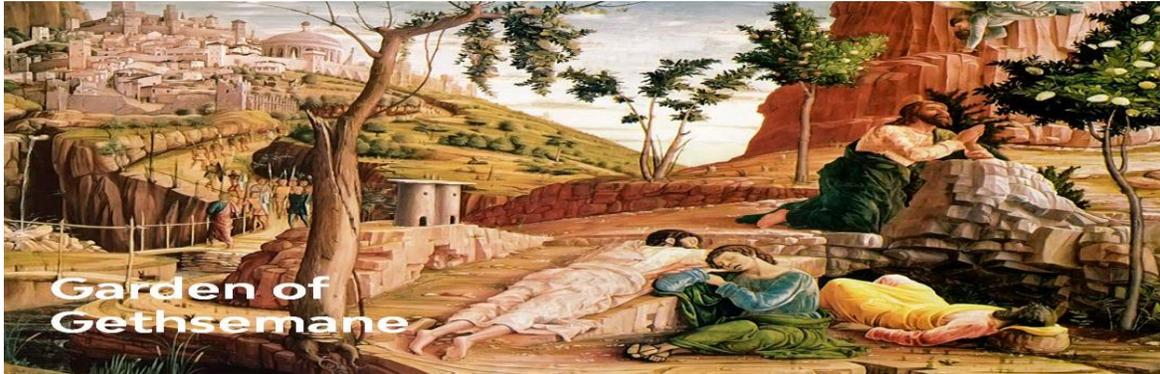


Ministry of Grace Church

Romans 12:17-21 – Do You Want to Get Even? Sermon Notes



Introduction

Last time we were together, we learned that we are to be a living sacrifice to God. We also learned that in the Old Testament, this type of sacrifice was to be devoted to God. However, to be “devoted” means something different today that it did in the past. Today the word means, “to be focused on someone or something almost exclusively.” In other words, it means, “to be loyal, to be committed to, to be devout, or to be dedicated.” However, the Hebrew word translated “devoted” in the Old Testament is *herem*, which means to be set-aside for destruction so as to no longer be of any use to anyone but God.

So, if we are to be a living sacrifice, we are to be devoted to God, meaning that we are to set ourselves aside for God’s exclusive use. Or, as Jesus said in [Matthew 16:24](#):

... “If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him **deny himself**, and take up his cross and follow Me.

However, that’s not how most Christians view our relationship with God. In fact, if we look back over the history of Christianity, there are very few other than the ascetics of the early church who really practiced self-denial. Their lives were examples of extremism which took them out of contact with others. But this seems to be in direct opposition to what Jesus told his disciples just before His ascension into heaven.

but you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the end of the earth.” ([Acts 1:8](#))

So – if we are to be witnesses of the presence of His Holy Spirit, then we have to be in the world, not separated from it. But – evn though we are to be witnesses in the world, we are not to be part of the world, as John told us in his gospel account,

If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, because of this the world hates you. (John 15:19)

Therefore, we have to ask ourselves, what does the Bible mean when Paul teaches us to, ... present your bodies as a sacrifice - living, holy, and pleasing to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. (Romans 12:1)

It means that we are to be devoted to God, not by killing ourselves, but by living in a manner that is pleasing to God rather than pleasing to our own flesh. But – how do we do that? This is what Paul has been teaching us in this twelfth chapter of Romans. Last time, we learned that it involves our Personal Duties, and our Family Duties. Our Personal Duties before God are basically summed up in this: **abhorring what is evil and clinging to what is good**. And our Family Duties could be summed up in this:

Rejoice with those who rejoice; weep with those who weep by being of the same mind toward one another, not being haughty in mind, but associating with the humble.

Paul now goes on to describe for us our Duties to Others, including those who consider us as enemies.

