

The Christian's Attitude Toward All People

By David Harrell

Bible Text: Romans 12:14-21

Preached on: Sunday, September 23, 2012

I trust that you have prepared your heart this morning to receive the Word. Will you join me by turning to Paul's epistle to the Romans? Romans chapter 12. We have now come to verse 14 and we will be examining verse 14 through 21. Romans chapter 12. Follow along as I read our text this morning beginning in verse 14.

Bless those who persecute you; bless and curse not. Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep. Be of the same mind toward one another; do not be haughty in mind, but associate with the lowly. Do not be wise in your own estimation. Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men. If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men. Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, "VENGEANCE IS MINE, I WILL REPAY," says the Lord. "BUT IF YOUR ENEMY IS HUNGRY, FEED HIM, AND IF HE IS THIRSTY, GIVE HIM A DRINK; FOR IN SO DOING YOU WILL HEAP BURNING COALS UPON HIS HEAD." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.¹

The Christian life is a very demanding life. Even with our new nature and the power of the indwelling Spirit of God, we find ourselves swimming upstream against the current of this world. And sometimes we begin to relax and when we do, the world begins to take us where it will. When this happens we succumb to the power of our enemies within and without. That power within, that enemy within is the flesh. And the enemy outside of us is the world, enemies, frankly, very few Christians seem to understand. Those who fall prey to these adversaries are described as men of flesh, babes in Christ according to 1 Corinthians three and verses one through three. They are people who have received the milk of elementary gospel doctrine, but because they continue to think and they continue to live like they did before they lived in Christ, they are unable, Paul says, to digest the solid food of the deeper doctrines of a gospel centered life, the types of things we are studying here.

To be sure, according to Hebrews 5:14 solid food is for the mature who, because of practice, have their senses trained to discern good and evil, that you will recall that in the first 11 chapters of Romans Paul has presented to us the stunning realities of our salvation, of justification by faith, what God has given to us. And now he shifts here beginning in Romans 12 and he reveals what God expects from us. And all of it, my friends, is swimming up stream. None of it is easy. None of what God expects of us comes natural. Yes, it is consistent with our new nature, but our flesh will fight it all the

¹ Romans 12:14-21.

The Christian's Attitude Toward All People

By David Harrell

Bible Text: Romans 12:14-21

Preached on: Sunday, September 23, 2012

way. And the current of the world sweeps us downstream into sin and to sorrow when we give in.

Bear in mind that the flesh demands self satisfaction. The flesh demands self love and the world offers us a myriad of ways to find satisfaction.

Galatians five verse 17 Paul says:

“For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please.”²

My friends, this is why many times we bristle in arrogant anger when God confronts us with his Word. We have been asked in Romans 12 to present our bodies as a living and a holy sacrifice that is acceptable to God. And he has told us how. He said, “Don't be conformed to the world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Use your gifts. Sacrificially service Christ by serving those that love him in your church family. And if you are not doing this, he has told us, that you are thinking more highly of yourself than you ought to think. He has told us, for example, to be devoted to one another in brotherly love, to give preference to one another. And yet many Christians want nothing to do with their church family, only those in their little immediate group.

We have learned that we must deny ourselves. We have got to discipline ourselves for the purpose of godliness. And when the flesh hears these kinds of things it instantly goes into damage control. Have you noticed that? Of course, you have. Immediately your flesh says, “Oh, wait a second here. We have got to silence this accusing conscience with a marching band of excuses and rationalizations and justifications.” And then if we are confronted a little bit further the flesh goes to war. We get defensive. We lash out. Who are you to tell me what to do? What? You expect me to be accountable to these things? Are you kidding me? I answer to me. I am the only authority in my life.

Beloved, if this describes you, you must understand that the Christian life is an accountable life. God holds us accountable to the principles and standards that he has set forth in his Word, these things that we study week in and week out. And he does this through the faithful shepherding of those that he has placed in authority over you as well as the one anothering that is to occur in the context of the body. And if you say to him, “I am unwilling to subordinate my life to your will by serving your people for your glory,” Then you violate his standards and his principles. And when we do this, he disciplines us and this is what I want you to avoid. This is what I want to avoid in my life. I have been disciplined before. And I am sure you have, too, by God almighty. And it is not fun.

² Galatians 5:17.

