

Our Responses to the Enemies around Us – Russ Kennedy and Tim Rech

Romans 12:14-21

You know we only spend a small amount of time together as a community of believers. And for many of us, we spend most of our waking hours with those who do not know Christ. So our passage today is fitting yet difficult to hear and to apply.

But before we pickup in 12:14, let's take a moment to briefly review how we got to this point in the book of Romans.

Paul makes clear in the first and last chapters of Romans his purpose for writing this letter to the church. It was to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of Christ's name among all the nations.

And he spends the first eleven chapters describing the great predicament man finds himself in and the great power of God has exercised towards man in the gospel of Christ – the gospel which reveals the righteousness of God in Christ and is available to all who believe and receive by faith. He also described the benefits of receiving the gospel, such as *“we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ”* (5:1) and *“there is therefore no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus”* (8:1). The believing reader has also received hope for the future and a new life in the Spirit which enables him or her to overcome day-to-day sin and to receive context for seeing and handling our troubles and trials in this life...and so much more. I hope you have found this letter to be breathtaking.

Having stated these truths of the faith, which he describes as *“the mercies of God”* (12:1), Paul now turns to the implications for and the response of the reader in chapter 12. Remember, this letter is about bringing us all to the obedience of the faith. Paul tells or rather begs the reader in 12:1-2 *to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.*

So we are to make a settled presentation of our bodies to God, driven by the use of our minds – minds renewed by God's Word, which causes our lives to no longer conform to the world, but be changed so that we express the reality of a life walking with Christ. Such a change causes us to exercise obedience to God and in the process, affirms His perfect will.

Then Paul instructs the Christian on what we are to be about in the family of God (12:3-13). This brings us to verses 14-21, which covers our interactions with our enemies and those who oppose us – an area where we naturally struggle to break out from conformity to this world.

Before considering this text, it is important to note a few things.

First, we need to understand why enemies come about in our lives. It is assumed here that the Christian ought to have enemies because they are offended by the cross and not because they are simply offensive. Sadly, the latter is too often true. Also, the Christian has enemies because he or she is not conforming to the world – not willing to compromise and live two lives; one pleasing to the world and

one pleasing to Christ. Rather the Christian is to live with both feet planted in the heavenly country. If so, enemies will come.

And second, our approach to the world is simply an extension of our loving approach to one another in the church. Love in the church and love in the world go together.

We read beginning in verse 14:

14 Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. 15 Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. 16 Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight. 17 Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. 18 If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. 19 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." 20 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." 21 Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Christians are a People Who Move Towards Others

With Blessing (12:14)

Paul begins by telling us we will be persecuted by the world. It is not a question of "if" but "when". And the sense here is one of constant or steady persecution – relentless in its form. It can be spoken or unspoken. It can be a complete shunning, a subtle exclusion from interacting with you, or an outright confrontation. It can involve a withholding of justice or your rights. In other countries, it can lead to imprisonment or even death. You can be sure the church in Rome was being persecuted and far more than we have been. But God has ordained that we will be persecuted for what we believe – to whatever degree He wills.

So what is our response? It is to run away, right? No, Paul says. We are to move towards the persecutor by constantly blessing him or her – a relentless blessing. We are to bless at a level that exceeds the level of persecution.

And again, let's check ourselves to make sure we are truly being persecuted. Un-Christian like behavior does not draw persecution but rather God's discipline.

Also note that Paul says not only are we not to run from them but we are not to curse them either. It is easy to curse the world – easier than running away sometimes. Feels good, does it not? But God says, "no". Do not curse your adversary. Christians often stumble in this area when active in opposing the evils in our land such as abortion – often the words used in fighting such evils become evil itself.

So do you see the action here? It is not a running away but a moving towards those who persecute you. Is this how you operate?

With Empathy and Harmony (12:15)

Paul then goes on to say in verse 15, *“Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.”* If you have not noticed, this life is characterized by its “ups and downs”- regardless of whether you are a believer in Christ or not. We are all subject to the sun and the rain that God allows into our lives. We rejoice in the good things of life such as a child being born, a marriage, an achievement, and so many other things. There are also times to weep - over the loss of a loved one, financial hardship, an unexpected illness.

Eccl 3:4 says, *“there is...a time to weep, and a time to laugh”*

We are commanded to move towards people to celebrate with them or to empathize and compassionately love them in their sorrow. And we can relate, for we know what these things are like. God takes us through these times as well. Should it be that hard for us to move towards them? Yes, it is. One who is rejoicing means they have received something good – and this may be the last thing we want to see happen to someone who has been persecuting us. “I do not want to rejoice with them”. And seeing our persecutor weep may be equally hard, because that is when we want to rejoice rather than weep. In our hearts, we are tempted to say, “Yes! He or she is getting what they deserve”.

We must watch our hearts in this area. Resentment can develop. “Why does he or she get to receive good things?” This is sin for we are accusing God in our hearts that He is unfair and does not know what He is doing. “Lord, do you not know what He did to me?”

