

Brick by Brick, Part 4

Scripture: Romans 12:14–21

Code: 45-96

REVIEW

Romans 12:9-21 is a text of great importance. It follows the monumental truths of justification, sanctification, and God's sovereignty and faithfulness regarding Israel. Those things serve as a foundation for the principles of Christian living that are discussed in chapter 12. Practical Christian living begins with dedication (vv. 1-2) and with a recognition of your special place in the body of Christ (vv. 3-8). We are to give ourselves to the Lord and then to the church. Then Paul gives practical instruction on how to live the Christian life in verses 9 through 21. The instruction starts in a very personal way with verse 9 and widens to include others in the following verses.

I. DUTIES TOWARD OURSELVES (v. 9)

II. DUTIES TOWARD OTHER CHRISTIANS (vv. 10-13)

III. DUTIES TOWARD OTHERS (vv. 14-16)

Paul discusses how we are to live in relation to everyone, whether they are believers or unbelievers. He starts with the worst of people that we may meet.

A. Blessing the Hateful (v. 14)

"Bless them who persecute you; bless, and curse not. "

1. A Teaching of the Lord

Christians are to bless people who treat them badly. That's not a new principle; it is common in Scripture. It goes back to the teaching of our Lord Jesus, who said in Matthew 5:44, "But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them who despitefully use you, and persecute you. " That verse expresses an important teaching that was commonly given by our Lord. Let's look at its parallel in Luke 6:27-33: "But I say unto you that hear, Love your enemies [with a genuine heartfelt love that is not hypocritical], do good to them who hate you, bless them that curse you, and pray for them who despitefully use you. And unto him that smiteth thee on the one cheek, offer also the other; and him that taketh away thy cloak, forbid not to take thy coat also. Give to every man that asketh of thee; and of him that taketh away thy goods, ask them not again. And as ye would that men should do to you, do ye also to them. For if ye love them who love you, what thanks have ye? For sinners also love those who love them. And if ye do good to them who do good to you, what thanks have ye? For sinners also do even the same. " The world is going to respond to goodness with goodness and to love with love. Therefore, to show the distinctiveness of being Christian, we need to respond with love to those who hate us, and with goodness to those who do evil to us.

2. A Test of Love

a. Experienced

We had the unenviable experience of having our house burglarized. My wife, Patricia, came home one day and discovered that the house had been ransacked. The thieves dropped a butcher knife that they were evidently carrying in case they had run into one of the residents. By God's grace that event occurred the day after my youngest daughter had been home alone. Your initial reaction to that kind of thing is very human, isn't it? If you went into your house and found that your privacy has been invaded and many things that you counted dear were thrown all over and many irreplaceable things had been taken, something in your heart would demand restitution. Your Christianity will be tested

when you have the opportunity to demonstrate love for those who have invaded your privacy, taken what is not theirs, and done evil against you.

b. Explained

The thought of verse 14 is that we should bless those who persecute us, whether it's a spiritual or physical persecution. The verb *di^ok^o* means "to pursue someone with the intent of doing harm." We are to respond to those with that intent by blessing them, desiring that God would pour out His goodness, grace, and mercy upon them.

c. Exemplified

1) Luke 23:34--"Then said Jesus, Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do. . . ." He magnanimously wanted grace to be bestowed on those who were taking His life.

2) Acts 7:60--Stephen, laying beneath the bloody stones that were crushing out of his life, expressed a similar blessing on his persecutors: ". . . Lord, lay not this sin to their charge. . . ." He didn't want them to be held accountable for his death.

d. Exhorted

Verse 14 uses the verb "bless" in the present tense, which conveys the idea of constantly blessing, celebrating with praise, or wishing good will upon someone. Another wonderful example in this regard is found in the life of Christ, as recorded in 1 Peter 2:21-23: "For even hereunto were ye called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow His steps; who did no sin, neither was guile found in His mouth; who, when He was reviled, reviled not again; when He suffered, He threatened not, but committed Himself to Him that judgeth righteously." When the Jewish and Roman leaders persecuted Him, He never retaliated.