The Christian's Attitude Toward All People

By David Harrell

Bible Text: Romans 12:14-21

Preached on: Sunday, September 23, 2012

In Hebrews 12 verse 11 we read that:

“All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness.”³

And God’s discipline in our life can be severe at times. We reap what we sow and if you sow the wind, you will reap the whirlwind. Broken fellowship with God, crumbling relationships, shattered marriages, prodigal children, financial ruin, deteriorating health. On and on it can go. You will end up producing the opposite of the fruits of the Spirit. Instead of love, you are going to produce bitterness. Instead of joy you will experience sorrow. Instead of peace there will be turmoil. Instead of patience, you will become an impatient person. Instead of kindness, you will become cruel. Instead of goodness, you will manifest wickedness. Instead of faithfulness, you will be unfaithful. Instead of gentleness, you will become rude and arrogant. Instead of having self control, there will be no restraint for the passions and appetites of your flesh.

So I lovingly come before you again as your pastor and warn you to take very seriously these things that God has for us, because he is going to hold you accountable of these things. And where there is no accountability, this is where you are going to be headed, the types of things I have just described. And, unfortunately, for some you have already arrived there. Just ask those who know you best.

And sometimes if our rebellion continues on with impunity, God will literally remove us from this life all together. There is a sin leading to death, 1 John 5:16. It is not referring to one specific kind of sin, but the final sin in a pattern of deliberate, high handed sinfulness where the cup of divine tolerance finally overflows, which is the most extreme and yet the most effective form of Church purification. So, child of God, please humble yourself. Hear these things and abide by them. And if you bristle at what God is saying in these passages concerning your attitude and duty to others in the body of Christ, then you fall into the category of men of flesh, babes in Christ. You have received the milk of elementary gospel doctrine, but because you continue to think and live as you did before you believed in Christ, you were unable to digest the solid food of the deeper doctrines of the gospel centered life. Defensive pride is always a mark of the infantile Christian. And it is certainly a precursor of divine chastening.

Here in chapter 12 Paul details the attitudes we are to have toward God, toward believers, toward all people. And he exposes, frankly, the character of spiritual immaturity, that is, those who will not abide by these kinds of things. And certainly we all struggle with these. But he also offers us a smorgasbord of the solid food to help us grow up in all aspects into Christ as Paul says in Ephesians four.

³ Hebrews 12:11.

The Christian's Attitude Toward All People

By David Harrell

Bible Text: Romans 12:14-21
Preached on: Sunday, September 23, 2012

I have talked with pastors. In fact, one pastor that I talked with about a month ago was telling me, “Boy, I have learned that you have really got to go easy on the practical things of Scripture, the practical things that God commands us to do, because, man, people tend to get mad and leave the church.”

Well, I hardly think Paul shared that view. I certainly don't. Yes, most will get defensive. I do at times. Because it goes against my nature. That is the natural reaction of the flesh and some will leave the church. That is inevitable. I quit counting over 100 people that have left this church in the 18 years that I have been here and I am sure it is probably tripled that amount. Some are going to leave because they are carnal. They are babes in Christ. They can't handle the solid food. They are unable to restrain the flesh. The current of the world is just simply too strong for them. But for those who humble themselves, they are willing to eat the solid food. They will have their senses trained to discern good and evil.

So join me this morning. Let's swim up stream a little bit, all right? That is what we are going to do. I am going to swim with you. Let's be transformed by the renewing of our minds that we may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.

Now in Romans chapter 12:9-21 there are basically 25 distinct but very closely exhortations that he gives to us and these are a very concise ethical injunctions characteristic of a believer that is presenting his or her body as a living and holy sacrifice acceptable to God. We have looked at the disciplines of personal character, of the disciplines of duty towards fellow believers and this morning we are going to look at the disciplines of duties towards all people.

Notice the very first one in verse 14. I would entitle this duty bless and do not curse our persecutors. He says in verse 14.

“Bless those who persecute you; bless and curse not.”⁴

Now think about that. That is tough. Thinking of the analogy of upstream, having lived with the Indians up in British Columbia on the Frazier River, the current is extremely strong and maybe you have seen places where there is a large rapids and that is where the salmon have to jump and try to swim to keep going up stream. The Indians call that a {?}. My friends, this particular duty before us today is a {?}. This is a very difficult rapids to somehow swim through.

“Bless those who persecute you; bless and curse not.”⁵

⁴ Romans 22:14.

⁵ Ibid.

The Christian's Attitude Toward All People

By David Harrell

Bible Text: Romans 12:14-21

Preached on: Sunday, September 23, 2012

You see, our natural response is to curse, not to bless, right? Somebody persecutes you, our natural response is to retaliate, to get even by seeking revenge. I mean, this is the plot of all of the movies, right? You have got a villain who persecutes some innocent victim and then the innocent victim schemes and finally gets even and we all cheer. I mean, who wants Rambo to bless the villain? You see? That is not how it works. So we have watched the opposite of this duty hundreds if not thousands of times. And we cheer every time.

