



Romans 12:13-21. Overcome Evil with Love.

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If there is one word that most fully describes the context of Apostle Paul's Christian doctrine it is *grace*. In the first chapters of Paul's epistle to the Romans he describes the true ungodly nature of all people, a sin nature that separates all people from God. There is simply no work of man that can overcome the power that sin has to separate us from God. Before Paul met Jesus on the Damascus road, he was a notorious persecutor of Christians. Upon meeting Jesus he fully understood that there are few people who deserve to be eternally separated from God more than he. Paul honestly refers to himself as the "chief of sinners" because of the part he played in the persecution of Christians.¹ Paul recognized that all people have sinned and come short of the measure of righteousness that would give them access to God.² There is simply nothing that man can do on his own to atone for his own sin. The only solution to the sin problem is grace.

When Paul writes of grace, he is referring to the undeserved gift of salvation that God offers to all who will place their faith and trust in the Lord. The receipt of God's grace does not require any penance, or any work of any kind. God's grace is demonstrated as a gift of salvation: when one comes to God in faith, sin no longer has the power to condemn. Jesus' death on the cross paid the penalty for the sins of those who place their faith and trust in Him. Those who come to God in faith still struggle with sin, but that sin no longer separates us from God. When sin no longer stands between us and God, a life change takes place. God's Holy Spirit is given to every believer as His will fills the void left by the surrender of self-will, a surrender that is part of accepting God as Lord and Savior. The Holy Spirit leads the believer to turn away from the old sin nature and old sinful choices, and turn to godly behavior. So, what is godly behavior?

Romans 12:9. *Let love be without dissimulation. Abhor that which is evil; cleave to that which is good.*

Paul describes the foundation of Christian behavior in the twelfth chapter of his epistle to the Romans. Starting in verse 9, Paul describes a love that is completely devoid of hypocrisy, a love that is an image of the love that God had demonstrated toward mankind. It is a love that the Holy Spirit inspires.

¹ 1 Timothy 1:15.

² Romans 3:23.

Unfortunately, submission to the Holy Spirit does not come easily to the natural and sinfully-natured man. We may choose to submit, but giving up the influences of this pagan and secular world are difficult, particularly when Christians are immersed in it. But, the desire to live a godly life, a desire that is led of the Holy Spirit, remains. If one is indeed saved, if one truly desires to be obedient to God, if one is truly submitting to the leading of the Holy Spirit, one will obey the most important of the commandments: love one another. Paul describes this love as a love without any form of hypocrisy or arrogance, one that does not discriminate among people based upon this pagan world's measure (v. 9). It is a selfless love that firmly embraces that which is godly and flatly rejects that which is evil (v. 9). Paul continues describing a life that is characterized by selfless love by describing some of the characteristics of demonstrated love. The text that follows is not a law of dos and don'ts. Rather, it is simply a description of what we see in someone who demonstrates a life that is submitted to the Holy Spirit. When we act in ways that are consistent with Paul's imperatives, we are acting in ways that are godly. Certainly, instruction in godly living is something that all Christians need. Paul's instruction comes in the form of imperatives that are almost poetic in form. Though writing in Greek, he uses a Hebraic form of poetic grammar that will be received comfortably by his Jewish readers. Consequently, as we look at these imperatives, we will see rhyming of ideas. Where verse boundaries surround these ideas, each verse can be divided into two, similar points: the structure of Hebrew poetry.

Rom 12:13a. *Distributing to the necessity of saints;*

Compassion is a hallmark of selfless love, a response to a need that always takes action. As we experience the various events of our lives, we often find ourselves in need. Likewise, when we come into relationship with other Christians, we are always going to find these others in need. If one truly feels a selfless love towards others, the natural response is a compassion that will find substantive ways to meet that need. When we work to meet each other's needs, the entire body of believers is strengthened as needs are met.

