

Romans 12:17-21
August 9, 2015

Open with Prayer

HOOK:

Over the last three weeks, I suggested that Paul has put together a checklist of how our lives should be lived as children of God. There are multiple areas that he covers. I compared it to a performance review at the office. When your boss evaluates your work, you are being evaluated in different areas, e.g. skill level, people skills, the ability to problem-solve, identify strengths or weaknesses, etc.

Transition: As we go through Paul's checklist, I want to again give you a word of encouragement: We could easily read this chapter and see only our shortfalls, but let's remember that there are things we are doing right. Let's read this text and determine what our "next step" would be to help us become *well-rounded* as Christians. **All of us CAN strengthen our spiritual walk with the Lord BY honestly evaluating ourselves in each of the AREAS of our walk Paul identifies for us.** We will go through the text slowly and take each verse and process the meaning. Let's begin.

BOOK (NIV 1984): [Read Rom 12:17-21]

V.17:

- Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody.

V.18:

- If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.

V.19:

- Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord.

V.20:

- On the contrary: "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head."

V.21:

- Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Process Questions and Observations:

Q v.17-18: Paul says "Do not repay anyone evil for evil." What do we "repay evil" with (v.21)? [Overcome evil with **good**.] Did you notice that by choosing not to repay evil doesn't mean be passive? He says "overcome evil with **GOOD**."

Q: How does this look at the practical level? Maybe you're not experiencing "evil," but you have that person in your life who is bothersome to you. How would you apply this? What does "good" look like? [Maybe when we're "bothered," we choose to be "burdened" for the one who gets to us.]

Q: Paul says "to live at peace with everyone," but what are the possible limitations we might face? [It may not be possible. But if it is in our control to create peace, we should do so.]

Q v.19-21: I love these last set of verses. When someone wrongs us, what is the natural, fleshly response we'd like to give? [Revenge! We might even foster something bad to happen to our enemy, or we hope they get their "upcomings."]

Q: But if you look at the model of "how to treat our enemies," what is God's part? [To avenge the wrongdoers. He says, "I WILL REPAY."]

Q: What is our part in this model of "how to treat our enemies?" ["leave room for God's wrath" and show care and concern to our enemies!]

Q v.20: So when we feed the enemy when their hungry, or give them something to drink when their thirsty, what is the outcome the Lord is wanting us to produce by doing so? [Heap burning coals on his head.]

X-REF: Matt 5:44–48 [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.]

Q: What does "heap burning coals on his head" mean?! **X-REF:** Proverbs 25:21–22. The coals on the head may refer to a ritual in Egypt in which a person showed his repentance by carrying a pan of burning charcoal on his head. Helping rather than cursing an enemy may cause him to be ashamed and penitent.]

As we wrap up Chp 12, can you see that in order for us to strengthen our walk with the Lord, our DEFAULT MINDSET starts with: **consider others better than ourselves/honor others above self, which then leads to practicing hospitality (pursuing friendliness with strangers), bless (speak well of another, especially our enemies) and only repay evil with good.**

Summarize: The key idea in this section is *relationships*. If we have a right relationship to God, we will have a right relationship to the people who are a part of our lives. "If a man says, I love God, but hates his brother, he is a liar" (1 John 4:20).

Application Rhetorical Q: I have proposed today that All of us CAN strengthen our spiritual walk with the Lord BY honestly evaluating ourselves in each of the AREAS of our walk Paul identifies for us. What would be one baby step you could take based on these last set of verses that would strengthen your walk with the Lord?

LOOK:

We need to hear this because it's time to do an assessment on how we are living out our calling as God's children. Paul provided multiple scales to be measured by, but the goal is to act on the information you learn. Since our spiritual growth is a process, we need to think in terms of baby steps in areas we need to improve. If you haven't been faithful in prayer, then figure out a small baby step that works for you to sharpen your prayer life. If it's practicing hospitality, then figure

out a baby step that works for you to sharpen your hospitality efforts. Let the Holy Spirit use this chapter to illumine the baby step(s) HE wants you to take and be open to it. You can't lose!

Close in Prayer

Commentaries for Today's Lesson:

Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). *The Bible Exposition Commentary* (Vol. 1, pp. 554–573). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

Our Relationship to Our Enemies (Rom. 12:17–21)

The believer who seeks to obey God is going to have his enemies. When our Lord was ministering on earth, He had enemies. No matter where Paul and the other apostles traveled, there were enemies who opposed their work. Jesus warned His disciples that their worst enemies might be those of their own household (Matt. 10:36). Unfortunately, some believers have enemies because they lack love and patience, and not because they are faithful in their witness. There is a difference between sharing in “the offense of the cross” (Gal. 5:11; 6:12–15) and being an offensive Christian!