Paul says that there's to be no mixture of blessing with cursing toward those who pursue you with the intent to do harm. The end of verse 14 says, ". . . bless, and curse not." The idea isn't to bless them in addition to cursing them; we are to bless without cursing at all. That is a distinctively Christian response.

Selfishness: The Source of Stress

I read an interesting article in a paper that is published by the University of California at Berkley. It presents the latest scientific, psychological, and sociological discoveries of the University's research departments. The article revealed that people today have high blood pressure and other anxiety-related diseases because of stress. However, they discovered that stress has little to do with long-term pressures, such as being overworked on your job, or having many things on your mind. Most people's severe stress is related to little things, like not being able to find your car keys, seeing someone take a parking space that you wanted, standing in line to buy something, or having someone cut in front of you in traffic. Those things precipitate stress that can result in physical illness. I believe that is the result of an escalating egotism; people are literally consumed with their rights. Things have become so bad that if you get in someone's way, he may be just as likely to kill you as look at you. That is the world's reaction; it can be frightening to be alive today because you don't know what people are going to do. Egotism has come to the point where you can't invade a person's territory without hostility breaking out. Is it any wonder that marriages and other relationships don't survive? But Christians should be distinctly different by not retaliating that way.

B. Rejoicing with the Happy (v. 15a)

"Rejoice with them that do rejoice . . ."

Another distinctively Christian response is enjoying someone else's joy or rejoicing at their prosperity. That requires the absence of jealousy. In contrast, Proverbs 17:5 the ungodly are glad at the calamity of others. But that is not the Christian response that Paul indicates in . . .

1. 2 Corinthians 2:3--". . . my joy is the joy of you all." It is distinctively Christian to be blessed at someone else's joy by rejoicing with them.

2. 1 Corinthians 12:26-27--"And whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it; or one

member be honored, all the members rejoice with it. Now ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular. " It is distinctively Christian to rejoice at someone else's blessing.

C. Weeping with the Heavyhearted (v. 15b)

" . . . and weep with them that weep."

1. Misplaced Sympathy

It is also distinctively Christian to be sympathetic, not indifferent. The world is becoming more callous toward things that really matter. On the other hand, it gets so worked up about relatively unimportant things. For example, I think it's appalling how much attention is given to animals. There are societies established to prevent injury to animals. Their advocates protest the use of rats and dogs in experiments, and the effect of oil spills on birds living near the seashores. Now I don't mind birds, dogs, and rats; they have a place in creation. However, it seems to me that the same element of society that is so concerned about them, also approves of abortion, the massacre of millions of babies for which this nation stands guilty before God. What an enigma: We murder babies, but we preserve animals--save the whales, yet kill the babies! Similarly, we get very exercised over poor, starving people in such places as Ethiopia, but often care very little about the people who are close to us. That reflects a certain pride and egoism that doesn't let itself get involved with the needs of other people.

2. Meaningful Sensitivity

a. Explained The word translated "weep" is an interesting term in Greek. It's the word *klaiō*, which means "to shed tears. " Weeping is the evidence of Christian sympathy. Christians are to be sensitive to people around them. As others have cause for rejoicing, we are to fully enter into their joy because we love them so much and can't restrain our joy at their being so blessed. Our joy should not be artificial. We are to be so honestly thankful when others are blessed that they vicariously enjoy the same thrill. Likewise, we are to sympathetically understand how to share the tears of a fellow Christian who is in sorrow. That, too, is distinctively Christian in an increasingly insensitive world. b. Exemplified The prophet Jeremiah experienced a life of sympathetic weeping. Actually, his weeping had very little to do with anything that was happening to him. Jeremiah was blessed and full of joy. He said, "Thy words were found, and I did eat them, and Thy word was unto me the joy and rejoicing of mine heart . . . " (Jer. 15:16). He experienced joy, but couldn't easily express it because he was so sensitive to the problems of his people. In chapter 9, he expressed the depth of his heart, "Oh, that my head were waters, and mine eyes a fountain of tears, that I might weep day and night for the slain of the daughter of my people!" (v. 1). He had such a burden for the salvation of Israel that he constantly wept night and day in anguish for those who were perishing without a right relationship to God. That is a beautiful expression of pure, sensitive love. So, when we are pursued by someone who wants to harm us--whether by persecuting us directly for the cause of Jesus Christ, or indirectly as we adhere faithfully to biblical standards--we are to respond with blessing. And, when we see other believers rejoicing or weeping, we are to rejoice or weep with them. In addition, Paul states that we are to be . . .