Rom 12:13b. *given to hospitality.*

When one demonstrates love without hypocrisy, the expression of hospitality always follows. Generosity is another hallmark of selfless love, and even pagans find it easy to be generous to those whom they love. However, godly hospitality goes beyond this level, demonstrating an equivalent generosity that inspires open arms to strangers, those who we have no relationship with, those whom we love only because God also loves them.

Rom 12:14a. *Bless them which persecute you:*

To bless someone is to treat them with grace, and like compassion, that expression involves substantive action. To bless is to lavish unmerited favor on another. This is the context of the word when we say, "God bless you." God has blessed us with His grace when we have no merit of our own. In a manner similar to the exercise of hospitality, it is easy to bless one we love. It is easy to lavish grace upon that new toddler grandchild that has a Grandmother's heart wrapped around his tiny fingers. It is something else, however, to lavish that same grace upon someone who is persecuting and abusing you. It is far more significant to lavish grace on one who is treating you with continual and harsh injustice. However, if love is to be without hypocrisy, it cannot differentiate between those who are close to us and those who are not. If we do not understand this idea, we will look upon one who blesses their persecutors and say, "how can you do this?" Their answer would be, "I do not know how to do anything else." That is love without hypocrisy.

Rom 12:14b. *bless, and curse not.*

We are observing the second half of this poetic construct, so their context should not be separated. This imperative is still referring to the way we relate to one another. If blessing is the lavishing of unmerited grace, cursing is its opposite: holding it back. How do we demonstrate a lack of grace towards one another? Love gives without strings attached. Cursing pulls back on attached strings. The ungraceful will look at others with judgment and condemnation, seeking the just reward for the ungodliness of others. We curse others when we seek their punishment. The pagan curse, "go to hell" is a demonstrative example of such a curse.

We tend to think of a curse as something we say, rather than something we do. However, we may also think of a blessing as something we say rather than something we do. To truly bless someone involves more than words; it also involves positive and substantive action. It involves the demonstration of grace through spontaneous and heart-felt acts of generosity and hospitality. Consequently, we also curse others by holding back that demonstration of blessing. A love without hypocrisy is not tainted by the impurity of cursing, but is empowered by the blessing of grace.

Rom 12:15. *Rejoice with them that do rejoice, and weep with them that weep.*

One who lives a selfless love will never be satisfied to live alone, but will enjoy developing and maintaining deep and meaningful relationships with others. Our pagan society disavows deep relationships. Most people in any given neighborhood can rarely tell you the names of the members of their neighboring families, much less any details about the events of their lives. To develop a deep relationship with someone is risky, as one is opening themselves up to being hurt. However, such an attitude is not self-less: it is self-centered. One who lives a love without hypocrisy develops genuine and caring relationships with others. Theirs is a life of sharing. Love, expressed in relationship, multiplies our joy and divides our grief. We can rejoice over the blessings of life when we can share that rejoice with others. We also can bear our grief more easily when it is shared with others. A love that is expressed without hypocrisy is not going to withhold a relationship with others, but will seek to build relationships with others that will serve to multiply joy and divide grief.

Rom 12:16a. *Be of the same mind one toward another.*

If we stay within the context of this passage, the "same mind" refers, not to unity, but the sharing of love without hypocrisy with one another, though certainly the latter will always promote the former. If we share godly love with one another, there will be a firm bond of unity that is based on trust rather than agreement. One could render the Greek as "live in harmony, one with another." In the past I have had the opportunity to experience harmony when serving as a guest director for concert band and orchestra. The director's task is basically to keep the beat and guide the orchestra to play a musical piece in a manner that is consistent with the director's interpretation of the writer's intent. The director assists in that effort by communicating important transitions to the musicians (referred to as "cuing") and by setting the tone through facial and body language. The members of the orchestra, under the leadership of the director exercise their best talent and ability in order to follow the director's lead, while at the same time listening to one another so that both the rhythm and pitch will be correct. The members of the orchestra work together toward a common goal: harmony.