Now this was obviously a huge issue in the early church. We know from many other passages that they had internal fighting between the cultures there. You have got the Jews mixed in with the Gentiles as tantamount to throwing a coon and a possum in a barrel and expecting them to get along. Unless God does something, it ain't going to happen. So that was an issue. And then they had the external persecution. The Christians were experiencing persecution from Jews and Gentiles that hated them. And so they were very often experiencing life threatening situations all because of their faith. And I might add, as a footnote, that this is a problem heading our way in the United States of America and it is doing so at an alarming rate. I find it absolutely astounding that people seem to be more sympathetic to radical Islam than they are to biblical Christianity. It is amazing.

Now term bless that Paul uses carries not only the idea of asking God to be merciful and bring a persecutor to a place of repentance and saving faith, but it also includes the idea of showing them kindness by demonstrating the same kind of love that Christ showed to his enemies when he hung upon the cross.

Remember in Luke 23 verse 34 he said:

"Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing."⁶

Jesus said in Luke chapter six beginning in verse 27 that we should love our enemies. He went on to say:

...do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. Whoever hits you on the cheek, offer him the other also; and whoever takes away your coat, do not withhold your shirt from him either.⁷

You see this is totally foreign to the flesh. This is one of those areas where we have allowed ourselves to be so conformed, so fashioned after this world, by this world that

⁶ Luke 23:33.

⁷ Luke 6:27-29.

The Christian's Attitude Toward All People

By David Harrell

Bible Text: Romans 12:14-21

Preached on: Sunday, September 23, 2012

this is almost ridiculous to our flesh. Jesus went on to add in Luke six beginning in verse 32:

If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. If you lend to those from whom you expect to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners in order to receive back the same amount. "But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High; for He Himself is kind to ungrateful and evil men. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful."⁸

I find that John Calvin has offered some very helpful insight in this regard. Here is what he had to say many years ago. Quote, "I have said that this is more difficult than to let go revenge when anyone is injured. For though some restrain their hands and are not led away by the passion of doing harm, they yet wish that some calamity or loss would in some way happen to their enemies. And even when they are so pacified, that they wish no evil, there is hardly one in 100 who wishes well to him from whom he has received an injury. Nay, most men daringly burst forth into imprecations, but God by his Word not only restrains our hands from doing evil, but also subdues the bitter feelings with in. And not only so, but he would have us be solicitous for the well being of those who unjustly trouble us and seek our destruction," end quote.

So the prohibition here is not simply that we should refrain from retaliating against our persecutors or even that we should forgive them in our heart, but he is saying that we should actually seek their good, actively seek their good as we pray for God's blessing on them.

In 1 Corinthians four this was Paul's practice. We read beginning at verse 12 that when he was reviled he said:

"... we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure; when we are slandered, we try to conciliate; we have become as the scum of the world, the dregs of all things, even until now."⁹

And I pray that the Holy Spirit will use these truths to transform our minds that we might become more like Christ and discipline ourselves to these ends.

⁸ Luke 6:32-36.

⁹ 1 Corinthians 4:12-13.

The Christian's Attitude Toward All People

By David Harrell

Bible Text: Romans 12:14-21

Preached on: Sunday, September 23, 2012

The second admonition, the second duty that we need to discipline ourselves in is that of identifying with others. Notice verse 15.

“Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep.”¹⁰

Now at first glance this seems to be rather easy, but, in truth, if we are honest, we are prone to indifference, to envy, to jealousy, to resentment. You know, it is not so easy to rejoice with a friend who just got engaged to the person with whom you have been secretly in love. It is not so easy to rejoice with a friend whose child just received the scholarship your child failed to receive. It is not so easy to rejoice with your friend who just got a promotion and is now able to buy that new car when you are barely able to fix your old clunker. It is not so easy to rejoice with a friend who is being honored, who is being rewarded for something you have longed to receive.

Often we are more like the elder brother of the prodigal son in Luke 15. You will recall that he came out of the field and he hears all of this music and dancing and he inquires of the servants, “What is going on?”

And the servant said, “Well, your brother has returned home safe and sound and your father has killed the fatted calf.”

Did he rejoice? No. He became angry. He would not even enter the house even after his father pleaded with him. But here we find ourselves again swimming up stream. And, frankly, failure in this duty always betrays our pride. We should remember that we are all par to the same family, we are all brothers and sisters in Christ.

1 Corinthians 12:26 Paul says:

“...if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it.”¹¹

Well, likewise, Christian sympathy is often eclipsed by our own selfish priorities. Notice how he says:

“...and weep with those who weep.”¹²

Folks, this speaks not only of having compassion, but showing compassion. How often do you really enter in to the sorrows of others? Sometimes we even rejoice in the sorrow of others, of wickedness of the worst order. Spence put it this way, quote, “What a depth

¹⁰ Romans 12:15.

