

Vengeance Is God's Gospel Culture, Part 10

Romans 12:17-21

David Sunday

March 18, 2018

Please open your Bibles to Romans 12. We believe that our labor here is not in vain when we come to read God's Word during this time in our services. We believe the Holy Spirit is speaking through the Word of God to transform our lives in 400 different ways—in each one of our lives—as we especially need His help.

Thank You, Lord, that this time is not in vain. Thank You for the presence of Your Spirit, Who is with us. Thank You for Your Word that endures forever; Your Word which is reading us even as we are reading it. It's showing us what's in our hearts and conveying to us what's in Your heart. Speak, O Lord, for Your servants are hearing and ready to obey. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Romans 12 has been our theme since January and today we are in the last section, the last sermon. Palm Sunday and Easter are coming up over the next two weeks, then we'll return to Romans after Easter to finish it up. Notice that this section, verses 17-21, is very clear to us. The problem in reading this section is not that we don't understand it; the problem is that it is difficult to obey it. So let's hear God's Word and trust that He will help us obey it:

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.

This is God's Word.

Pastor Scott Sauls tells the story of a friend he calls Ted who was an attorney. Ted was pushed out of his firm—not in spite of, but because of his good and honest heart. One day Ted's supervisor called a private meeting with him and said, "Ted, if you want to keep your job, you're

going to have to twist the truth about one of our client's assets, because if the whole truth about our client's assets became known by shareholders, it would be the end of our client's business—and it would be the end of a significant income stream coming into our firm.”

Well, Ted—because he was loyal to Jesus and committed to his integrity—respectfully refused to follow his supervisor's order and was summarily dismissed from the firm. But that wasn't the end of it. Ted later learned that his supervisor was going around his back to all the firms in the city and slandering him, so for two years he was black-balled and could not find a job. There were two years of very painful unemployment for Ted, his wife and their three children.

One Sunday during those two years, Ted's pastor found him in the foyer before church. He was kind of joking around with him when he said, “Ted, do you want me to go out and get a jug of gasoline and some matches, so we could set your former place of employment on fire—starting with your old supervisor's office?”

[I'll be the first to admit—pastors do say some stupid things sometimes.]

Ted looked his pastor straight in the eye and uttered two unforgettable words: “No retribution.” No retribution. He understood what this passage is all about.

Verse 17, “*Repay no one evil for evil.*” That's how it begins. Verse 21 is how it ends: “*Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*” In case we weren't getting the point, it's also there in the middle, verse 19: “*Beloved, never avenge yourselves.*” The message is clear.

If you wait until evil assaults you to decide how you're going to respond, you will almost certainly blow it. Ted's response—“No retribution”—didn't just happen. What came out of Ted's heart when he was under intense pressure was a reflection of what he had cultivated in his heart through many ordinary and daily practices of faithfulness. He was ready to respond in a Christ-like way when he was provoked by evil. What about us?

Here's the deal, friends. Before long, you will be done wrong in this life. You won't get a whole lot of living done before evil is done to you. It's unavoidable. People are going to do you wrong. Even those who love you will do you wrong. Others will hate you or slander you or mistreat you or hurt you. We need to understand that behind all the evil people can do to us, there is not a human face, but a demonic face—an evildoer who breathes out violence against God's children. The Bible says our struggles ultimately are not against flesh and blood, but “*against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places*” (Ephesians 6:12).

You cannot avoid evil being done to you, because the evil one is not going to avoid you. You must fight. When you are born again and become a child of God, you are born for battle. You will either conquer evil, or evil will conquer you. If you repay evil with evil, you've lost the

battle, just like in The Lord of the Rings where anyone who used the evil ring to wage war against the Dark Lord became evil in the process. If you become evil to beat evil, you've lost. Nietzsche didn't get everything right, but he did get this right: "Beware that, when fighting monsters, you yourself don't become a monster. For when you gaze long into the abyss, the abyss gazes also into you."