To live in harmony with one another is much like serving as a musician in an orchestra. The director is the Holy Spirit, and the resulting music is the product of godly living. As each musician brings his skills on a particular instrument, each Christian brings his unique giftedness to the body. Every sense of the musician is engaged in an effort to produce the highest quality of music possible. Living in harmony engages the senses in sharing with one another: instead of hearing, we listen; instead of looking, we see the heart; instead of knowing, we understand.

What would happen if the members of the orchestra each decided to play their own melody in their own key, ignoring the lead of the conductor or the sounds coming from the other instruments? This is the disunity that is demonstrated when the faithful are not of the “same mind,” and chaos results. There is a value in harmony that is never realized in chaos.

Rom 12:16b. *Mind not high things, but condescend to men of low estate.*

If love is to be expressed without hypocrisy, the harmony that is engendered in the first half of this verse does not draw lines between those who are to be included and those who are not. Since we are still working on harmony, I will push this orchestra metaphor a little further. I was once an accomplished trumpet player with the potential to be acceptable to any orchestra. However, choosing another direction in life, I can no longer play the instrument with such skill and will not invest the time and energy to regain it. If I were to now take my trumpet back to the Eastman or Juilliard schools of music, and request to be seated, I would receive nothing but scorn and be ejected from the place. I would certainly experience the blunt end of condescension. Such discrimination is appropriate for such fine schools of music, as it is appropriate for those recruiting for a fine orchestra. However, no such discrimination is justified in the body of Christ. This pagan and secular society teaches us to admire people of high social estate, and to despise those of low social estate. Literally all of the violence and conflict of this world bases its motives on this axiom. True Christianity is characterized by a different axiom: the ground is level at the foot of the cross and there are no distinctions among people that would cause any one to have more or less value than any other, simply because love without hypocrisy loves as God loves: unconditionally.

One who thinks of himself highly considers it condescending to “stoop” to relate to one who the consider lower than themselves. A similar word is used here that refers to a continual practice of humility for the benefit of all concerned. When we stoop down it is only selfish pride that we are stepping down from. When we lift up those who the world considers low we find that we are becoming part of God’s purpose to bring encouragement into that person’s life.

Rom 12:16c. *Be not wise in your own conceits.*

When you look in the mirror, what do you see? In January of 1973 the top pop music hit in the country was "*You're So Vain*" by Carly Simon. One line of her composition remains vivid in my memory: "*You had one eye in the mirror*

as you watched yourself walk by." It described the base personality of one who had an unduly high opinion of himself. There is no place for conceit in the heart of one who demonstrates love without hypocrisy. *Agape* love is selfless, not self-centered. If conceit is a compensation for low self-worth, one can be encouraged to know that in God's heart there is no person of low worth. If we share God's heart, we find our value in Him, yet it is a value that is shared by all others. A selfless love loves others greater than one's own self.

Rom 12:17a. *Recompense to no man evil for evil.*

A love that is without hypocrisy does not desire the hurt or injury of any person. The pagan model for human interaction is one of revenge and retribution. "If you hit me, I'll hit you harder" seems to be the axiom for secular peace. In the peak of the cold war the nations referred to it as M.A.D.: Mutually Assured Destruction. When Jesus described grace in action, he stated "turn the other cheek."³ One who exercises godly love simply cannot bring themselves to bring hurt or evil on another. This is grace.

Rom 12:17b. *Provide things honest in the sight of all men.*

A literal rendering of this verse could be, "stand for what is right in the sight of all." A true Christian should be known for their stand for godly choices. There is an implication of spiritual integrity in this verse. "In the sight of all" implies that this integrity is a visible characterization of your personality. The maintenance of integrity is somewhat of a go no-go endeavor. We consider a bridge to have integrity if it can hold the load for which it is designed. It only takes a small flaw for the bridge to buckle and fall under its rated load. Likewise, there is no room for the acceptance of a small flaw in personal integrity, since when it becomes known before men, integrity no longer exists. A love that is without hypocrisy is characterized by flawless personal integrity. Such an individual is not going to be seen doing ungodly things in private, simply because those ungodly things are not done. The implication here is not to hide our ungodliness. The implication is to live a life that does not need to be hidden, but is rather visible to all people as one of honesty and integrity.