¹¹ 1 Corinthians 12:26.

¹² Romans 12:15.

The Christian's Attitude Toward All People

By David Harrell

Bible Text: Romans 12:14-21

Preached on: Sunday, September 23, 2012

of malice does that heart reveal which can rejoice in the misfortunes and griefs of others? Yet though this extreme of malignity is uncommon, it is—catch this—not an uncommon thing even for Christian to be unmoved by others' woes.”

You see, this takes being self absorbed to a whole new level. We must remember, as Paul said in 1 Corinthians 12:26:

“And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it.”¹³

You see, wherever we identify with either the joys or the sorrows of our brothers and our sisters in Christ, we really manifest that kind of love that a person would have if they are presenting their bodies as a living and a holy sacrifice. And whenever we enter into the sorrow of another we literally come into their life and we help share that load, that burden of pain. We make it a little bit lighter.

This is will illustrated in a custom that was practiced in the temple in Jesus' day. The temple only had one major entrance at the base of the southern wall. It is visible to this day. And worshipers would ascend the stairs as they came in that temple area. And they would exit through another passage. And steady streams of people would do this unless a worshiper was experiencing some great sorrow, some great calamity. Perhaps they were mourning over the loss of a loved one. And then that worshiper and even the family would go in the opposite direction and when they did this it forced others to encounter them face to face and, for at least a moment, share in their grief and be aware of what was going on in their life.

Well, today we use many means to make ourselves aware of each other's griefs. We use the telephone. We use email, all kinds of devices like that. But certainly it is our duty to do more than just hear of the pain, but to somehow enter into it through some kind of action. Maybe it is a card. Maybe it is a phone call. Whatever.

If there are more than one stringed instrument in a room and a note is struck upon one of those instruments, it is fascinating that the corresponding string of all of the other instruments will begin to vibrate with that sister tone. Beloved, this is how it should be amongst us. And ask yourself. Am I disciplined in this regard?

The third discipline of duty is that of avoiding showing favoritism. verse 16.

“Be of the same mind one toward another.”¹⁴

Now the idea here is living in unity, living in harmony with one another by having the

¹³ 1 Corinthians 12:26.

¹⁴ Romans 12:16.

The Christian's Attitude Toward All People

By David Harrell

Bible Text: Romans 12:14-21

Preached on: Sunday, September 23, 2012

mind of Christ toward one another. And, sadly, if we are honest, we tend to treat some in our church family in different ways than we treat others. Those we like we tend to fellowship with. We talk with. Those we don't like, we just ignore. This is painfully obvious when we come together in meals over in the other building or have various fellowships. Little cliques tend to sit together and ignore those that sit alone.

By the way, this is a very special problem in this church and in most churches with respect to women who attend the church without their husbands. Maybe they are a single woman. Maybe their husband is lost. But many times they are the ones that feel the most alienated. He is saying here, "Be of the same mind toward one another."

This was obviously a concern in the churches at Rome, because Paul repeats this exhortation later on verse five of chapter 15. He says:

"Now may the God who gives perseverance and encouragement grant you to be of the same mind with one another according to Christ Jesus."¹⁵

So you want to ask yourself. Am I a person who patiently endures and encourages everyone in my church family without partiality or do I pick and choose? Paul has told us in Romans chapter two verse 11 there is no partiality with God. He doesn't treat me in some special way and kind of leave you out here on the side. There is no partiality. But sadly all too often there is with us.

James, the pastor of the church in Jerusalem really hammers this home in James chapter two beginning with verse one. He says:

My brethren, do not hold your faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ with an attitude of personal favoritism. For if a man comes into your assembly with a gold ring and dressed in fine clothes, and there also comes in a poor man in dirty clothes, and you pay special attention to the one who is wearing the fine clothes, and say, "You sit here in a good place," and you say to the poor man, "You stand over there, or sit down by my footstool," have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil motives?¹⁶

The answer is, of course. He went on to say:

"But if you show partiality, you are committing sin and are convicted by the law as transgressors."¹⁷

¹⁵ Romans 15:5.

¹⁶ James 2:1-4.

¹⁷ James 2:9.

The Christian's Attitude Toward All People

By David Harrell

Bible Text: Romans 12:14-21

Preached on: Sunday, September 23, 2012

Beloved, this is a serious issue and it is rooted in our pride which inevitably sows seeds of discord within the body of Christ and robs us of blessing. So let's examine ourselves in this duty.

The fourth duty is that of avoiding haughtiness and associate with the lowly. Notice again in verse 16 he says:

“...do not be haughty in mind, but associate with the lowly.”¹⁸

What word haughty, that just says it all, doesn't it? It has got that sound of {?}. That is how we are many times. It literally means not thinking high things, that is with respect to yourself. We might put it this way. Get off your high horse. Don't be such a snob with your nose stuck up in the air.