Remember how Paul began this chapter? "*Therefore brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercies...*" He's inviting us to gaze into an ocean of mercy, to be transfixed in our minds and hearts with the mercy that God has shown us in Christ. Because God has been so merciful to us, we're to present ourselves now as a sacrifice to Him. All that we are and all that we have belongs to Him. Living holy, well-pleasing in His sight, we should be able to respond, "Lord, I'm yours."

Then Paul says to us in verse two, "*Do not be conformed to the pattern of this world*"—to the way this world thinks—because this world says, "Don't get mad—get even." This world says, "Tit for tat. If someone hurts you, you hurt them back." "Don't let anyone disrespect you without showing them who you really are." "Get back. Strike back at your enemies."

But God says in verse two, "*Don't be conformed to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind.*" Let God's will change the way you think.

A clear command (verses 17-18)

When you are transformed by the renewal of your minds, then you will be able to test and discern, what the will of God is—His good, His acceptable and perfect will (Romans 12:2). He makes His will very clear to us in the end of Romans 12 as it relates to those who do wrong to us. There's a clear command in verses 17 and 18. It begins with this: "Repay no one evil for evil." That was Ted's rule: "No retribution." He understood. Retaliation is out of bounds for a follower of Jesus.

It's very easy for us to return evil for evil. Our natural response is to do that. "No one insults me and gets away with it."

But if this is the way you're going to live, you'll never have a need to pray that God will help you carry out your results. If you're committed to paying back evil for evil, you'll never have a need for watchfulness or for prayer or for humility or for faith. If you want to repay evil for evil, you can do that on your own—and the devil is happy to help you do it

But if you want to live as someone who is enamored with the mercy of God, someone who's overwhelmed with what God has done for you in Christ—if you want to live differently, if you want the mercy you have received to pour out on others—then you're going to need help from God. We are called to live that way, with no exceptions in verse 17: "*Repay no one evil for evil.*" So turnabout is never fair play for a Christian, because we follow the Man Who, when He was reviled, did not revile in return. When He suffered, He did not threaten. So follow Jesus, repaying no one evil for evil.

Instead, verse 17 says, "*Give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all.*" Now, you might be someone who says, "I don't think God's Word is full of 'do not's'—do not do this, do not do that. It's not about a bunch of rules." There's some truth to that, but I hope you've noticed, as we've read this passage, there are quite a few "do not's" in this passage. There are quite a few commands that we are to be careful to obey.

The Bible doesn't just leave us with the "do not's"—it also gives us a "do," a new way of living, a new way of operating. It shows us how we are to follow Christ, which begins with something that's going to require careful thought on our part. "*Give thought*"—be careful to do—"*what is honorable in the sight of all.*" One translation puts it like this: "See that your public behavior is above criticism." Don't give people a reason to treat you badly. Don't be the type of person who says, "I don't give a rip what people think." That's not godly.

No, we should seek to show honor to everyone. Even things like common courtesy and manners matter. It matters how we treat other people, how we act in public, being honest at work, having a cheerful heart when we deal with other people, being a team player. Ray Pritchard says, "Not being a troublemaker, a grump, a whiner, a constant complainer or a hypochondriac." Live in such a way that no one can make an honest accusation against you. Live so that if they are going to accuse you, they have to tell a lie to do it. Give thought to what is honorable—not just for Christians, but in the sight of all.

When you go into the world, ask yourself, "How can I show honor and esteem to the people around me?" When someone else hurts you or offends you, it is not easy to turn around and show that person honor, respect and esteem. But that's what we're called to do in this passage. We are called to create a counter-culture among God's people, where we're not constantly putting people under negative scrutiny, where we're lifting other people up, where we are forgiving one another's weaknesses, admiring one another's strengths, celebrating one another's accomplishments, and where we are even honoring those who treat us badly.

