

Sermon: Results of Forgiveness

Text: Romans 12:17-21

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Introduction: Romans 12:14-16 (NIV) ¹⁴Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. ¹⁵Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. ¹⁶Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.

**How do you suppose it was that the culture treated the Church in the first century?
Reading between the lines of the text you might conclude:**

- **The culture persecuted them (v.14)**
- **The culture cursed them (v.14)**
- **They probably didn't want much to do with the Christian community (v.16)**
- **They probably discriminated against them (v.16) Of course that wouldn't happen now!**

Romans 12:17-21 (NIV) ¹⁷Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. ¹⁸If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. ¹⁹Do 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. ²⁰On 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." ²¹Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Also inductively we might conclude:

- **The culture did cruel things to them (v.17)**
- **The culture created dissension and were hostile (v.18)**
- **They may even have been violent with the Church (vv.18-19)**

If you have been forgiven, you will never be the same. Once you have experienced God's love, everything changes. Love will become possible as an honest expression—even to your enemies.

The Bible says if you follow Christ there should be:

I. No Retaliation

A. Retaliation does not demonstrate God's love.

Booker Washington said: "I will not allow any man to make me lower myself by hating him." The only real way to destroy an enemy is to make him a friend.

If we treat others according to the way they have treated us, we are only treating them as they deserve. We can justify that kind of behavior so easily. "I'm only teaching them a lesson. I'm only showing them how I feel. I'm only giving back what they gave me."

But we need to be different than the world. We need to demonstrate grace and share what we have been given - unmerited favor from God.

If you don't retaliate when you have the opportunity and the power to do so, you will act positively instead of negatively. What will result then is what Paul quoted from [Proverbs 25:21-22](#), and is called "heaping burning coals on his head." And what is not quoted from the Proverbs text repeated in the Roman text is that if you do these things, i.e. feed your enemy and give him drink, "*the Lord will reward you.*"

"Heaping hot coals on his head" does not mean that you are going to get even with your enemy by another process, i.e. burning his head. This may refer to the ancient way of lighting fires. They did not have matches or BIC lighters in those days, so if you wanted to light a fire in your home you couldn't go and simply borrow a match. But you could go and borrow some coals from your neighbor. Of course, you took along an earthen jar that would not burn. Then you would ask your neighbor if you could borrow some coals to light your own fire. (This may be where the song came from: *Come on Baby, Light My Fire*)

If he was a good neighbor, he would fill the jar and you would carry the padded jar home on top of your head. This became a picture of an ample generous response to a neighbor's need. Soon it became a metaphor for responding so generously to your neighbor that it made him ashamed of himself for his attitude toward you.

It is easy to retaliate, but

B. It is not *our* place to retaliate.

We do not understand how to punish or retaliate. In our lifetime God punishes to discipline those he loves.

Isaiah (19:22) says that God strikes in order to heal - never with the intent to destroy the relationship. He wants to keep the possibilities open. His judging tends to be redemptive. He leaves the door open. We usually try to close it. You see we need to be patient with others just like God is patient with us. We need to be praying for those who now trouble us that they may repent and become our friends - even our family. We should never be praying for God to punish these difficult people.

It is a lot like Jonah when Ninevah repented. When God spared the city, Jonah became angry with God. “Why didn’t you wipe them out like you said you would?”

We must never carry out revenge, because we are not in a position to judge. Since we are guilty too, and need to be judged ourselves.

Illus. Relationships do not always end up the way they start. I can’t tell you how many people who end up marrying each other - at first were not at all attracted.

Another result of being forgiven is that there is:

II. More Care in How You Live

Afterall:

A. A world is watching.

And it is a world of peers, family, and acquaintances.

As Augustine said: “The Church owes Paul to the prayer of Stephen.” ([Acts 7](#))

Stephen’s spirit of forgiveness probably had an accumulative effect on Paul’s resistance to the Gospel. We never know who is watching us. Stephen was not playing to the crowd. When you are dying all pretense leaves. Stephen was how he always was - a man full of the Holy Spirit - totally committed to the Church of Jesus Christ to the very end. You can tell a lot by the way a person dies.

The world was watching as Christianity said there is no more slave or free. The world was watching to see if they would sit and eat together. There is no longer any class distinction in God’s eyes. A slave and master come to God with the same resources. NONE.

As Christians our conduct is to be good, fair, and equitable. And also we are to avoid even the appearances of evil. ([I Thessalonians 5:22](#); also see verse 15 which has a doxology following in verses 23-24).

I Thessalonians 5:15-24 (NIV) ¹⁵Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always try to be kind to each other and to everyone else. ¹⁶Be joyful always; ¹⁷pray continually; ¹⁸give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. ¹⁹Do not put out the Spirit's fire; ²⁰do not treat prophecies with contempt. ²¹Test everything. Hold on to the good. **²²Avoid every kind of evil.** ²³May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. ²⁴The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it.

Yet another result of being forgiven is that there is:

II. More Care in How You Live. - afterall ...

B. God is watching.

He was watching Job in the O.T.

Job 14:16-17 (NIV) ¹⁶ Surely then you will count my steps but not keep track of my sin. ¹⁷ My offenses will be sealed up in a bag; you will cover over my sin.