Now class warfare was going on in the early church. There were racial distinctions and some folks would look down on others with contempt because, after all, that guy is a slave. Yeah, I know he has come to Christ, but he is just a dirty slave. And then there were others who were wealthy. There were the uneducated the educated and on and on it goes.

So what Paul was saying here is basically don't be a snob. Take a real interest in all people, ordinary people.

Canfield writes, quote, “There is always a sign of the worldliness of the church when its leaders no longer associate as readily and freely with humble people both inside and outside the church and with those who are socially superior.”

You see, folks, there is no room for an aristocracy in the church.

Recently at our elders retreat up at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, we took a tour of the campus and they took us to one of these beautiful old chapels and it had, you know, one row down the center and the pews on either side with the little doors they used to have to keep you from getting cold. It was white, a beautiful place. But it was interesting. The person that was telling us about it, the history, said that the way it used to work is the more important you were in the church, the further you sat towards the front and as your status decreased, so, too, did the seating arrangement until it would finally go all the way to the back and I guess that is where they get the phrase back seat Baptist. I am not sure. But anyway, there is no room for that. And, by the way, that didn't just happen there. That is how it used to be. Can you believe that?

¹⁸ Romans 12:16.

The Christian's Attitude Toward All People

By David Harrell

Bible Text: Romans 12:14-21

Preached on: Sunday, September 23, 2012

But Paul says we are to associate with the lowly. Literally he is saying you are to make friends with those whom others look down upon. Be friendly with those whom people do not honor, those that others ignore.

I like to put it this way. Befriend the guy that always gets picked last. Have you ever seen that? That is the idea. This is a discipline of duty we would all do well to work on.

A fifth admonition is basically don't be conceited, verse 16.

“Do not be wise in your own estimation.”¹⁹

Boy, the Holy Spirit knows us so well, doesn't he? I can put it a little bit differently. Don't be self promoting. Don't be self sufficient. Don't be self absorbed. If we are honest, we tend to see ourselves as the only one worthy of some preferential treatment. We are the only ones with the right answers, with the right philosophy, with the right preferences. We tend to see ourselves as superior to others. And then we don't want anything to do with those other people that don't agree with me. That is what he is saying here.

“Do not be wise in your own estimation.”²⁰

Who do you think you are? Church growth gurus have tapped into this wickedness by advocating a philosophy of ministry that targets specific people by zip code. And the logic is that if you have a homogeneous congregation, in other words, a congregation that is made up of people that are similar in their culture and their social status and their values, all of these types of things, then others like them are going to be drawn there and they are all going to get along and they will grow numerically. I know churches that are made up of the, quote, down and out, that no other people want. Well, that sounds nice. And, yeah, they have grown numerically. They all get along, but they are not growing spiritually. If you look around you will see there is the yuppie church. There is the {?} church. There is the tattoo and body piercing church. There is the cowboy church. There is the ... and on and on it goes. And, yes, it is true that they attract their own kind. They tend to grow, very, very rapidly. They tend to all get along. But if you look at them—and have talked with pastors who are struggling with churches that have been built in this way—you will find that they are spiritually stagnant and immature and arrogant. They are spiritually crippled and retarded due to that kind of in breeding.

You see, that philosophy is blatantly unbiblical. You are being wise in your own estimation here, promoting yourself. Folks, Jesus and the apostles never targeted anybody

¹⁹ Romans 12:16.

²⁰ Ibid.

The Christian's Attitude Toward All People

By David Harrell

Bible Text: Romans 12:14-21

Preached on: Sunday, September 23, 2012

by zip code. Now, I know hey didn't have zip codes, but you understand the concept. The only group that they targeted were those that were lost from every tribe, from every tongue and every people and every nation. You see, it is the glorious work of the Holy Spirit to take all of this diversity and in the miracle of transformation and giftedness to take us and make us a united body that functions to the glory of God. And as soon as we try to do that, we are going to mess it all up. That is what it means by being wise in your own estimation. Don't do that. Don't lose sight of the fact that we are all members one of another. We need one another. We need that diversity of personalities and diversity of backgrounds and diversity of experience. Obviously the diversity of gifts. And then we all function as a body by the power of God.

And then Paul expands his admonitions to help us understand our duties towards our enemies which would primarily be, then, those people who do not share faith in Christ. Number six he says don't be vindictive.

“Never pay back evil for evil to anyone.”²¹

Verse 17. And this is actually reiterating and even expanding upon the principles that the gave us in verse 14.