Romans 12:17-19

Never paying back evil for evil to anyone, respecting what is good in the sight of all men, if possible, so far as it depends on you, being at peace with all men, never taking your own revenge, beloved—instead leave room for the wrath of God. For it is written, “vengeance is mine, I will repay,” says the Lord

Duties to Others

In this section, Paul starts off by contrasting two thoughts. Do you see what they are? He says,

Don't be reactive and respond with evil acts when evil acts are done to you. Instead, be proactive and consider ahead of time what good things you are going to do for others.

When someone does something to us that is unkind, offensive, hurtful, or just downright mean, our natural instinct is to respond in kind and “get even.” I'm sure we've all heard the expression, “I don't get mad – I get even.” That's precisely what Paul is telling us **not** to do. Before I got saved, I used to express a corollary to that saying. I said, “I don't get mad, and I don't get even, I get one-up!” You see – that's how our sin nature operates.

We should not behave like the unsaved do. They are slaves to their flesh and have no choice but to obey their fleshly instincts because they are spiritually dead. But we have been set free from the bondage of our flesh and are now spiritually alive. We have a choice and that choice should always be to do good, not evil.

Paul now tells us what a living sacrifice should look like to others. He says, “**If possible, as far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men.**” We have all known people who behave out of anger toward everyone else, unwilling to let anyone be nice to them. And

there are others who have an intense hatred for all Christians, refusing to be at peace with us. Thus, it is not always possible for us to be at peace with others.

But Paul's point is that we should make every effort to be at peace with all men. Our part of any relationship, the part that we are held responsible for, is to treat others with love, the way we would want them to treat us, even those who hate us, even those whose lifestyle is drastically different from our own, even those who don't believe in God and who live in a manner that we know is not pleasing to God, even those who intentionally make life difficult for us. We are not responsible for the actions of others, but we are responsible for our own reactions to them. And we don't have to compromise our own beliefs and values to do so.

Romans 12:20-21

“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 on his head.” Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Duties to those who consider us enemies

Paul now caps off what he has been saying about our duties to others, by telling us how we should treat our enemies, or more appropriately, those who consider us to be their enemies. Not only has he told us that we should be proactive about doing good things to others and peacefully coexisting with them, he now commands us, “**never take your own revenge.**” Why not? Because when we take matters into our own hands, we sinful humans are notorious for making incorrect judgments based on our biased perception of the facts. God, on the other hand, is a perfect judge and always judges rightly based on the real truth.

I would paraphrase the first part of the current verse as, “instead of stepping in and taking on the responsibility of executing judgment for yourself, back-off and let God decide who's guilty.” God promises that He will take retribution on those who oppose Him and those who cause harm to His children. But He will do so in a righteous manner, pouring out His wrath on those who deserve it based on truth.

The next verse is one of those which is often misunderstood and misapplied. Remember what Paul has said in the previous few verses: do not retaliate with evil when evil is done to you - do not take vengeance because that is God's exclusive domain. God will take vengeance on those who genuinely deserve vengeance. Therefore, “**If your enemy is hungry ...**”

Here is Paul's point: because God will take care of the vengeance part, we are to take care of the part that will do the most in terms of producing ultimate good. The expression, “**you will heap coals of fire on his head**” has been interpreted by some to mean that by doing good to those who do evil to you, you will produce pain and suffering in them and increase God's judgment against them. But isn't that just the same as taking vengeance? If we do good for the purpose of giving them pain, then we are producing vengeance and we are being hypocrites, aren't we?

This verse is quoted from the book of Proverbs.

If your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat; and if he is thirsty, give him water to drink; for *so* you will heap coals of fire on his head, and the LORD will reward you. (Proverbs 25:21,22)

To get a better understanding of these verses, let's look at how the ancient Rabbis explained it. Heaping coals of fire is a method that was used in refining metals like silver and gold. The ore was ground up, placed in an ingot, and placed on the fire. Then hot coals were heaped on top. As the ore melted, it separated into the precious metal and what we now call slag. The slag would rise to the top, and if the coals on top were hot enough, the slag would burn off, thus producing a purified metal (but it takes a long time, so you have to wait, and wait, and wait, and wait!) This is the imagery that many early Rabbis provided in explaining these two verses in Proverbs.

