corrupt the morals of upright citizens. To the contrary... Paul taught that normal Christian living **seeks out** people on the fringes... and risks embracing them.

The believer is not to be snobbish... not to allow his mind to roam around in the *high things* of this world. On the contrary... we are to look upon the poor and lowly and to give ourselves (fully) to meeting their needs. ... We are not to neglect... ignore... separate... criticize... or despise those who have less education... intelligence... or material wealth than us. We are to be friendly and kind... loving and gracious... always helping to meet their needs.

In a world where everyone is scrambling for position... prominence... and recognition... it is rare... (even among the ranks of the redeemed here in

the church)... to find those who are deliberately courting people of a lower status.

Many people use their contacts and relationships for selfish ambition. They select those people who will help them climb the social ladder. Christ demonstrated and taught that we should treat all people with respect—those of a different race... the handicapped... the poor... young and old... male and female. We must never consider others as being beneath us. Paul says we need to live in harmony with others and not be too proud to enjoy the company of ordinary people.

Are you able to do humble tasks with others? ... Do you welcome conversation with unattractive... non-prestigious people? ... Are you willing to befriend newcomers and entry-level people? ... Or do you relate only to those who will help you get ahead?

But... you don't have to do this. You can ignore it – U N L E S S... ...
... [P A U S E] ...

“Do not be wise in your own sight” – this pride of intellect is probably the most dangerous kind of pride. ... And “being wise in our own sight” is behind not wanting to associate with the lowly.

Romans 12:17

Vengeance is a hot desire to give back as much pain as what someone gave you. But the problem with revenge is... that it never gets what it wants; it never evens the score. Fairness never comes. The chain-reaction set off by every act of vengeance always takes its own course.

Both the injured and the injurer get stuck on an escalator that never stops; it never lets anyone off. That is why family feuds go on and on until everyone is dead or gets too old and too tired to fight.

Vengeance cannot bring resolution... never brings closure... and only brings satisfaction - in our mind's **fantasies** !

(Look at your past dealings with it.) The exchange of pain is never balanced. When I am on the receiving end... the pain I receive always feels worse than the pain I cause you. And when I am on the giving end of pain... the pain that I cause... never seems to me that it hurt the other person as bad as they hurt me. ... Vengeance **cannot** bring resolution.

The Greek word for “*give thought to*” (pra-na-eō) means “*to foresee*”... “*to take thought of*”... “*to have regard for*.” ... It relies heavily on the concepts of *seeing* and *vision*. ... This makes a great deal of sense. “*Have regard for your future reputation...*” Visualize it! ... Look *past the offense*... to see how you can keep an *honorable reputation* in everyone’s eyes. “*Respond to the hurt someone brings you... in such a way that everyone can see you are honorable.*”

But... you don’t have to do this. You can ignore it – **U N L E S S**... ...
... **[P A U S E]** ...

Romans 12:18

“*If it is possible*”... the believer is to live at peace with all men. However... it is **not** *always possible*. ... Some persons are troublemakers... grumblers... complainers... dissenters... splitters... fighters... ego-hunters... self-

centered leaders... image-seekers... power-builders... warmongers. ...
Some persons have no interest in living at peace with the believer.

But what if I were to tell you that there are some Scripture verses that explain – “How can we **promote** peace (even) if the other person doesn’t want peace?” There are some things we can do to **encourage** it. Here are just a few:

Proverbs 10:12 (ESV)

¹² Hatred stirs up strife, but love covers all offenses.

Proverbs 12:16 (ESV)

¹⁶ The vexation of a fool is known at once, but the prudent ignores an insult.

Proverbs 15:1 (ESV)

¹ A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.

Proverbs 17:9 (ESV)

⁹ Whoever covers an offense seeks love, but he who repeats a matter separates close friends.

Proverbs 17:14 (ESV)

¹⁴ The beginning of strife is like letting out water, so quit before the quarrel breaks out.

These verses tell us many things we can do to promote or encourage peace... even if the other person does not want it.

Romans 12:19

All of us have been wronged at some time in our lives... but we are not to seek revenge. Almighty God sees all... and He will take care of injustices. This was established in the law. Deuteronomy 32:35 says: “Vengeance is

mine, I will repay. In due time their foot will slip, because their day of disaster is near. Their doom is coming quickly"

God alone is sovereign and knows the hearts of all people... and therefore... He is the only One Who can dispense justice in perfect truth and righteousness. He can administer it better than we can!

The essence of ungodliness is that we presume to take the place of God (to take everything into our own hands.) ... But it takes faith to commit ourselves to God... to cast all our care on Him... and to entrust all matters of our life to Him. ... (But LISTEN!) Feelings of revenge can be overcome by realizing that God will PERFECTLY make all things right... and that He will visit His wrath on those who deserve it.

Do not execute wrath. Leave it to God. Commit all to him. Leave yourself and your enemy in His hands... assured that He will do much better than you ever could.

But... you don't have to do this. You can ignore it – U N L E S S... ...
... **[P A U S E]** ...

Romans 12:20-21

“Hunger and thirst” (here) signifies any need in general. If your enemy is needy in any way... do him good... and supply his necessity.

These words are easy to read but difficult to practice. Surely we need to pray and ask God for love as we try to show kindness to our enemies. Will they take advantage of us? Will they hate us more? Only the Lord knows.

Our task is not to protect ourselves but to obey the Lord and leave the results with Him.

As children of God... we must live on the highest level—returning good for evil. (Anyone can return good for good and evil for evil.) The only way to overcome evil... is with good. ... If we return evil for evil... we only add fuel to the fire.

What does it mean to "*heap burning coals*" on our enemy's head? And why should we want to? ... This refers to the evoking of a sense of shame... and it can lead our enemy to God's grace and thereby cause them to put away their hurtful ways. ... The most malignant enemy cannot always withstand God's grace - being expressed through us.

We are 'conquered' by evil when we engage in counter-punching... in 'giving back' what has been meted out to us. ... We 'conquer' evil by overcoming our vengeful instincts... and giving others the same kind of grace that God shows us – every day! This is stark and overwhelming.

... [P A U S E] ...

Perhaps you have been thinking: "*But I can't do it. I don't care if this is the Christian way or is the example of Christ, I can't do it. Nothing is ever going to get me to the point of wanting to do good to those who hate me.*"

Fair enough. You have to start where you are... and if that is where you are... you have to recognize it. ... But also recognize that those who belong to Jesus Christ do not have a choice about whether they are going to follow

and obey Him or not. We must be like Him.... And extend the same grace that He has given us... to others.

So the question is not WILL you? ... The question is **HOW**? ... So here is what I suggest: ... Long before an enemy creates a crisis... the answer to Paul's "faith question" ("If God is for us, who can be against us") must fill our hearts. ... If we wait until we're dodging missiles... we will be decimated. ... So... let's prepare now. ... Let's settle the issue before the crisis... and let our hearts be fully convinced.

Read the answer to Paul's faith question ("If God is for us") in Romans 8:32-39... and focus on turning it into a **conviction**. Write down the reference... Romans 8:32-39. Make believing it your current spiritual objective. Read it... and reread it—**aloud** (every day this week... and maybe next.) Pray over it. ... Ask the Holy Spirit to transform your mind so that you accept its truth as naturally as you live with the law of gravity.

Romans 8:31-39 (ESV)

³¹ What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? ³² He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? ³³ Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. ³⁴ Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. ³⁵ Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? ³⁶ As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered." ³⁷ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸ For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹ nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.