“Bless those who persecute you; bless and curse not.”²²

Now this is not referring to the public and frankly the proper administration of criminal law as we would see described in the Old Testament commandment in Exodus 21, an eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth, hand for a hand, foot for a foot, et cetera. You see, what he is describing here is the idea of private revenge. There is no room for that.

Now I think you all know what this looks like. If I can describe it to you, it is when the fist begins to clench, at least for guys. I am not sure about the gals. It is when you begin to grit your teeth, the nostrils begin to flare, the face gets red, blood pressure goes up. You begin to strut around like a mad dog and all the hair on your back is up and you are just looking for a fight. That is what he is saying here.

“Never pay back evil for evil to anyone.”²³

We have no right to take upon ourselves the function of the civil authorities in punishing crime. But, my friends, private revenge is a very, very powerful and deadly wickedness. It is a wickedness in our flesh. It is where our flesh loves to savor these concepts, these ideas, these ideas of revenge, to savor them in the secret recesses of our imagination. And

²¹ Romans 12:17.

²² Romans 12:14.

²³ Romans 12:17.

The Christian's Attitude Toward All People

By David Harrell

Bible Text: Romans 12:14-21

Preached on: Sunday, September 23, 2012

then when we are wronged we find ourselves staying awake at night trying to come up with ways to get even. You know how you rehearse those things in your mind and you always win right? That is the way it looks.

Beloved, when your mind descends into that kind of an abyss may I challenge you quickly cry out for help. Ask for forgiveness and strength. You need to forsake those kinds of thoughts immediately and replace them with the mind of Christ. Go to prayer for these people. Ask God to help you understand a way that you can show kindness to them.

Is not Christ our supreme example in this regard? Did he not set his love upon us when we were yet sinners, when we were still his enemy?

1 Peter two verse 23:

“...and while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously.”²⁴

Beloved, this is to be our attitude. We have got to keep in mind that our enemies are our mission field, not our punching bag. How are people going to see the love of Christ in us if we return evil for evil?

I have to laugh. Peter tried to decapitate the servant of the high priest. Remember that? Malchus. If he hadn't have ducked he would have taken his head off. He just got his ear instead. And yet Peter would later on understand this and he could say with full authority in 1 Peter 3:8:

“To sum up, let all be harmonious, sympathetic, brotherly, kindhearted, and humble in spirit; not returning evil for evil, or insult for insult, but giving a blessing instead.”²⁵

Isn't it great? What a work of the Spirit of God?

Paul said in 1 Thessalonians five verse 15:

“See that no one repays another with evil for evil, but always seek after that which is good for one another and for all men.”²⁶

Beloved, bear in mind that the absence of a vindictive spirit is a powerful tool that the Spirit of God can use to draw other people to Christ, because they are going to see in you something that is totally foreign. And there are many stories to attest to that.

²⁴ 1 Peter 2:23.

²⁵ 1 Peter 3:8-9.

²⁶ 1 Thessalonians 5:15.

The Christian's Attitude Toward All People

By David Harrell

Bible Text: Romans 12:14-21

Preached on: Sunday, September 23, 2012

Number seven, he wants us to respect what is right. Notice in verse 17b he says:

“Respect what is right in the sight of all men.”²⁷

Now this is interesting. This may be a little different than what the English would help us see, but the term respect translates a Greek word that basically means to think about something ahead of time, with the implication that one can then respond appropriately. It is the idea of giving attention to something beforehand and to have in mind something to do. If I can use the word to have foresight, all right? That is the idea. And we have got to discipline ourselves in the realm of exercising foresight and how we are to respond to evil in a way that is right, right referring to that which is moral in its value, praiseworthy to others.

See, this is what it means to literally live out the implications of the gospel, to have a gospel centered life.

In Mathew five verse 16 Jesus said:

“Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.”²⁸

You see, when we have foresight concerning how we should respond to various scenarios of evil that may be perpetrated against us, then we find ourselves spontaneously responding in a godly way. Sometimes somebody mocks my faith. Have you ever had that happen? Sure you have. All right? And I have thought about it. How am I going to respond to that? Of course now over the years I have responded to it many times and when somebody does that I will be very respectful and say, in essence, with all due respect, I will pray that God will have mercy on you and help you understand the great truths of the gospel that have radically transformed my heart.

I am not going to get in a fight with the guy. This is consistent with what Paul said in 2 Corinthians 4:2. He said:

“...but by the manifestation of truth commending ourselves to every man’s conscience in the sight of God.”²⁹

²⁷ Romans 12:17.

²⁸ Matthew 5:16.

²⁹ 2 Corinthians 4:2.

