

## **Romans: A Call to Seek Peace**

**Romans 12:17-21**

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*February 27, 2002*

If you have your Bibles I'd invite you to turn with me to Romans chapter 12 as we continue to work our way through this great book of the gospel written by the Apostle Paul under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. In this whole chapter Paul has been delivering practical direction for Christian living. The things that he calls us to do in this chapter are very hard to do in a fallen world. The kinds of instructions that he gives are practical and understandable. If you have ever been in the circumstance of being called upon to do these things when you have been wounded or offended, or persecuted, or abused by the person to whom you are called to do this, then it is an entirely different matter. That's why all of the previous eleven chapters of Romans serve as a preface to Romans 12 and are absolutely essential for appreciating what Paul is calling on us to do here. Paul is just not throwing out a few ethical standards in saying, "Go out and live that way," because nobody could just go out and live the way that Paul describes here. Paul is the first one to tell you that. This isn't an ethical system that is practical or obtainable by someone who hasn't been transformed by grace. The Apostle Paul knows that. That's why he spent eleven chapters telling you about the grace of God before he got to his ethical system. That's so important for us to understand as Christians.

One of the things that is so distinctive about Christianity is not simply the beauty and the loveliness of the moral life to which the Christian is called, but the fact that God realized that it would be utterly impracticable and unobtainable were it not for the Holy Spirit indwelling us, were it not for God's grace enabling us. So, when the Apostle calls on you to do these things, bear in mind that the Apostle himself understands that it is only God's grace, operative in us, that enables us to live this way.

Secondly, we also have to remember the controlling principle that we learned in verses 1 and 2 in Romans chapter 12, before the rest of these directions fall into place. In Romans chapter 12, verses 1 and 2, the apostle has urged us to lay ourselves on the altar, to be ready to die for Christ. He's asserted that the Lord Jesus wants all of us. He wants our heart, He wants our bodies, He wants the totality of our lives. Therefore, Paul is saying that in every circumstance, in every

relationship, we must factor in our service of the Lord Jesus. For instance, when I'm going through a particular trial, my only concern or my prime concern cannot be, "Well, how am I going to get through this? This discourages me, it causes me doubts, I'm having difficulty coping. How am I going to get through then?" If what Paul says in Romans 12, verses 1 and 2 is true, and it is, it's God's word, then we have to be asking, "In these difficult trials and circumstances of life, how am I going to be a witness to God in this?" Since I have laid myself on the altar, I've died to self, I live for the Lord Jesus Christ. His honor is at stake in how I respond in the circumstance. See, that's not even a question on our plate. If that's not part of our agenda, then there is no way that we are going to be able to do the other things that Paul calls us to do in this passage, I might add, especially in the verses we are going to study tonight.

So, Paul has been thinking with us in verse 3 all the way down to verse 16 about our relationships with believers. He's given direction after direction, imperative after imperative, character quality description after character quality description, in order to show us what Christians ought to be doing, expressing their Christian living in relationship with one another.

Now, when we get to verse 17, he turns his attention on how we ought to relate to those who do not profess the faith how we ought to relate to those who are unbelievers, how we ought to relate to those who are pagans. I don't use that word in a derogatory way, I use it in a descriptive way. It's a very good description of someone who is not a believer in our Lord Jesus Christ, a pagan. He's telling us how we ought to relate to pagans, how we ought to relate to the world, in other words.

It's not that what he says here doesn't apply to our relationships with one another as believers, or that that subject is completely out of his mind, but it is that the focus of his concern, it's very clear, the focus of his concern is our relationship with the world and our consequent witness to the world. Paul knows that our relationship to the world is fundamental to our witness to the world. I am going to make that argument several times tonight. Our relationship to the world, and the way the world perceives our quality of life, is fundamental to our witness to the world. So he's calling on us to think about how we relate to the world.

Now, one warning here as we look at these verses. You will miss Paul's point in these verses if you think that he is ruling out the magistrate, the military, and the judicial system applying justice and judgment in the world. If you think that what Paul is about to say rules out the possibility of the civil magistrate, the government, the military, or the judicial system ever bringing to bear justice in any given situation, you'll miss what Paul is talking about. He is primarily thinking here about our personal relationships. I can prove that folks. What is the very next thing he is going to talk about? Romans 13, 1 through 7: the government. One of the things that he is going to say in that section is, "The government does not bare the sword for nothing." Now a sword isn't to hang up on the wall and

look impressive; a sword is to chop people's head off. So, Paul is not denying that there are circumstances and institutions in society that are called upon to administer justice and judgment against evildoers. He is concerned that in our personal relationships, our kindness and our goodness and the qualities of compassion and mercy, and forbearance, and non-retaliation, and non revenge would show through in the way that we relate to the world so that it grabs the world and makes the world think for a few fleeting moments, "Ya know, those Christians, they really are different." With that in mind as an overlong introduction, let's hear God's word beginning in Romans chapter 12 verse 17:

Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men. If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men. Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay," says the Lord. "But if your enemy is hungry, feed him, and if he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in so doing you will heap burning coals upon his head." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Amen and thus ends this reading with God's holy and inspired and inerrant word, may He write its eternal truth upon our hearts. Let's pray.