D. Treating Others with Humility (v. 16a-c)

1. The Principle (v. 16a)

"Be of the same mind one toward another. . . . "

a. Explained That's a very simple thought. It means that we are to treat everyone on the same level. Don't be a respecter of persons. Don't play up to certain kinds of people. Don't plan your strategy to reach only the elite. Rather, treat everyone equally. b. Exhorted 1) Romans 15:5--"Now the God of patience and consolation grant you to be like-minded one toward another according to Christ Jesus. " We're not to prefer one person over another. 2) Philippians 2:1-4--Paul says that since there is consolation and fellowship in Christ--common participation with Him among common partners--we need to be "like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind. " Paul shows how that is possible in verses 3-4: "Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory, but in lowliness of

mind let each esteem others better than themselves. Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others. "3) James 2:1-9--We are told not to respect a person's position for improper motives. Rather, we are to love everyone the same. For example, if a wealthy man comes into your congregation wearing a gold ring, don't give him the chief seat and say to the poor man who's already seated, "Get out of the way so we can make room for the rich guy. " That's not the way Christians respond. Believers are to treat everyone the same. That is a very important pattern of life because it's easy for us to become social climbers and want to associate with the rich and the famous. 4) Philippians 1:27--Paul wanted the Philippians to "stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel. "5) 1 Corinthians 1:10--Paul wanted the Corinthians to experience a unique unity: "Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment. "That unity of spirit among believers flows out of a love that is expressed in humility. It is an essential ingredient.

2. The Particulars (v. 16b-c)

Paul indicates two things that will enable us to treat everyone the same:

a. Associating with the Lowly (v. 16b)"Mind not high things, but condescend to men of low estate. . . .

"1) ExplainedThe Greek verb translated "mind not " comes from *phroneo*, which means to "think" or "concentrate. " Paul says that we are not to concentrate on high things (Gk. *hupselos* = "lofty"). Don't pursue high places, people, positions or any other things that are highly esteemed in the world's eye. On the contrary, we are to be willing to associate with people of low position. The command to condescend is not meant in a patronizing sense. In modern English, we think of the term condescension in a negative way. But the Greek word for condescension simply means "to come down" or "to be carried away with. " Be eager to associate with people "of low estate" (Gk. *tapeinos* = "not rising above the ground, humble"). That doesn't mean you ignore those who are in high positions; just don't spend all your time and energy on them. I praise God for those who occupy influential positions in the secular world and in Christendom. I also praise the Lord for friends whose influence isn't as wide spread, yet they equally enrich my life and mean as much to me as any others. That kind of attitude is distinctively Christian. Our feelings are to be so much in line with lowly things that we are perfectly at home with common people. There's no place for aristocracy in the church. We are to be at home with the lowly as well as with the influential. 2) ExemplifiedIn Luke 14:12, Jesus said, ". . . When thou givest a dinner or a supper, call not thy friends, nor thy brethren, neither thy kinsmen, nor thy rich neighbors, lest they also bid thee again, and a recompense be made thee. " You know how it is: You invite people to come over, and then they've got to have you over. Jesus gives a better suggestion in verses 13-14: "But when thou givest a feast, call the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind, and thou shalt be blessed; for they cannot recompense thee; for thou shalt be recompensed at the resurrection of the just. " If you bring over the rich, they will pay you back. But if you bring over the poor who are unable to repay you, it is the Lord who will pay you back. So, whom do you want reward from--the rich, or God, who is the richest of all?It's nice when you invite people to your house for a meal and they reciprocate by having you over or bringing a gift. But their gift can't match what the Lord will give. So, next time you have a dinner, call the poor, lame, and blind, who could never have you over or pay you back. Learn to be comfortable in interacting with people who are of low estate by the world's standards. The truth of the matter is, low social estate has nothing to do with spirituality. In fact, I have found very often that people who are low on the social scale are very high on the spiritual scale. The second way of living a life of humility is by . . .