The Christian's Attitude Toward All People

By David Harrell

Bible Text: Romans 12:14-21

Preached on: Sunday, September 23, 2012

I will give you another example of having foresight. I have been asked, I am sure 100 times something like this. “How can you call yourself a Christian and still say that homosexuals are an abomination to God?”

My response would be something like, “My friend, with all due respect, I didn’t say that. God said that. But, secondly, frankly, if you have to ask I am sure you would not understand and you will never understand until you humble yourself before a holy God and cry out for him to save you. And when that happens you will find that you will have a radically different perspective of life, of his law, his Word. You will become a new creature in Christ. The old things will pass away. New things will come. But, frankly, until that happens, you re not going to see it. You and I live in a parallel universe and it will remain that way for eternity unless you repent and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ.”

That is what it means to respect what is right in the sight of all men. Don’t get caught off guard. Don’t respond to situations in a way where people can look at you and say, “Huh, that person is just like everybody else in the world.” Same type of attitude. And then you ruin your testimony.

Peter says in 1 Peter two verse 12:

“Keep your behavior excellent among the Gentiles, so that in the thing in which they slander you as evildoers, they may on account of your good deeds, as they observe them, glorify God in the day of visitation.”³⁰

Well, number eight, he gives to us another way to swim upstream against that world, against the flesh. He says to live at peace with everyone. Verse 18.

“If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men.”³¹

Boy, this is an area where we have to really discipline ourselves. It is very straightforward. Obviously not always do we find two parties agreeing. But whenever there is a breach in relationship the point here is that you as a Christian must do everything you possibly can to make sure that that breach is not going to continue because of your unwillingness to make peace.

“If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men.”³²

We have got to do everything in our power to bring about peace. And then we leave it to the Lord.

³⁰ 1 Peter 2:12.

³¹ Romans 12:18.

³² Ibid.

The Christian's Attitude Toward All People

By David Harrell

Bible Text: Romans 12:14-21

Preached on: Sunday, September 23, 2012

Now I might add that if you were currently right now at war with somebody in your life, maybe it is somebody here in your church family, you need to examine yourself and make sure it can never be said of you, someone who has been redeemed by the blood of the lamb that it is your fault that reconciliation has not taken place. So ask yourself. Am I disciplined in this duty? This is what God has called me to for my good and his glory.

Number nine, never seek revenge. We see it in verse 19. And this is reiterating what he has said earlier and, again, this emphasizes the importance here. It must have been a big issue in the church. And I think it could be said in our church and in every church. He says:

“Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, ‘VENGEANCE IS MINE, I WILL REPAY,’ says the Lord.”³³

Beloved, no matter how serious the injury, no matter how wrong the treatment, we are never justified in seizing the swords of divine retribution out of the hand of almighty God and swinging it on our own. That is God’s role, not ours. He is the judge and the executioner. But, boy, isn’t that our tendency? We want to get even.

“VENGEANCE IS MINE, I WILL REPAY.”³⁴

There he is quoting the Mosaic law, Deuteronomy 32:35.

Beloved, bear in mind no sin will ever go unpunished. God will see to that. And of you realize that judgment is going to be administered by our precious Savior the Lord Jesus Christ? The one that the world mocks.

In John five verse 22 we read:

“For not even the Father judges anyone, but He has given all judgment to the Son.”³⁵

He goes on in verse 27 and says:

“...and He gave Him authority to execute judgment, because He is the Son of Man.”³⁶

May I remind you of something? God is far more creative in his judgment than you could ever be. He made arrogant King Nebuchadnezzar eat grass like a cow for seven years. That is pretty serious. In Daniel four verse 33 we read that his hair grew like eagles’

³³ Romans 12:19.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ John 5:22.

³⁶ John 5:27.

The Christian's Attitude Toward All People

By David Harrell

Bible Text: Romans 12:14-21

Preached on: Sunday, September 23, 2012

wings and his nails like birds' claws.

He took a woman who was basically a painted up whore, a queen named Jezebel and he had her thrown down out of a window. The Word of God says that her blood was splattered on the wall. She was trampled under foot by horses. Her flesh was eaten by dogs. The text says that the only thing left of her was her skull, her feet and the palms of her hands.

In Acts 12, for refusing to give God glory God sent worms to devour Herod Agrippa right in front of everybody. I saw the place in Israel where it happened, a big amphitheater. He was delivering some arrogant oration. You can read about in Acts 12. In front of his adoring fans who saw him being like a god and he was taking it all in. Five days later, according to Josephus he died.

Beloved, let God be God, all right? Let him be the vindicator of his honor and of those who abuse his children.