When someone else hurts us, instead of thinking, "How can I get back at them?" God's mercy calls us to think, "How can I honor that person?" Why is this so hard?" I heard Jani

Ortlund say, "It's hard because, as sinners, we are prejudiced to hate other people's sins more than our own." Isn't that the truth? We have a very fine-tuned gauge to recognize when other people are sinning—and we hate it. But we're very tolerant of our own sin. God's Word calls us not just to "love the sinner but hate the sin." I love the way Rosaria Butterfield puts it: "Love the sinner but hate the sin? Even better, love the sinner and hate your own sin."

What if we started there? What if we hated our own sin more than we hated the sins that are done against us? Maybe it wouldn't be quite so hard to resist retribution, instead giving thought to doing what is honorable in the sight of all. What do you think? Let's be realistic about this. Thankfully, God's Word doesn't paint a naïve picture, like, "Hey, why can't we just all get along?" God's Word understands that in this world of evil and sin, peace is not always possible. We should always pursue peace, but we should be realistic in our expectations.

I am so glad Romans 12:18 is in the Bible. It can save you a lot of sleepless nights. "*If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.*" Give it all you've got. Fight for peace. Be willing to die to your own selfish agenda. Don't pour fuel on the flame. Don't inflame quarrels. Take the initiative to be a peacemaker. But realize—it's not always possible to live at peace with everyone. Sometimes people aren't willing to live at peace with you. Sometimes people say, "Well, if you want to be at peace with me..."—calling you to do something that would compromise your relationship with God. You can't do that.

What did the angels say about Jesus when He came into the world? "Peace on earth and good will to men" (Luke 2:14). Jesus is the great Peacemaker. He came to bring peace between men and God, as well as between people and people. Jesus also said, "*Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword*" (Matthew 10:34). There are going to be divisions in families because some will follow Him and some won't. There are going to be divisions in communities.

So the Christian call to pursue peace is never a peace at any cost. It's not, "Oh, I just want to be peaceful. I just want my life to be smooth and comfortable. I just want everyone to like me." No, it's not that kind of peace. Some people are going to hate you because they see Jesus in you. That's a fact. Other people are going to hate you just because they like hating. That's just what's in their heart. Some people are addicted to their own rage. And some people are very sick mentally and spiritually, and they don't want to be at peace.

Sometimes peacemaking is beyond your reach. You can't control other people. You can't always be chasing them down. Just make sure that you're not contributing to the problem. Guard your own heart (Proverbs 4:23). You're the only person you ultimately can control. By the power of the Holy Spirit, you can have self-control. You can remember, "*A soft answer turns*

away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger" (Proverbs 15:1). "I'm not going to contribute to the conflict. I'm not going to stir up strife. But if peace is not possible right now, I will leave it in God's hands."

The command is clear in these verses: "do not repay evil for evil, but instead pursue peace." How do you do that? This will require careful thought, doing what is honorable in the sight of all. This calls for realistic expectations, because even if you do all that is possible within yourself to make peace, peace may not be possible. But whatever you do, when evil assails you, do not take revenge.

A compelling rationale (verse 19)

Verse 19 gives us a compelling rationale for why we should never avenge ourselves. Let's look at it together: "*Beloved...*" He reminds you right now, and I remind you as well, friends, God loves you. You are a child of God if you trust in Jesus. You are His beloved. You are dear to Him as the apple of His eye. You are loved. Don't forget that. In a world of strife, in a world of evil, God loves you. Jesus loves you. "*Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God.*" There's the compelling rationale. "*For it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.'*" We need to get this.

Have you ever experienced an evil against you that is so seething, so dehumanizing, so traumatizing, you've said in your heart, "I will never get over this. I can't forget it. I've been scarred so deeply. I've been betrayed. I've been brutalized. It seems permanent. I can't get over it"? If you've ever felt that way—and I'm sure many of us have—I want you to jot something down right now. Write down this name: David Powlison. Then write down this article: "I'll Never Get Over It—Help For the Aggrieved." Search for it in Google.

Do you know what Dr. Powlison says to the person who has suffered such evil they feel they will never get over it? He says:

You're right. You will never get over it. A human being is not meant to deal with a terrible wrong by having it simply wash away. So you don't have to chase an impossibility. You don't have to ruin your life with attempts at anesthesia. You don't have to feel like a failure because you're not happy and smiley all the time.

