

Romans Part 44 – Chapter 12

Sunday, March 12, 2023

With input from BibleRef.com, Martin Luther King Jr. "Letters from Birmingham Jail"; Vince Everett Ellison

Last week we ended with the thought from **Romans 12:16**: *Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight.*

To live in harmony requires humility from everyone involved. It's not surprising, then, that Paul's next instruction is that we not be haughty or arrogant and stuck up. He makes clear what he means with a follow-up command: associate with the lowly. In other words, don't think of yourselves as being too good to hang out socially with anyone else at all.

Martin Luther King Jr.: "Lamentably, it is an historical fact that privileged groups seldom give up their privileges voluntarily."

One of the reasons Christianity attracted so many followers in its early days was that women and slaves and people of low social standing were all welcome to come to faith in Christ. The result was that people who would never associate anywhere else in Roman culture found themselves in relationship with each other in the church. Paul commands those on the upper levels of society to leave any class rivalry out of the church.

His final command in this verse is that Christians must never be wise in our own sight. This is not the same as saying that we are never wise. The idea is that we should not accept our own opinion as the final word. We submit to the word of God, as well as to the input and ideas of others.

Romans 12:17-21:

17 Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all.

Paul declares that we must resist our natural human instinct for revenge and refuse to ever pay back evil when evil is done to us. This would be true whether the person who hurts us is a believer or not.

Instead, Paul tells us to be thoughtful when evil is done to us. He seems to suggest we see that moment as an opportunity to demonstrate that, in Christ, we are honorable people. We cannot, after all, display the love and forgiveness of Christ until we have the opportunity to forgive. When we do, we make a powerful statement that we are choosing to live in service to God instead of to ourselves.

The following verses will expand on this idea, including the claim that doing good for one's enemies is a far more powerful response than attempting petty revenge.

18 If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

As believers, we should live peaceably with all people. This would include our siblings in Christ, as well as unbelievers. Another way to read this command might be, "Never let yourself be the reason for an un-peaceful relationship with another person."

This is not a statement of total pacifism or complete apathy, however. Paul gives two clear conditions: "If possible" and "so far as it depends on you." This command recognizes that conflict is sometimes

unavoidable. Some people are just not interested in making peace with us. There is such a thing as an appropriate time and place to disagree, to dispute, or even to fight. Not every action that makes others happy is something good, or something God would want us to do.

What does it require to live this way? For one, of course, we must be willing to admit our wrongs, to apologize, to make things right, and to forgive. This is where the idea of "so far as it depends on you" comes into play. Our own ego, pride, desires, and prejudices should never get in the way of living peaceably with others. First and foremost, that means we ought not do "wrong" things to or towards other people.

Not all conflict is related to wrongdoing, however. Sometimes, it's simply a question of two sides who disagree about an issue with no absolute answer. In those cases, maintaining the peace may require us to be willing to yield, to be moved, on an issue we care about.

The Bible is clear, however, that on matters of bedrock conviction, we must take our stand with grace, mercy, and integrity (**Hebrews 10:23** *"Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful."*) When making "peace" is possible only by compromising the truth, or the commands of God (**Acts 5:28–29**: *And when they had brought them, they set them before the council. And the high priest questioned them, 28 saying, "We strictly charged you not to teach in this name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching, and you intend to bring this man's blood upon us." 29 But Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than men.*) then peace is simply not possible, and the choice no longer depends on us.

That stance might result in our own suffering or persecution. Paul has shown that it always matters more that we represent Christ well than to come away with an outcome we find favorable (**Philippians 4:11–13**: *Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. 12 I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. 13 I can do all things through him who strengthens me.*).

Do not settle for false peace. What is false peace? Settling for false peace means covering up the divisions that prevent peace, while fighting for true peace means addressing these divisions and taking sides with those who experience injustice.

John 14:27: *"My peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Therefore, let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid"*

Romans 12:19: *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."*

Those who follow Christ are commanded to never avenge themselves, to never "get even." Whether the hurt comes from fellow believers or from unbelievers, revenge is simply not a legitimate option for us.

For a change, Paul gives us a reason for this command, and it's a bit surprising. After all the other instructions to sacrifice ourselves for the good of others, we might expect something similar. Instead, Paul writes that we should refuse to take revenge because God is much better at it than we are. In a sense, Paul implies that taking our own revenge may dilute God's opportunity to avenge us in His great anger against those who harm us.

Paul quotes from Deuteronomy 32:35 to show that God has always declared His intention to take vengeance on those who wrong others. A desire for justice for ourselves and those we care about is not wrong. Paul simply wants us to trust God's timing and power to deliver justice as He sees fit.

How do we respond to this idea? On the one hand, we might be concerned that God will show mercy to those who harm us instead of giving them what they deserve. After all, He has shown great mercy to us. Isn't that what God does? The truth is that God executes justice for every sin, including ours. For those in Christ, God's anger was poured out on Jesus on the cross. Someone suffered for those sins: Christ. He experienced what we deserved. Those who refuse to receive Jesus' death in their place for their sin will suffer the consequences for that sin themselves for eternity.