Father we thank You for this word. We are convicted just in the reading of this word. We need the grace of Your Holy Spirit not just to understand what Paul, what You are teaching us here, but to do, to live what You are teaching us here. Grant that it would be so for our good, for our witness, for Your glory. In Jesus name. Amen.

It's a great passage isn't it? It's almost like Paul haphazardly heaps up all these directions on how we are to live. How do you organize this? With difficulty I assure you. Paul is a good teacher, he repeats himself, you've already just in glancing at this passage tonight noticed that he has repeated certain themes in verses 14 ,and verses 17, and verse 19. He's a good teacher and he knows you need to hear over and over.

I'm going to outline this in four parts. I'd like to give you just a couple of words for each of the sections to get it in your mind. In verse 17, just the first half of that verse and then in verses 19 and 20 one theme seems to refrain: reject revenge. That's what Paul is saying, reject revenge. Then if you allow your eyes to scan back to the second half of verse 17 you see this theme: live the good. Now don't ask me to explain that right now. I will explain it in a few moments. Live the good. Reject revenge. Then in verse 18, Paul says: pursue peace. In verse 21: overcome evil with good. I'd like to look at those four grand themes that pervade the section with you for a few moments.

## **I. Reject revenge.**

First look at verse 17, then allow your eyes to fall down to verses 19 and 20. Here Paul is giving us a restraint against the natural instinct to retaliation. When somebody punches you in the nose, you get mad. It happens, the natural instinct, the fists are clinched, the blood rushes to your head, and you are ready for some sort of retaliation, even if it's running. You're looking for some form of retaliation, and revenge is an unfortunately, natural instinct of the fallen human soul. Paul is offering to Christians here an exhortation, a restraint to this instinct of retaliation. He's saying to us that in our personal relationships with the world, he wants us to reject the inclination to revenge and he wants us to show kindness instead. The instinct is revenge. He says, reject that inclination to revenge and instead show kindness. Look at what Paul says, in verse 17. Paul's language is absolutely emphatic. He uses a particular form that makes it clear that he is saying that Christians should repay evil with absolutely no one at all, Jew or Gentile, Pagan or otherwise. He wants us not to be in the habit of repaying evil for evil, but the very opposite.

He goes on in verse 19 to expand on this very point, don't repay evil for evil. He goes on in verse 19 to outright repute revenge. He says that we are not to take on the spirit of revenge, we are not to take to our selves that right which God holds for vengeance in this temporal world, that which resides with the state and with the justice system and with the military. With regard to our personal relationships, we are not to take on that spirit of revenge or the act of revenge and he explains in verse 19 why this is and how we are able to do it. Look at what he says, "For it is written, vengeance is Mine, I will repay." Paul is not saying, don't take revenge my friend, and never worry again about justice being done. He's saying, my friend you can leave the issue of justice and even vengeance in the hands of almighty God. He has not said, vengeance is not mine and I'll never do it. He said, "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay."

Therefore the application for justice and judgment that God Himself will deliver will be better than anything you could have ever thought of. Not because God is petty, not because God has a small unforgiving heart, but precisely because God has a perfectly just heart. He will settle accounts. And every Christian should live in this world forbearing personal offenses, not because those personal offenses will never be righted, but certain that one day, one way or another those offenses will be righted. The Christian, as he or she grows, no doubt grows hoping those offenses will be righted one day in the mercy of God when that person's heart is changed. All along there is that realization in the back of the believer's mind that there is a day of judgment and that day will be a day of recompense. You can safely leave that recompense to God. He'll handle it. He'll handle it better than you will. He'll handle it with more justice than you would, but He will handle it. Because of that, the Christian can rest in the deliverance of justice that God will bring.

You see God's not saying that you must personally forgo justice in your

experience eternally. That's not what God is saying to you as a believer. He's saying, "My child, I'll take care of this. Your business now, is to love your enemy, but I will settle these accounts, trust Me. Leave it with Me." So the apostle reminds us of that, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay." Therefore we are to leave room for the wrath of God.