. b. Acknowledging Your Limitations (v. 16c)". . . Be not wise in your own conceits. "Don't act as if you knew everything, assuming that everything begins and ends with you. Proverbs 3:5 says, ". . . lean not unto thine own understanding. "Since we are to treat everyone equally in the church, there can be no social or intellectual aristocracy in it. Don't say to yourself, "I'm so wise; I wouldn't want to invite a house of fools over. What would I say to them? I need to have people who are at my level. "

There are no castes in the body of Christ. That's the way it ought to be. I thank the Lord that our church represents a wide range of social and intellectual strata because our ministry is not oriented only to certain classes. It is spiritually and biblically oriented to everyone who desires to study and apply the Word of God. Even outside the church, I think we are to reach down to people who are lowly, while still being available to those of higher position. The circle again widens a final time in verse 17 to become all inclusive. The last few verses of chapter 12 present . . .

IV. DUTIES TOWARD ENEMIES (vv. 17-21)

A. Refusing to Retaliate (v. 17a)

"Recompense to no man evil for evil . . . "

Verse 17 is similar in thought to verse 14. We are told not to respond with evil when others do evil things against us, even though that's a natural reaction.

1. The Contrast of Legal Punishment

You say, "Now wait a minute, John. What about the Old Testament passages in Exodus 21, Leviticus 24, and Deuteronomy 19 that say, 'Eye for eye, tooth for tooth . . . ' (Ex. 21:24)?" Those verses are talking about public law that deals with the nation of Israel. A nation is to have a system of justice that retaliates against evil. So where there is a murder, there should be the execution of the murderer. Where there is a theft, there should be retribution brought upon the thief. There is to be punishment commensurate to the crime in a society that is ordered by law. But that does not apply to private revenge. God's design for society is not vigilante law. According to Romans 13:4, a nation's law enforcement official "beareth not the sword in vain; for [he] is the minister of God, an avenger to execute wrath on him that doeth evil. " So there is built into society the avenging of wrongdoing.

2. The Consequences of Lax Punishment

When a society doesn't punish evil, I believe it puts itself in the judgment of God. If you read the Old Testament, you'll find that God demands blood for blood. Unfortunately, our society has allowed many crimes to go unpunished. There are murderers who have gone relatively unpunished because of loopholes in the law and liberal judicial decisions. I believe our society bears the responsibility for not responding appropriately against evil with the law of God. I believe that puts us in a position to be judged by God.

There is no place for private revenge. Paul says that we are to pay back "no man evil for evil. . . . " (v. 17). That is not our place; that responsibility belongs to the government. Christians are not to retaliate.

B. Respecting What Is Right (v. 17b)

". . . Provide things honest in the sight of all men. "

1. The Passage Paralleled

a. 1 Thessalonians 5:15 "See that none render evil for evil unto any man, but ever follow that which is good, both among yourselves, and to all men. " b. 1 Peter 3:9 "[Don't be] rendering evil for evil, or railing for railing, but on the contrary, blessing " Christians are not to give back evil, but good and blessing.

2. The Provision Premeditated

"Provide" is an interesting word in verse 17. It means "to take thought in advance. " In this context, it means to premeditate your goodness so that you're not caught unaware when someone wrongs you. When someone does something evil to you, if you're just set up for momentary reaction, you're going to react with evil. That's your natural reaction. So, you have to premeditate to do good when evil comes. It is a preparation process that demands a disciplined life. If my reactions are premeditated, when evil is committed against me, I will not be left to react with my raw emotions because I will have already thought through how I will respond with goodness. Paul is saying, "Premeditate your goodness; don't be caught unaware. " What is meant by providing "honest" (Gk. kalos = "intrinsically good") things is bestowing things that are visibly, outwardly, and tangibly good.