With that punishment in mind, perhaps we will hesitate to wish for God's vengeance on our persecutors. Perhaps not. In either case, God says to us, "Trust me to handle revenge and justice for all who harm you instead of seeking it yourself."

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."

One reasonable way to interpret Paul's command would be as an instruction to avoid and ignore those who harm us. If we can't get even, at least we can stay away from them. However, Paul now reveals that this is not the path of those who follow Christ. Instead, we are called to active, positive, and generous engagement with those who harm us. Rather than simply ignoring our enemies, we ought to seek to do good for them and to them.

This is not meant to be taken as a command to stay in a situation in which someone is actively physically harming us. Retreating from violence or avoiding a physical abuser is not being discouraged here, at all. If we can take steps to avoid future injury, that is the right and wise thing to do. God is not commanding us to welcome any kind of abuse.

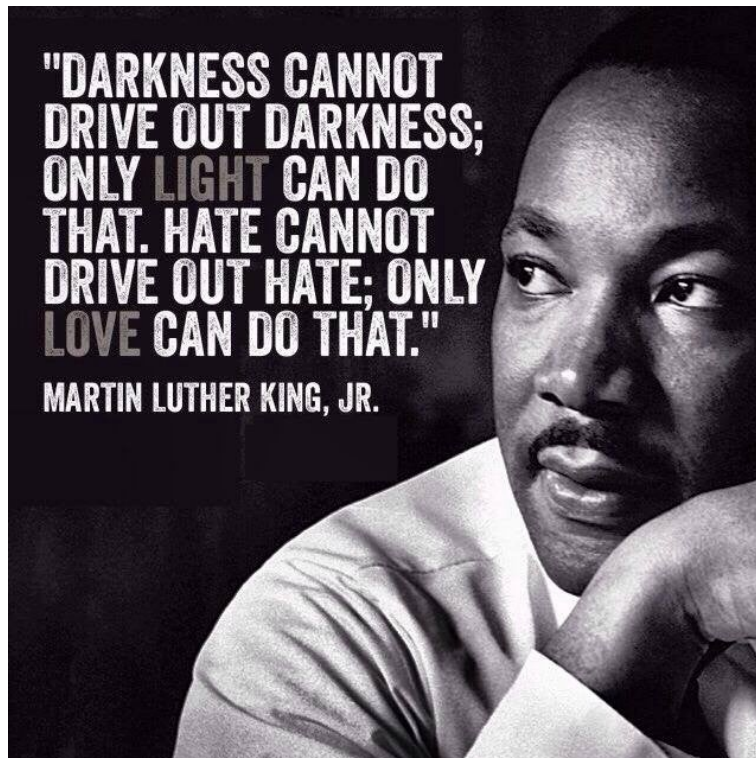
Even though we're not being commanded to "embrace" abuse, this is still a hard teaching. In quoting Solomon's words from Proverbs 25:21–22, Paul's description of how to respond to evildoers is galling, even infuriating, at first. At the same time, there is a certain ruthlessness about it, spiritually speaking. We are called to bring down fiery conviction on our enemies by being relentlessly kind in seeing and meeting their basic needs. As we do, two things happen. One, we reflect God's own mercy to us who were once His enemies (Romans 5:10). Second, we show both that we do not deserve to be treated poorly and that we are stronger than those who harm us.

The description of "heaping burning coals" is a reference to Proverbs 25:21–22. In Egypt, there had been a custom to carry a pan of burning coals on one's head as a sign of repentance. Kindness and forgiveness to those who abuse us, ideally, will make them ashamed of themselves, and hopefully bring them to repent. The strongest, most powerful response to persecution and hatred is to love your enemies.

Those who choose to do good to their enemies create the opportunity Paul describes in the following verse.

21 *Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*

Now Paul comes to the final command of the chapter. In essence, he commands us to be strong in our conviction to live in this way. We are not to be overcome by evil, but to overcome evil with good. Paul seems to have in mind the idea that we are overcome by evil when we join in and give it back, when we sink to evil's level. That just results in more sin, more pain, and an endless cycle of revenge and hatred.



Martin Luther King Jr: One may well ask, “How can you advocate breaking some laws and obeying others?” The answer is found in the fact that there are two types of laws: There are just laws and there are unjust laws. A just law is a man-made code that squares with the moral law or the law of God.



Christian author Vince Everett Ellison:

Mr. Ellison was asked about the far-left democrats who have hijacked their party and presented a “woke” agenda to follow:

"If you want to know what evil is, I'll make it easy for you. Anybody that intentionally harms a child, even Jesus Christ said, ‘If you harm one of these little ones, it is better that a millstone be tied around your neck and you be thrown into the sea.’ Well, I hope some of these Democrats can swim."

They want you to castrate little boys and call them little girls and they want to cut off the breast of little girls and call them boys. And they're telling people they're not going to be held responsible for this? That is a lie. They are controlled by a cabal of perverts, liars and psychopaths,"