In Jeremiah it says:

Jeremiah 31:27-28 (NIV) ²⁷“The days are coming,” declares the LORD, “when I will plant the house of Israel and the house of Judah with the offspring of men and of animals. ²⁸Just as I watched over them to uproot and tear down, and to overthrow, destroy and bring disaster, so I will watch over them to build and to plant,” declares the LORD.

God watched Jesus while He was in the flesh among us. At Jesus' baptism and His transfiguration God said: “This is my son in whom I am well-pleased.” Someday I hope he says to you and me: “Well-done good and faithful servant enter into the rest that I have prepared for you.”

We are told to pay attention and watch as well. **Matthew 26:36-41 (NIV)** ³⁶Then Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to them, “Sit here while I go over there and pray.” ³⁷He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with him, and he began to be sorrowful and troubled. ³⁸Then he said to them, “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me.” ³⁹Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, “My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will.” ⁴⁰Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. “Could you men not keep watch with me for one hour?” he asked Peter. ⁴¹“Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak.”

Yet another result of being forgiven is that there is:

III. An Attempt to Live at Peace (as far as it depends on us).

A. With the Church

The saddest commentary on Christianity is conflict, disunity, and out and out hatred in the Church. This sometimes comes from the least likely sources. It usually is the result of someone or some group insisting on their way - almost always related to issues of power, control or money. Rarely is it over important issues such as doctrine or how much money we should spend on missions and benevolence.

Many of the reasons for denominations have their roots in inner dissension. God is not pleased with what His Body has become and how it continues to fragment more each generation over differences in taste and opinion. God is not honored when His own people can not get along.

B. With our enemies

Karl Barth poses the question: “Why, then, should we not engage in conflict, particularly if our own struggle with ourselves is, to some extent at least eased, i.e. it is so much easier to find fault than to correct our own flaws. (personality profile)

Jesus tells us in [John 16:33](#) that he has overcome the world, but none of us believe that Jesus has turned the hatred of all his adversaries into love. We should not be crushed when we sometimes fail as well.

Christians should not go around with their finger of moral consensus in the air checking how the currents of modern man may be moving. Morality is not up for vote. Because we are to be peaceful and not retaliate, should not be confused with complacency towards sin and immorality.

A number of years ago, Rodney King posed the question: “Can we all get along?”

Well that depends, Rodney. If we as Christians are asked to accept the amoral, hedonistic lifestyle of our culture, the answer is NO!

If “Can we get along?” means that we need to continue to be silent as people abuse the name of our Lord and Savior and degrade His Body the Church, the answer is NO!

Or if “Can we get along?” means that we as Christians need to accept abortion, homosexuality as a Christian lifestyle and pornographic filth, the answer is NO!

Yet we *will* love people who may live like that. We just cannot condone what they do!

We as Christians have come to know what the Apostle Paul knew:

Ephesians 2:14-18 (NIV) ¹⁴For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, ¹⁵by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, ¹⁶and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. ¹⁷He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. ¹⁸For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.

From the world’s view - as a result of our being forgiven, there will always be:

IV. Actions Which Are Unexpected.

All of Christianity is a paradox to unregenerate man because:

A. True love comes from the Holy Spirit.

Romans 5:5 (NIV) ⁵And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.

Our power to love comes from the Holy Spirit.

Emil Brunner has this insight: “Precisely because the genuineness of the life of faith must prove itself in love, the danger of an artificial, fabricated love is never far away.”

There is always the danger of hypocrisy, but not if the love is motivated by the Holy Spirit.

B. We’ll treat others like God treated (treats) us.

Romans 5:6-8 (NIV) ⁶You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. ⁸But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Illus. There is the story of a Christian soldier who as a boy had formed the habit of praying beside his bed before he went to sleep. He kept up this practice in the army, but he became the object of mockery and ridicule to the entire barracks. One night he knelt to pray after a long, weary march. As he was praying, one of his tormentors took off his muddy boots and threw them at the boy, one at a time, hitting him on each side of his head.

Saying nothing about it, the Christian lad took the boots and put them beside his bed and continued to pray. But the next morning, when the other man woke up, he found his boots sitting by his bed, all shined and polished. It so melted his heart that he came to the young man and asked him for forgiveness. This led, after a time, to the man becoming a Christian. This is what Paul means when he says you are to overcome evil with good.

You see it is not enough to just refrain from retaliation. It is not enough to resist inflicting injury in return for the pain given us. We are to do positive things - give food and drink. One of the primary social manifestations of God's love (agape) is peace. It is why Jesus came to earth to die.

Conclusion: Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. The principle involved is that evil can never be overcome by evil. It only escalates and reduplicates what it was trying to annihilate. Evil can only be overcome by the greater good. The old saying that two wrongs don't make a right is absolutely true.

Every good deed and kind act we perform makes it more difficult for those in the world to deny that we have not just taken a self-improvement course, but we have encountered the Living God. For those who are patient in this holy lifestyle there is victory on the horizon - not only personally, but also for those who we touch.

Jesus is coming in the clouds. I just pray that we will be ready and those who we now count as adversaries will be a part of the group of friends for whom He comes.