There are pains, hurts and evils done that in this lifetime will not be fully healed. When you stop looking for some magic cure that's going to leave you without a scar, then you can get to the real work of facing your pain in the presence of God. Who is He? He's a God Who daily bears our burdens. He's a Father of mercies and the God of all comfort. He's a Savior Who weeps with

us, Who bears our shame and our sorrows. He's a Holy Spirit Who sanctifies to us our deepest distress.

And because He is with us, we can forgive. We can refuse to let bitterness take root in our hearts. We can let go of offenses. Friends, there are some pains and some wounds that we're going to have to wait for full healing until we see Jesus face to face. Everything will be okay in the end, but we have to be okay with not everything being fully healed right now. If you cannot rest in that promise, you will be restless for revenge. If you cannot wait on the Lord to set all things right, you're going to be impatient to take matters into your own hands. Don't do it!

God is warning us in this passage: never avenge yourself. You're trying to do a job that only God can do, but you'll never do it right. Your own sin is going to get in the way and cloud up your judgment. You'll end up hitting back too hard, or hitting the wrong target altogether.

Kate and I were watching an episode of the British detective series, "Foyle's War," and it illustrated this tragically. There was an older couple whose daughter had been violently assaulted and impregnated by a man much older than she. In her shame and despair, she took her own life. Her parents were stricken with grief and seething for revenge. They knew they would never get over this despicable crime in their lifetime. They knew they would never get over this unspeakable loss. They knew there was no judge who could set it right, because their daughter took her own life.

So they plotted for revenge. They found someone who was able to tell them the address of where the perpetrator lived. So the old man went to the address he had heard and when the owner of the home opened the door, the father plunged a knife into the man's abdomen, leaving him dead—only to find out later he had heard the wrong address. There were two streets that sounded similar and because he was hard of hearing, he went to the wrong street. That meant vengeance demanded another murder. Then when Detective Foyle finally uncovered the crimes and arrested the old man and his wife, they resigned themselves to the gallows, "Because," they said, "our lives have already ended." Vengeance did not ultimately satisfy anything.

We long for justice because we're made in the image of God. We feel if we don't take revenge, justice will never be served. But there's a more compelling rationale in these verses: "*Leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.'*" There is no sin in the universe that will ever go unpunished. None of yours, and none of mine, and none of those who do evil against us. Every sin in God's universe will be punished. Justice will be served for all the evil that's been done on earth—the evils that have been done against you, as well as the evils you yourself have done. Justice will be served.

God has reserved two places where His perfect justice can be satisfied, where evil is avenged in a fully satisfying way. The first is at the cross of Jesus. The second is in an eternal hell. I want to speak to you who have come today who may not be a believer yet. You may find trouble in your heart with this idea of God's judgment—especially the thought of hell. That might be very troubling to you—a God Who actually sends people to hell.

I want to ask you, “Have you ever had wrong done to you? Have you ever suffered something unspeakably great? Have you ever felt in your heart a desire for that wrong to be made right?” I want to ask you, friend, what if ultimately there was no justice? What if ultimately all those people who died in the Holocaust, in Stalin's gulags and in Syria today were just snuffed away and there was no one to set the record right? There was no one to deliver justice? Could you stand to live in a world like that—in a world of such chaos, in a world of such meaninglessness? I couldn't stand it.

I long for a God of justice. And friend, if you have that desire in your heart for justice to be dealt out and satisfied, then you also have to admit that whoever does the justice has to be fair and equitable so it's dealt out for all. Then you've got to start thinking about your own life, your own misdeeds, your own sins. Then the question becomes: where will you find refuge from the justice you deserve for the wrongs you've done?