We are not only to refrain from revenge, Paul says in verse 20, we are even to do acts of kindness toward those who have offended us. Those acts of kindness are not merely to be mental, "Ok I'm going to think nice thoughts about my enemy." Those acts of kindness are to be tangible; if my enemy is hungry, I am to feed him, thirsty, I am to give him drink. I am to tangibly minister to his needs. Paul explains in verse 20 that that will bring a conviction upon those who offend us and perhaps it will lead them to repentance, "In so doing you will heap coals of fire upon their head." You will bring conviction to them. Now mind you, that conviction can cut in two different directions. Sometimes when the sinner is convicted he responds with an obstinate hatred that is even more intense than his previous hatred for those who have done right and well.

I know not all of you are fans of J.R.R. Tolkien and *The Lord of The Rings*, but there is a great incident in the books, it actually happens in the third volume of *The Lord of The Rings* Trilogy. One of the heroes in the books meets an evil wizard who has been cast down from his high estate and the wizard attempts to kill him. When he attempts to kill him, all his friends come to his rescue and attempt to kill the wizard, and the hero says, "No don't do it." I want to read the section, it is very instructive on what happens sometimes when you show mercy. "No Sam," said Frodo speaking to Sam, who was going to bring revenge to the wizard. "Do not kill him even now for he has not hurt me and in any case I do not wish him to be slain in this evil mood. He was great once of a noble kind that we should not dare raise our hands against. He has fallen and his cure is beyond us, but I would still spare him in hope that he may find it." Saruman, the wizard rose to his feet and started at Frodo. There was a strange look in his eyes of mingled wonder and respect, and hatred. "You have grown Halfling," he said. "Yes you have grown very much. You are wise and cruel. You have robbed my revenge of sweetness and now I must go hence in bitterness in debt to your mercy. I hate it and you."

Paul is perfectly aware that that is sometime the response to our mercy. That is, in fact, sometimes the response to our forbearance and our refusal to take revenge and our acts of kindnesses and our acts of kindness to those who have wronged us. Of course, the believer holds out hope that this would not be so. Think of Elisabeth Elliot. Word comes that her husband and his fellow missionaries have been killed by the Indians in the Amazon to whom they had gone to minister. In her heart comes, what? A love for those Indians that compels her into the wilderness of Brazil to minister the gospel to them. God honors that love.

Or think of our Lord Jesus Christ on the cross. We are told in the gospels, that at the beginning of the day, two thieves were hurling abuse at Him and mocking Him. But at the end of the day, we are also told in the gospel that one thief, one of those thieves, one of those robbers, is defending His honor and begging Him for forgiveness and mercy. You see, the mercy of the Lord Jesus, even in the hour of His death, heaped coals of fire upon that man's head. That conviction was wrought by grace for salvation. That is our desire in dealing with those who have offended us.

Jim Phillips says, "The test of reality in Christian profession is scene when life turns against the believer." That's where your mettle is tested. That's where the grace of God in you is tested. That's where the fruit of the Spirit is tested in you. When life turns against you, how you respond shows some measure of the grace in you. The distinctive behavior of Christians in this area is to bare witness to the world of the truth of the gospel. They say they are struck, but they strike not back. What are these men, what are these women? Where does this come from. Paul teaches us here to reject revenge.

## **II. Live the good.**

Look with me at the second half of verse 17. Here he says, live the good. In other words, Paul is saying that he wants us to cultivate a regard for what is seen to be good and right in common grace by even unregenerate men. In other words, he's saying that in our personal relationships with the world, do those good things that are recognized to be good even by Pagans. Do those things that even the Pagans understand are good.

This passage is unclear in the New American Standard Version. It says, 'respect what is right in the sight of men.' It makes you think you are going to sort of sit back and think well about what men think is good. The ESV translates a little better, 'give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all.' Paul is not asking you to theoretically think about how nice it is that Pagans think that some things are good. He's asking you to live that way. This doesn't mean to do what is right in the sight of the world as opposed to what God says in His word. It doesn't mean to follow the moral maximum of the age rather than the word of God, but it does mean that even pagans, even pagans still have a sense of right and wrong. They have it via the image of God, which is implanted in every human being, every human being. They have it via general revelation. They have it via common sense. Though all of those things are impacted in one way or another by the fall and by sin, yet so often pagans can still recognize a person who is upright and even admire that person. Paul is saying, do those things which are good, which even pagan society recognize as good, and do it for the sake of your witness.