By God’s enabling grace we are called to a far higher standard. Identify with other people and what they are going through. This encourages people and enhances their joy and helps to shoulder their sorrow. I like the following quote:

“A sorrow shared is but half the trouble. A joy that is shared is a joy made double.”¹

Move towards the people God has placed in your life in the “ups and downs” of life whether it be to rejoice or to weep. And if they desire, allow them to share in your joys and sorrows. In the midst of this, we are given opportunities to speak and live out the gospel. This is God’s will for His people.

With Humility (12:16)

And as verse 16 says, live in harmony with those who do not know Christ. Have the same mind with them. There is obviously an earthly situation or status that places you together. It might be a workplace a profession, or a common activity. Be realistic about your setting and the environment you share with people in this world. Do not act like you are above others around you....example?

And *“do not be haughty”*, Paul says. Haughty means to act arrogantly superior and to disdain others. Instead be lowly, not thinking you are so important – be humble always before people. Associate with all regardless of their station of life – especially with those who are lowly - not because they are more important than others, but because they are more needy.

¹ R. Kent Hughes, *Romans* (Wheaton, Crossway, 1991), p. 225

And “*never be wise in your own sight*” - keep your opinions to yourself – no one likes a conceited, know-it-all who wants to fix everyone. Simply share the gospel as God provides opportunity, and then live it out before them. If someone asks for your opinion on a matter, then give one if you feel are able, but always do humbly. No one wants to hear an opinionated Christian all the time – especially your enemies.

With A Public Willingness to be Wronged for Christ's Sake (12:17)

And in verse 17 we are to “*repay no one evil for evil.*” When wronged by an unbeliever, do not retaliate like the world loves to do – often with a vengeance. Such retaliation is often meted out disproportionately to the offense and causes the matter to escalate and even destroy both parties. Rather approach it evenly without overreacting. Consider first whether or not to even demand it to be made right. If it cannot be let go, look for every remedy so as to bring it to a peaceful close. Resist the natural tendency to justify the evil you want to do to someone else because of the evil they have done to you.

However you respond, do it honorably and in a way that people around you see is right and reasonable. Be honest and fair in your dealings with all people. Remember the reputation of Christ and “the Faith” is at stake. Also keep in mind the setting you are in...the definition of being honorable can vary {example – white collar vs construction). Understanding it can help you to shape a wise and fitting response.

But be willing to be wronged without any justice in sight. Trust God that He will take care of it in His timing and that the wrong will perfectly be made right.

Not retaliating and behaving honorably turns the head of your enemy and others around you since it is radical. It is an even-handed response to people that God shows us. And it is the radical response that Christ displayed when offended.

Doing so may cost you, but it goes a long way towards achieving verse 18.

Christians Respond when People Move Against Them

With Peaceableness (12:18)

Verse 18 is not only the center of our text today but is the central aim in all our relationships with our enemies – it is peace. As new creations and living sacrifices, we are characterized by peace. Remember chapter five – “*we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ*”. We are therefore a people called to peace and to be peacemakers in all of our relationships. This does not mean we do so at the expense of truth since truth is often the path to true peace.

But there is a limit. Do you see it? “*So far as it depends on you*” As people of peace, we strive to achieve peace in all situations. But sometimes peace is not possible, for your enemy is not satisfied with it. He can be unreasonable and this should not surprise us. In that case, we are only left to get away from the relationship if at all possible. But if we cannot, we continue to seek peace, not repay evil for evil, and to bless. This is what God has called us to do.

With No Revenge (12:19)

Verse 19 anticipates our being wronged or even being attacked. And when someone moves against you, do not avenge yourself. Vengeance is not our department or our responsibility. God will handle in His timing and in proper measure – it will fall under His wrath. God takes offenses toward His people seriously and will not forget to punish. This is where we need to trust God because in the heat of the moment we often want justice and vindication so badly. “Get out of the way everyone (God included) because I am about to bring down my wrath.”

But we must leave the punishment to God – a punishment or consequence which may even come in this life. We do not know when but it does not matter since God will take care of it.

Someone has said, *“If you defend yourself, then God cannot defend you.”*²

Paul quotes Deuteronomy 32:35 here which reads, *“Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.”* If you recall this passage is part of the last words of Moses to the children of Israel and is part of Moses’ song. The song recounts all that God has done for Israel yet how the people turned their back on Him. God’s anger burned towards the rebels of Israel but He did not destroy them lest Israel’s enemies would get the wrong idea. In the process of God judging Israel, the surrounding peoples would think it their strength that had brought Israel down.

Punishment always belongs to God. For who are we to punish others for wronging us? Even Christ did not punish and He had every reason to do so.

God intends for us to be an instrument of mercy and grace – a stark contrast to how this world operates. People who are lost, are already suffering from the consequences of sin and guilt – do not add to it. Remember before you were saved when you knew not your right hand from your left - how God showed you grace through people who did not take justice into their own hands but showed you grace? Looking back, were not those people used by God for you to see your need for a Savior and turn to Christ in faith and repentance? Praise God, right? We must leave the avenging to God.