Rom 12:18. *If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men.*

The next few verses speak to the peaceful character of a true Christian. A true Christian will make every effort possible to be a peacemaker, to serve as

³ Matthew 5:39

an agent of reconciliation rather than one of division. One can note that this is clearly not a call to pacifism as some have thought. This phrase "if it be possible" is important. Of course, with God all things are possible, so peace is always a possible resolution to conflict. However, there seem to always be occasions when evil is on the move and must be stopped in order to save lives. The only way to stop the mass killing of European Jews in the early to mid 20th century was to go to war and destroy the government sponsoring the killing. Many people suffered and died on both sides of that conflict. There will be times when action must be taken to stop the progress of evil, and it takes courage and wisdom to respond to such situations in a godly manner. However, most of us will never need to make such a decision in life. Short of this one circumstance, there is no place for violence. One who loves without hypocrisy will always seek to live in peace with others, willing to break that peace only in the most extending of circumstances.

I am reminded of the pacifist by the name of Alvin Cullum York (1887 - 1964) who won the Medal of Honor (and many other American and French medals) and is generally recognized as the greatest American hero of World War 1. Sergeant York was a man of peace, and one who did everything in his power to avoid conflict. However, when necessary, he had the courage to do what needed to be done.

Rom 12:19. *Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord.*

It is the cultural pattern of this pagan world to seek retribution and vengeance, repaying evil with a greater evil. The command of love leads us to quite a contrary conclusion: love does not seek to be avenged. Vengeance is an act of hatred or anger, not of love. All people will ultimately be held accountable for all their deeds, but that accountability is to God, not to men. Quite soon in his epistle, Paul is going to discuss the sin of judging one another. God has called his children to live in love, and to leave the judgment to Him. The issues of salvation are far larger than the issues of our bumps and bruises. We can damage the gospel and nullify the work of the kingdom in the heart of another when we take vengeance into our own hands. Many people avoid contact with the church because they have been subjected to judgment at the hands of the church. I have repeatedly heard people disdain the church, stating that "those people judge me," or "those people are such hypocrites." When people receive judgment instead of love, only satan wins. Christians are to leave the judgment of others to God and serve as His agents of love, peace, and reconciliation. A love that is without hypocrisy is not going to judge another, nor seek vengeance. Such a love always seeks peace and

reconciliation. Such a love always sees potential value to the kingdom of God in every lost soul.

Rom 12:20. *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.*

If one is to spend many hours in research in order to ascertain the meaning of this verse, the result is always the same: there are many different opinions from which to choose. Whenever we approach the task of biblical interpretation⁴ we must always maintain the context of the message that was intended by the writer. The truth in any one scripture is always in agreement with the truth of scripture as a whole. The entire context of love without hypocrisy disallows any command to seek vengeance. This point is important when we approach this verse.

The most common interpretation of this verse uses the "therefore" construct to tie this verse to vengeance. This interpretation states that by doing good, those who have hurt us will see those good works and become more subject to the wrath of God who will avenge us. This interpretation is inconsistent with the nature of grace. It is inconsistent with the application of true self-less love. One who lives love without hypocrisy has no interest in being avenged. Consequently this cannot be a valid interpretation. The phrase "heap coals of fire on his head." is a literal reference to Psalm 25:21-22.

Psalm. 25:21-22. *If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat; if he is thirsty, give him water to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head, and the LORD will reward you*

We are dealing with a Hebrew idiom. Idioms come from historical origins and often refers to a particular event or custom, so it may be instructive to ascertain what this idiom meant to the ancient Jew. We tend to look at the idiom in modern English. When we do, we come away with the image of bringing great pain on an individual as we visualize placing burning coals over their head. However, the idiomatic and correct application of this phrase brings us to a quite opposite conclusion.