As Christians, we believe there is a place where we can find refuge. We believe Jesus took away the guilt of the sins of everyone who puts their trust in Him when He died on the cross. That's what we believe about the cross. We believe God hated our sin so much that it required His Son to die for us. When we say to Jesus, “I am a guilty sinner. I cannot rescue myself. I cannot make justice for what I've done wrong, but Jesus, I put my sins on You,” we believe God metes out justice on His Own Son in our place. Now, when we trust in Jesus, justice smiles and asks no more from us. We're forgiven. We're free.

If you're a Christian, your greatest desire is that the mercy God has shown to you might be shared with, seen by and experienced by others too. You want that. So you love your enemy. You pray for those who persecute you. You bless them. You ask God, “Would You be as merciful to them as You've been to me?” You would be content for the justice you desire for the evils you've endured to be satisfied by the sufferings of Christ on His cross. In other words, if you're a Christian, you are more than willing for those who have done evil toward you to experience the same salvation you have experienced in Jesus Christ.

God gave His Son to be the One Who takes away the guilt of the sins of those who trust in Him. Can you trust that if God cares that much about justice that He will not fail to carry out justice for the evils done against you? I think that's the step God is calling many of us to take

today. He wants us to take the offenses that are festering inside our hearts—to take the seeds of bitterness that are wanting to find a rooting place inside our hearts where they can grow up and choke out joy and peace—God is calling us today to let it go, to leave room for the wrath of God. Either at the cross, or in hell, justice will be served. Can you leave it to the wrath of God?

Martin Luther King, Jr. put it like this: “The arm of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” Evil may be doing well on the 100-yard dash, but at the end of the marathon, it’s justice that will have the final word. Good will prevail. Look at the portrait of our Lord Jesus Christ in the book of Revelation. See Him riding in triumph. See Him carrying out God’s wrath on all God’s adversaries. Look at Jesus treading out the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God against all evildoers in the book of Revelation. Can you trust that God’s justice will ultimately be served? Can you leave it in God’s hands? Can you wait until Jesus comes for justice to be satisfied?

Look at how Jared Wilson puts it:

When we become eager to enact God’s wrath through personal vengeance, it’s often because we distrust God’s ability to deal with injustice himself. Or we distrust Him to do it in a way that satisfies us. When we lash out, fight back, take up zealous causes, angrily pontificate, feud on Facebook, tsk-tsk on Twitter and berate on blogs, aren’t we, in essence, saying God needs us to set people straight? All too often what we’re really protecting isn’t God’s honor, but our reputation or influence.

So leave it to God—He will repay.

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What we ought to do and why we ought to do it (verse 20)

In the meantime, Romans 12:20 tells us what we ought to do and why we ought to do it. If your enemy is hungry, take him to Jimmy John’s. If he is thirsty, give him a Diet Coke. “*For by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.*” I know some of you are thinking, “Does this mean I have to just expose myself to abuse again and again and again? Do I have to be a doormat?” The answer is no. Sometimes the most loving thing you can do to your enemy is to confront him and to rebuke him for his sin. Jesus taught that too. It’s not loving to let an abusive person continue abusing you without confronting that person—and if necessary, enforcing consequences for his sin.

Remember verse 9. “*Love must be sincere. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good.*” But even when you are having to hold an evildoer responsible for the consequences of his

or her sin, remember your motive must always, always, always be to bring blessing to that person—to do what is in the eternal best interest of the person who's wronged you. Maybe some consequences are in that person's eternal best interest. But guard your heart from vindictiveness and revenge. We are called to love people, even at great cost to ourselves, because Jesus loved us at great cost to Himself.

When we treat our enemies with kindness, we heap burning coals on their heads. Now, this could be referring to an ancient Egyptian practice where people would carry burning coals on their heads as a sign of repentance. Paul may be saying that when we treat our enemies with kindness, God may perhaps move them to feel shame over their sins through the kindness we've been showing them, and our enemy becomes our friend. They repent. That might be what he's saying.