3. The Principle Practiced

When someone does evil against you, do good to them in a way they can see. Doing good is not to be a private emotion; it is a visible act of kindness. We are to graciously return something good to the evildoer. I've tried to do that through the years, for example, when I have received mail from people who have been angry with me for things that I've said from the pulpit. I have learned to premeditate my response so that I can reply in kindness to those who are hostile. Usually, I respond with something like, "Thank you for your concern. If I've done anything to offend you, forgive me. Please pray for me that I might be the man that God wants me to be. " That's the way to respond to evil. If it's possible to give something that is tangibly expressive of your kindness, do so.

Our behavior should commend us to those who do evil against us. That is a basic principle.

Christians are to think through their responses so that when they are confronted with an evil situation, they have premeditated a response that rightly represents the God they belongs to. Only then can they fully "adorn the doctrine of God . . . " (Tit. 2:10).

C. Pursuing Peace (v. 18)

"If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men. "

1. Taking the Initiative

I like that statement--it's practical. Paul wants us to live peaceably, but he prefaces it with the statement, "If it be possible " There are some people you try to make peace with but are unable to. Sometimes you have tried everything you can, yet peace is still not achieved. In those cases, that phrase can be comforting, for even the Holy Spirit knows that making peace isn't always possible. Furthermore, the phrase "as much as lieth in you" indicates that it takes two to make peace. That tells us that we have the responsibility never to let the conflict come from our side--regardless of whether those who oppose us are wrong in their condemnation of us. We should make peace.

2. Refusing to Compromise

The phrase "as much as lieth in you" is very important because it's sometimes difficult to know how far to go in making peace. You say, "If I really want to make peace, I'm going to have to compromise the truth. So-and-so is going to be furious with me unless I change my doctrine, or unless I say I'm wrong and he's right. " So, you have to come back to the phrase, "as much as lieth in you. " There are times when you come to the bottom line but things are still non-negotiable. I'll do everything I can to have peace except compromise what I believe to be the truth. The one thing I will not do is violate the Word of God, but I will do as much as I can to make peace. Even Jesus, the Prince of Peace, said, ". . . I came not to send peace, but a sword. For I am come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law" (Mt. 10:34-35). Jesus said, "I know times will come when even though I come in peace, I won't be able to bring peace without compromising the truth--and I won't do that!"

So, as much as possible--to the point of not compromising--live peaceably with all men. Seek to be a peacemaker. The world is full of troublemakers, "but the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable . . . " (Js. 3:17). Right next to purity is peace. Are you a peacemaker? Or are you a troublemaker?

D. Assisting Your Adversaries (vv. 19-21)

1. The Vengeance of God (vv. 19-20)

a. Justice for the Judge (v. 19)"Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but, rather, give place unto wrath; for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord. "Don't execute justice yourself. The Greek word for "avenge" (ekdike^o) means "to punish. " Don't punish people for their evil because you are not to judge (Mt. 7:1). Rather, we are to leave the response of wrath to the Lord, as indicated by the quotation from Deuteronomy 32:35 in verse 19. Don't try to take justice into your own hands--let the Lord judge. Give room for God's wrath, for He is an infinitely just Judge. God's promise is that He will repay: He will deal with sin; no sinner will ever escape his just reward.

Therefore, I don't feel any need to carry out my own personal vengeance. I don't have to retaliate

because God does that. Passages like Nahum 1:2-3, Habakkuk 1, Psalm 37:1-17, and Psalm 94:1-3 reveal that God is a just God who will repay evil. b. Food for the Fire (v. 20)"Therefore, if thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink; for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head. "That last phrase is fascinating. Apparently, it refers to 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 on his head, which were supposed to represent the burning pain of shame and guilt. 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.