One common interpretation takes us back to ancient Egypt. We may be familiar with the tradition of expressing mourning by sitting in ashes while wearing "sackcloth". Ashes come from burning coals. Some argue that this

⁴ Referred to as the science of hermeneutics.

tradition came from an earlier Egyptian tradition of placing a bowl of burning coals on one's head in order to demonstrate repentance. If we use this as the idiomatic source, we come away with the interpretation that our good works will cause the enemy to repent following their "burning sense of shame."⁵ However, such a conclusion may be logical, but it does not fit the context of any of these verses.

Another interpretation is the one preferred by this writer, and is probably more obscure than either of these other interpretations. It also took a lot more research to find. However, it is historically defensible, and it is consistent with the manner of the message of grace. The ancients were a nomadic people who depended upon fire for their daily work. When one would retire for the night, they would stoke the fire with fresh wood so that there would be coals remaining in the morning. It may be necessary to get up in the middle of a particularly cold night and repeat the process so that there are still coals remaining in the morning. However, if one is lazy and does not prepare the fire the night before, the coals are all extinguished in the morning and that individual is forced to go to a neighbor and beg for some hot coals. Envision your enemy coming to you in the morning begging for a few coals. He brought a small bowl with him with which to hold the coals. You have few coals to share since your fire will not be fully built until late morning. However, recognizing your enemy's need you offer him so many coals that he has a full, large bowl full. The ancients carried a bowl on the top of their head.

To heap burning coals on one's head is to lavish them with a gift that they do not deserve. This is consistent with grace. It is also an act that is deserving reward. There is no measure of hypocrisy, and no desire for vengeance in this act. The point is not to "kill them with kindness," it is to "lavish them with kindness." By so doing we leave the judgment and vengeance entirely up to the Lord, doing exactly what the scripture describes, and exactly what the Holy Spirit would inspire.

Rom 12:21. *Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good.*

Returning evil is never the appropriate response for a person of faith. "To respond to evil with evil is not to overcome it, but to add to it."⁶ The world adds evil to evil, and we see the results of this in the retribution that is constantly evident in Arab-Israeli conflict as each continually violates the other claiming retribution for some past act of violence. The most powerful weapon that we have to combat evil is the application of godly goodness that is empowered by the Holy Spirit. Such goodness is, first, the appropriate way to

⁵ See W. Klassen. "Coals of Fire: Sign of Repentance or Revenge?" New Testament Studies 9(1963) :337-350.

⁶ Schreiner, 242.

express the love and grace of God upon those who greatly need it. Second, this is a response that is usually quite unexpected, opening the door for resolution and ministry. "The best way to get rid of an enemy is to turn him into a friend."⁷ Returning good for evil may not always elicit a desired response from another, but returning good for evil is the only response that is appropriate for a person of faith.

Verse 21 really closes an extended discussion that started with verse 9. The foundation of this entire passage is the expression of love that is not mixed with any measure of hypocrisy. Paul is writing to people who are seeking to obey God, and at the same time are being subjected to persecution by both the Jews who despise them as a cult, and the Gentiles who despise them as being "unenlightened."⁸ They saw themselves subjected to evil, and their natural response, as ours, is to strike back. Paul has been trying to teach the early church and us that the foundation of grace is agape love. Christian behavior is to stand on that foundation, and by so standing, one stands above the evil of this world. Evil will always be buffeting the faithful, but love constrains the faithful to overcome that evil with a consistent expression of agape love that is without flaw.

The command for us is simple: submit to the Holy Spirit instead of our own self-will, and demonstrate God's love in our lives with grace and integrity. This is a high order, but it is the only order that leads us to obedience to God and to a more useful part in the furtherance of His Kingdom on earth.

⁷ Bruce, F. F. *Romans*, 218. Quoted in Schriener, 242.

⁸ Not much has changed; only the persecution of Gentiles by Jews has dramatically diminished.