And finally, number 10, overcome evil with good, verse 20. He says:

"BUT IF YOUR ENEMY IS HUNGRY, FEED HIM, AND IF HE IS THIRSTY, GIVE HIM A DRINK; FOR IN SO DOING YOU WILL HEAP BURNING COALS UPON HIS HEAD."³⁷

That phrase, "For in so doing you will heap burning coals upon his head," an interesting phrase. It refers to an ancient Egyptian custom whereby a person would take a pan of burning coals and put on their head to publicly demonstrate their profound humiliation, their shame, their guilt over something that they had done. And so Paul is saying this. By demonstrating acts of kindness to your enemy out of a sincere heart of love what you end up doing is bringing shame upon that person as if they are carrying around a pan of hot coals on their head.

And then verse 21 concludes by saying:

"Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."³⁸

This worthy to be called Christian proverb. Frankly, we should carry this with us wherever we go.

"Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."³⁹

³⁷ Romans 12:20.

³⁸ Romans 12:21.

³⁹ Ibid.

The Christian's Attitude Toward All People

By David Harrell

Bible Text: Romans 12:14-21

Preached on: Sunday, September 23, 2012

Very easy to remember.

You know, it is hard enough not to return evil for evil and allow God to be the avenger without our help. We tend to say, “You know, that is all right, God. I will handle this.”

You know, to do that means that we do nothing. And that is tough, just to do nothing. But to actually now return good for evil, oh, my. There we go swimming up stream again. That is really tough. Our flesh says, “No way.” And the world says, “What a moron.”

“Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”⁴⁰

By the way, that means two things. One it means don't allow the evil that others do to you gain victory over you. Don't let it defeat you. Don't let it overwhelm you with sorrow and grief and despair. Don't let it conquer you.

Beloved, bear in mind. We fight a battle that has already been won, right? But it also means don't be overcome by your passion for evil retaliation. We are babes in grace and sadly carnal if we allow this kind of sin to have mastery over us.

If I can put it a little bit differently, don't fight fire with fire. Remove the fuel. A soft word turns away wrath. When you are injured, let go. Just let it go. Walk away. The enemy is not worth the high blood pressure. Schemes of revenge only bring about greater injury. It destroys your health. Do you realize that? It literally destroys your health.

Every week I get some of the most vile emails you could possibly imagine. Some of them I just begin to read the vitriol is so great I delete it before I allow my mind to even go any further. So at some level I am used to being attacked. And, you know, it always hurts at some level, but I have learned—and I have to work on this all the time—what it means here that don't be overcome by evil. Just let it go. And at that point when I read those things I hit the thing, the bigger issue for me is what is for lunch? I am just not going to let myself go there.

Now, my flesh can instantly come up with, well, I could write a powerful paragraph. I mean, I could verbally dissect that guy. I could rip him in a thousand... I could show him so many passages of Scripture, it would choke him. Boy, I would feel a whole lot better, right? And God would be dishonored. My evil would be worse than his. Don't do that. But, instead, overcome evil with good. Overcome literally means ... it could be translated, win the victory over evil with good.

“...we are more than conquerors through him that loved us.”⁴¹

⁴⁰ Ibid.

The Christian's Attitude Toward All People

By David Harrell

Bible Text: Romans 12:14-21

Preached on: Sunday, September 23, 2012

Dear Christian, this is supernatural living, isn't it? It is upstream all the way and we are not going to be able to do this on our own power. It is impossible. We cannot live this level of Christ likeness with our feeble human exertion. The only way this can be obtained is by faith, faith in the power of the Spirit of God who takes his Word that is living and active and puts it within us and causes us to respond in a way that brings honor to the Lord Jesus Christ. And, boy, when we do that, we demonstrate the transforming power of the gospel to a lost and dying world. So may we all take care how we run our race? Ok? Take care how you live. Life is a battle. See to it that you win by the grace and by the power of God.

Let's pray together.

Father, thank you for these amazing truths that really expose the remnants of our flesh, how these things expose our need to walk by faith and to cry out for the Spirit's power in our life. Lord, that is what we do as your people. We are all so needy in this regard. And we thank you that you are patient, you are long suffering and we thank you that you live within us to conform us to the image of Christ.

For those that do not know you that may be within the sound of my voice, oh, God, how I pray that today will be the day that they will be so overcome with the reality of the wrath of God that abides upon them having violated your law that they will cry out for the mercy that you will grant so instantly. May many come to Christ even this day by the power of your gospel? I pray all of these things in the precious name of Jesus our Savior and for his sake. Amen.

We pray you have been edified by this presentation. You have been listening to pastor, Bible teacher and author David Harrell. For more information or to order additional tapes or CDs of pastor Harrell's messages, please visit OliveTreeResources.org.

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⁴¹ Romans 8:37.

The Christian's Attitude Toward All People

By David Harrell

Bible Text: Romans 12:14-21

Preached on: Sunday, September 23, 2012