With Goodness (12:20)

And when our enemies have wronged us, we respond by meeting their needs. Verse 20 says, *“if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink.”* Christ says do something entirely unexpected to your enemies – meet their needs. But you might say, *“Are you kidding Lord?”* Do you not understand who I have to deal with down here? And besides, he or she took something I need – he or she made me look bad – he or she is going to get away with it – he or she.....” - fill in the blank. *“Let them get their own food and drink.!* But God’s Word is clear – walk straight into the face of insult and malice – walk straight into the offense and bless – bless by meeting your enemy’s basic needs. Do good to the other person.

² Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary – New Testament, Vol 1* (Colorado Springs, Cook Communications Ministries, 2001), p. 556.

By doing so the Bible says, “you will heap burning coals on his head.” Paul draws this phrase from Proverbs 25:21-22. There is some disagreement on the meaning of this term but it seems clear that by doing good to your enemy, he or she is afflicted in conscience. A sense of guilt comes over the person. Shame is the result. And just as the proverbs tell us that a kind word turns away wrath, the effect can defuse the situation.

Now this is not something we set out to do but is the effect God causes when we obey His Word.

With Victory Defined by God’s Terms (12:21)

This passage ends with verse 21, “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good”. In the heat of the conflict, it is easy to be overcome by the evil and to shrink away or respond with evil ourselves. But it is not enough to forego vengeance when we are wronged and we cannot run away. We are charged to respond with good.

You see this is how God works. He overwhelms evil with good. And this is what we are called to do – to persistently bring good until the evil is overcome – never giving up. God will then lead us to victory in the situation – a victory on His terms.

Although we can comprehend Romans 12:14-21, we really do not understand in our experience, do we? First of all, we are not often persecuted. And when we are, we often do not obey. Perhaps a story from another time and setting will help:

The young Russian boy stood before Marco, the Soviet captain. Marco snarled, “What is it? What do you want? The boy, only twelve, swallowed his fear as he stood before the Communist officer. “Captain, you are the man who put my parents in prison. Today is my mother’s birthday and I always buy her a flower for her birthday.”

Since my mother always taught me to love my enemies and to reward evil with good, I have brought the flower instead for the mother of your children. Please take it home to your wife tonight, and tell her about my love and the love of Christ.”

Captain Marco, who had watched unmoved as Christians had been unmercifully beaten and tortured, was stunned at the act of love of this boy. His tears fell as he slowly walked around the desk and grabbed the boy in a fatherly embrace. Marco’s heart was changed by the gift of Christ’s love. He could no longer arrest and torture Christians, and soon he himself was arrested.

Only months after the boy’s visit to his office, Marco slumped in a filthy prison cell surrounded by some of the same Christians he had previously arrested and tortured. He tearfully told his cell mates of the young boy and the simple gift of a flower. He considered it an honor to share a cell with those he had previously hunted and attacked.³

³ *The Voice of the Martyrs, Extreme Devotion (Nashville, W Publishing Group, 2001), p. 11.*

Unlike the boy, we will probably not face the persecution he did. But the teaching remains. However, like the boy, we do not fully understand what will happen when we obey in this area. We simply trust God with the result. And also like the boy, start where God has placed you. Do you have an unbelieving spouse, children, or other family members? We often get tripped up by those closest to us. Do you have a difficult co-worker or classmate? Someone who loves nothing better than to ride you about your faith? How about a close neighbor? But when persecuted by them, seek peace by blessing, rejoicing and weeping, and living in harmony with them. And move towards them – not with vengeance but to meet their needs and to swallow the evil of the persecution with good.

Seek peace – look for gospel opportunities – pour yourselves out – who knows? God may save your enemy. But even if He does not, He is glorified and you are obeying the Faith. Victory in our relationships will be achieved on God's terms.

Pray to understand this passage better. And pray that God would change our hearts to be more like this boy but even more importantly to be like Jesus who says in Luke 6:

27 "But I say to you who hear, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you... 36 Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful. (Luke 6:27, 36)

Reflect and Respond

Obedience to this passage:

- **Is consistent with the character and love of God.** Remember Romans 5:8 *"but God shows His love for us in that we were still sinners, Christ died for us."* Christ is the ultimate peacemaker, reconciling God to man.
- **Is consistent with the character and love of the Christian. We are to seek peace with our enemies even though it is costly** – it is the heart of our personal Christian witness – it is one of our greatest opportunities to evangelize
- **Deepens our love for the lost and for Christ**
- **Deepens our fellowship with Christ and with one another.** As we receive the arrows of persecution, we run to Christ for refuge and for grace knowing He has been there already and can sympathize. And we run to one another to share our stories to encourage and to be encouraged in this walk of faith. And most importantly, we can then return with strength to the battle.
- **Beckons others who do not know Christ to be saved and to join His people in humble repentance and faith** – a radical faith which loves and does good to its enemies. **Will you join?**