2. The Victory of Good (v. 21)

"Be not overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. "

That is a distinctively Christian response. The word "overcome" is *nikaō*, from which we get words like Nike (maker of athletic goods) and the Nike missile. It means "victory. " Paul is saying, "Be the victor by overcoming evil with good. Don't be a victim; be a victor. "

CONCLUSION

Let me sum up this practical passage in a few sentences. What is a Christian? How are we to live distinctively? We begin by loving without hypocrisy, hating evil, and holding fast to what is good. In humility, we are affectionately concerned with others. As a result of our diligent, fervent service to the Lord, we inevitably face resistance from the unbelieving world. But we can counter that opposition with hope, joy, and faithful prayer. And when we see others who are in need, we reach out to them, sharing our possessions. When we are opposed in our service to Christ, we bless those who persecute us. We experience the joy of others and endure their pain as well. We have no desire for personal prestige and high position. We not only regard those who are of high social standing, we also fellowship with those on the lowest level of society. We are marked by humility, which knows no intellectual or social aristocracy. We do not return evil against even those who personally harm us. Rather, we desire to overpower them with good--no matter what they have done. We assign any vengeance and judgment to God, and, in so doing, become the true victors. That is how justification touches practical living.

Focusing on the Facts

1. What makes Christian love distinct, according to Luke 6:31-33?
2. How should we respond toward those who persecute us? Give some New Testament examples.
3. What example did Jesus leave us for dealing with persecution (1 Pet. 2:21-23)?
4. Identify the types of things that are most responsible for creating stress. (see p. 9)
5. How are we supposed to respond to those who rejoice and those who weep? Explain.
6. For whom did Jeremiah the prophet weep? What was his weeping a beautiful expression of?
7. What does it mean to "be of the same mind one toward another . . . " (Rom. 12:16)?
8. What does the unity of spirit among believers flow out of? Discuss some Scriptures that speak of that.
9. What are two things that will enable us to treat everyone on the same basis, according to Romans 12:16? Explain them.
10. Are we to punish those who do evil against us? Defend your answer. Explain the difference between vigilante law and legal punishment (Rom. 13:4).
11. Why is it important to premeditate your response to those who might wrong you? What else should characterize our response?
12. What did Paul realize about making peace? Why is his statement in Romans 12:18 comforting?
13. What responsibility do we have in making peace? How far should we go in making peace?
14. Why are we instructed not to avenge ourselves (Rom. 12:19)?
15. What do you accomplish by showing your adversary acts of kindness (Rom. 12:20)?

16. How are we to overcome evil (Rom. 12:21)?

Pondering the Principles

1. As Jesus said, it is easy to "love those who love you . . ." (Lk. 6:32; NASB). But the true test of your maturity as a Christian is your willingness to love those who hate you in a tangible way. Are you aware of any enemies that you have? If so, what could you offer them as an expression of your love for them? Meditate on Luke 6:27- 36, praying that God might stretch your ability to love the unlovable.

2. What types of things are you sympathetic toward? Are they things that have high priority in God's eyes? How does the intensity of your concern for them correspond to their temporal or eternal value? Are you sensitive to those around you, especially believers? Or are you too busy, indifferent, or uninvolved in their lives to know when they are weeping or rejoicing? List some things you can do to increase your sensitivity to them.

3. Have you heard that if you want to be successful, you should associate only with positive and successful people? Have you assimilated that reasoning into your own thinking without really knowing it? What kinds of people did Jesus associate with? Consider those he healed, taught, and lived with. How does the world's system measure success? How does the Bible measure it? Do you desire to be temporarily successful by worldly standards more than you desire to be eternally successful by God's standards?

4. Paul said, ". . . Respect what is right in the sight of all men" (Rom. 12:17; NASB). Do you consider how the watching world will evaluate what you are doing? Do you plan how you will respond to who treat you negatively? If you are expecting opposition over something, predetermine how you will respond with goodness.

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