Or the burning coals may be another symbol of judgment, because they often are in the Old Testament. Paul may simply be underscoring in a metaphorical kind of way what he just said in the previous verse—leave to the wrath of God. Either way, friends, your motive must not be vindictive. You're not to go about, saying, "I'm going to be really kind to you, because the more kind I am, the more God's going to judge you in the end. I want you to get it as bad as you can possibly get!" That's not the heart of this passage. Our motive, as verse 14 reminded us, is to bless those who persecute us, to love them as God has loved us in Jesus.

The climax (verse 21)

Now the climax of chapter 12, verse 21. I love this verse. *"Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."* Chinese war strategist Sun-Tzu said, "Before you embark on a journey of revenge, you should first dig two graves." You're only going to end up destroying yourself in the process. Evil will overpower you if you use evil means to try to overcome evil. There's only one way to overpower evil. It's the way of the cross—by doing good. It's the way of Jesus toward us. What does 1 Peter 2:23 say? *"When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly."*

That last phrase is vital. Jesus was practicing what He preached. He models exactly what Paul urges us to do as we follow in Jesus' steps. Jesus was not taking vengeance into His own hands. He was loving His enemies, blessing those who persecuted Him, making peace through the blood of His cross, saying, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing"

(Luke 23:34). He was leaving room for the wrath of God, entrusting Himself to Him Who judges justly.

Friends, that head which once was crowned with thorns is crowned with glory now. And so will be the heads of all who follow Him on this path of not repaying evil for evil, refusing to take revenge, not being overcome by evil, but overcoming evil. May we have grace from God to trust that God will do a better job than any of us at seeking vengeance for the wrongs that have been done in this world.

Let's we read together some words from the prophet Nahum. God's Word says:

*^{1:2} The Lord is a jealous and avenging God;
the Lord is avenging and wrathful;
the Lord takes vengeance on his adversaries
and keeps wrath for his enemies.*

This is true about Who God is. But it's not all the truth. It is truth that we need to take comfort in. But there's more truth as well.

*³ The Lord is slow to anger and great in power,
and the Lord will by no means clear the guilty.
His way is in whirlwind and storm,
and the clouds are the dust of his feet.
⁶ Who can stand before his indignation?
Who can endure the heat of his anger?
His wrath is poured out like fire,
and the rocks are broken into pieces by him.
⁷ The Lord is good,
a stronghold in the day of trouble;
he knows those who take refuge in him.*

He knows you. He calls you to find refuge in Him. There's an old hymn that says:

You who think of sin but lightly
Nor suppose the evil great
Here on the cross may view its nature rightly
Here its guilt may estimate

[Stricken, smitten and afflicted, See Him dying on the tree! by Thomas Kelly, 1804]

Some of us probably came into church today thinking in our hearts, "My sin is really no big deal," because we're so much more preoccupied with what other people have done to us than what we've done against God and others. This Communion Table that we're coming to today says, "That's a deception." To think that your sin is no big deal, wait a minute. If you were the

only sinner in the world, God would have had to crucify His Son to bring justice against your sin. That's what a big deal your sin is. Don't come to the Table thinking, "My sin's not that great."

This Table also says you and I are so loved so that even while we were enemies, God was willing to give His Son to reconcile us to Himself (Romans 5:10). If you believe that, if you cherish what Jesus has done for you, it will make you think differently about those who do you wrong. If there's someone in your life right now whom you hate, you can't come to this Table this morning without first repenting of that attitude. You can't say, "God, I'm okay with You loving me, forgiving me, but I'm not okay with You loving and forgiving my enemy."

Is there anyone in your life whom you would refuse to forgive? Would you consider their debt to be greater than your debt to God? Is there anyone you would rather see suffer in hell than to experience the mercy God has lavished on you? If those attitudes are in your heart, now is the time to repent, to give it to God, to seek His cleansing, to wait for His judgment, to trust that justice will be served and to thank Him that in His great mercy Jesus bore everything that justice demanded for your sin. Take a moment of quietness now to give these things up to God and ask Him to work in you a heart of mercy and love.

New Covenant Bible Church

4N780 Randall Road, St. Charles, IL 60175

(630) 584-2611 ♦ www.newcbc.org

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