The Christian must not play God and try to avenge himself. Returning evil for evil, or good for good, is the way most people live. But the Christian must live on a higher level and return good for evil. Of course, this requires *love*, because our first inclination is to fight back. It also requires *faith*, believing that God can work and accomplish His will in our lives and in the lives of those who hurt us. We must give place to “the wrath”—the wrath of God (Deut. 32:35).

A friend of mine once heard a preacher criticize him over the radio and tell things that were not only unkind, but also untrue. My friend became very angry and was planning to fight back, when a godly preacher said, “Don't do it. If you defend yourself, then the Lord can't defend you. Leave it in His hands.” My friend followed that wise counsel, and the Lord vindicated him.

The admonition in Romans 12:20 reminds us of Christ's words in Matthew 5:44–48. 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. Paul referred to Proverbs 25:21–22 as he urged us to return good for evil in the name of the Lord. The “coals of fire” refer perhaps to the feeling of shame our enemies will experience when we return good for evil.

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. And even if our enemy is not converted, we have still experienced the love of God in our own hearts and have grown in grace.

Witmer, J. A. (1985). *Romans*. In J. F. Walvoord & R. B. Zuck (Eds.), *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Vol. 2, pp. 487–497). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

12:17–18. The exhortations in verses 17–21 relate primarily to believers’ relationships with unbelievers, speaking as they do of those who do evil toward believers (v. 17) and are the “enemy” of believers (v. 20). The Old Testament principle of justice was “eye for eye” (Ex. 21:24), but Paul commanded, **Do not repay anyone evil for evil** (cf. 1 Peter 3:9). On the positive side Christians are **to do what is right** (*kala*, “beautiful,” used here in the ethical sense of good, noble, and honorable). Paul then commanded believers, **Live at peace with everyone** (cf. “live in harmony with one another,” Rom. 12:16). But recognizing that limits exist, Paul included the words, **If it is possible, as far as it depends on you**. Harmony with others may not always be achievable, but believers should not be responsible for that lack of peace (cf. Matt. 5:9).

12:19–21. Referring again to the negative (cf. v. 17a) Paul then exhorted his readers **not to take revenge** after they are misused. Instead they should **leave room for God’s wrath** (lit., “for the wrath”), because God has promised to avenge His people: **It is Mine to avenge, I will repay** (Deut. 32:35; cf. Heb. 10:30). David’s refusal to kill Saul on two occasions when it seemed that God had delivered Saul into David’s hands is a classic biblical example of this principle. In light of God’s promise to execute vengeance, a Christian should therefore **feed his enemy** and quench his thirst—in short, respond to his evil with Christian love. Heaping **burning coals on his head**, along with the first part of Romans 12:20, is a quotation from Proverbs 25:21–22. The coals on the head may refer to a ritual in Egypt in which a person showed his repentance by carrying a pan of burning charcoal on his head. Helping rather than cursing an enemy may cause him to be ashamed and penitent. As Paul summarized, **Do not be overcome by evil**, giving in to the temptation to retaliate, **but overcome evil with good** (cf. Matt. 5:44, “love your enemies”). Again positive and negative commands are put together (cf. Rom. 12:9, 11, 16–20).

Cabal, T., Brand, C. O., Clendenen, E. R., Copan, P., Moreland, J. P., & Powell, D. (2007). The Apologetics Study Bible: Real Questions, Straight Answers, Stronger Faith (p. 1701). Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers.

12:19–20 Paul rejected revenge as a Christian response to injustice, but did he then imply another kind of revenge after all—heaping fiery coals on an enemy’s head (perhaps an image of hell)? The first two lines of the quotation and its final statement of God’s reward that Paul did not cite here (from Pr 25:21–22) argue for a positive meaning to this. The next verse confirms this: “Conquer evil with good.” More likely, then, “fiery coals” envision a positive effect: shaming the enemy into repentance. The burning coals may refer to an Egyptian ritual during which one demonstrated genuine repentance by carrying hot coals in some container. Paul urged Christians to do good to enemies so they see their sins and repent. Obviously, repentance will not always follow, but this is the Christian response when injured (recall Mt 5:44–47).