Tertullian, in the days of the early church and recorded in his *Apology*, the words of a heathen, a pagan in Rome, who said, "Gaius Seius is a good man even

though he is a Christian." It was the attitude of the heathen in ancient Rome, these Christians they are sort of substandard human beings, they don't live up to the moral quality of a virtuous Roman, but the life of some Christian has caused this one pagan to say, you know these Christians, they are good people, even though they are Christians. The apostle is saying, I want people to look at you and say, ya know even though he's a Christian, even though he's a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ, even though he believes the gospel — can you imagine somebody believing that gospel, he's a good person. Your life is to confront them with the reality of its moral quality and thus bring a beautiful witness to Jesus.

The greatest single barrier my friends, the greatest single barrier to our witness and evangelism to the world is that we do not bare the mark of goodness in us. The world looks at us and they say, "You are no different from us." You are no different. In many cases we are better. You have heard the conversations, you have stood around with Christians before who said, "I'm not going to go to a Christians doctor, I'm not going to go to a Christian mechanic, I'm not going to go to a Christian attorney, I'm not going to go to a Christian business because they can't be trusted." That testimony is a sham. That is exactly what the apostle is saying needs to be avoided in our conduct. They ought to say, the pagan world around us ought to say, "Even though he's a Christian, he does the best job of anyone. Even though he is a Christian, he's the most upstanding moral person I know. Even though I don't respect what he believes, his life bears a quality of goodness that I can't deny." That's what Paul's saying there in verse 17.

### **III. Pursue peace.**

Then in verse 18, he gives us this plea for peace. He calls us to pursue peace. He tells us that in our personal relationships with the world, we are to aim for a principle of peace. Notice three things in this little verse. He says, *if possible*, Paul makes it clear that it is not always a possibility to be at peace with the world. Secondly, notice he says, *so far as it depends on you*. Paul makes it clear that peace does not depend on the actions of Christians. It takes two and cooperation in order to have peace and you can't control the other end of that too. But he's saying; if there is not peace, let it be their fault, Christian. Let it be the pagan's fault. If there is not peace, let it be their fault, Christians. Let it be the pagan's fault. Don't let it be your fault. If there is not peace, don't let anybody say that it was because of what you did. Don't you instigate the peace breaking, don't you disrupt the peace. Let the pagan disrupt the peace, but in so far as is possible, as far as it depends on you, you be at peace with all men. We live in a world of peace breaking. Paul is saying that he wants us to be a part of peace making instead.

### **IV. Overcome evil with good.**

Finally if you look at verse 21, he gives us a key to the defeat of evil in this world. Overcome evil with good. Paul is saying that in our personal relationships with the world, the cycle of evil can only be broken by good. You see, Paul doesn't intend that we should be defeated in this life by the forces of evil that we encounter and from which we sometimes suffer, but we cannot he says, we cannot fight fire with fire. In this instance we have to use a different weapon. Our tact must be unworldly and other worldly. It must be distinctively derived from the way Jesus behaved in this world as people offended Him. The key to overcoming evil is to employ the good to do it. The cycle of evil can only be overcome, can only be broken by good.

William Hendriksen tells the story of a pastor who left a church because of a moral offense. Now, most of the congregation didn't know about his moral failure. He was extremely popular; he was extremely well loved. When the next pastor came along, there were many people who didn't like him. They liked their previous pastor though they didn't know some of the failings of their previous pastor. They didn't know his moral failings. So when this man met one particular gentleman in the congregation, the man met him with these words, you're not my pastor. It hurt. Now what was the temptation of that new man coming in that circumstance? To tear down the reputation of the former pastor. Well, I could tell you a few things about your former pastor. He did not do that. Three or so months later, the man who said those very mean words to him became seriously ill. Quietly, lovingly, steadily the new pastor ministered to him in his hospital and in his home. After many months the man said to him, you have become my pastor and I thank you. You see, that man had two great challenges. The first great challenge was to respond with goodness initially when he had been dealt with evil. The second challenge was when that man had come around to continue to respond to him in love and say, you don't deserve me to be your pastor the way you've acted toward me, but to continue in love, evil can only be overcome by such goodness.

We are more than conquerors and so we can only conquer the cycle of evil with Christ weapons and so foil our foes with joy. Let's pray.

*Our Lord and our God, we thank You for Your word and we realize with all our hearts that we are incapable of living this way apart from the aid of Your holy spirit and His divine grace. So, Lord command what You will and give what You command. In Jesus name. Amen.*

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