So now let's apply this to what Paul is teaching us. If we are not to retaliate, letting God handle the vengeance part, then what are we to do? Nothing, for the time being! Just wait! It is entirely possible that the one who has done evil to you will have a need, the most basic of which are hunger and thirst. When he or she has that need and comes to you for help, don't send him or her away with harsh words and an empty stomach; instead, provide for their needs in a humble, loving way because in so doing you are being a witness to the love that God has for us. Your deeds of kindness may produce repentance and reconciliation with God. Thus, in doing good to those who have done evil to you, you may be doing that which God may use to purify them just like heaping coals of fire in the refining process. But, remember, this takes time!

Paul started off this chapter by stating:

Therefore I exhort you, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a sacrifice—living, holy, and pleasing to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. (Romans 12:1)

Throughout the remainder of this chapter, he has been showing us what it looks like when a person is a living sacrifice, totally submitted to God; for instance, someone who has presented his or her body as a living sacrifice to God will not repay evil for evil and will not avenge himself or herself.

In the past few verses Paul has not been giving us commandments so much as he has been showing us what the evidence of our submission as a living sacrifice looks like. And so, he wraps up this chapter with a final piece of evidence of a person who is totally submitted and committed to God. This person does not allow himself, or herself, to be overcome with evil; instead he, or she, overcomes evil with good. A literal translation of this verse could be:

Do not be overcome by the evil *one* but overcome evil with good.

Some would say that "the evil one" refers to Satan, for he is sometimes referred to in that manner. In this case, however, I believe Paul is referring to anyone who does evil to you. If the result of an evil act on you causes you to do evil in return, then you have succumbed to the temptation of retaliation and you have demonstrated that you are not fully submitted to God. But, if evil is done to you and there is within you the ability to plan and carry out

goodness toward the one doing evil, then you are showing that you are still laid on the altar, a living sacrifice to God, and He will use you when you live that way.

So What?

Instead of executing revenge on those who we think have wronged us, let's humble ourselves before Almighty God and trust that He understands the situation correctly and that as our Holy Father, He will do what is right and just. But - if you are a born-again Christian, keep in mind that He does not give us what we truly deserve.

What Paul has described here is the very definition of mercy, doing something good to someone who doesn't deserve it. Because God has shown us such great mercy, we should be constantly on the lookout for ways of showing mercy to others. Let me challenge you to show mercy to someone this week.

Jesus, Himself, gave us the ultimate example of mercy in the 18th chapter of Matthew's gospel account.

Then Peter came and said to Him, "Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?" Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven. For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he had begun to settle them, one who owed him ten thousand talents (that's in excess of \$5 million today) was brought to him. But since he did not have the means to repay, his lord commanded him to be sold, along with his wife and children and all that he had, and repayment to be made. Therefore, the slave fell to the ground and was prostrating himself before him, saying, 'Have patience with me and I will repay you everything.' And feeling compassion, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. But that slave went out and found one of his fellow slaves who owed him one hundred denarii; (about \$50 today) and he seized him and began to choke him, saying, 'Pay back what you owe.' So, his fellow slave fell to the ground and was pleading with him, saying, 'Have patience with me and I will repay you.' But he was unwilling and went and threw him in prison until he should pay back what was owed. So, when his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were deeply grieved and came and reported to their lord all that had happened. Then summoning him, his lord said to him, 'You wicked slave, I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave, in the same way that I had mercy on you?' And his lord, moved with anger, handed him over to the torturers until he should repay all that was owed him. My heavenly Father will also do the same to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your hearts." (Matthew 18:21-35)

It's not easy to be merciful, because we each have a sin nature that wants us to be in control and wants to get even with those who hurt us. However, by the power of the Holy Spirit we can remain submitted to our Lord and we can respond to the evil done to us with goodness. That's sacrificial living. It's pleasing to God because it allows Him to receive all the glory and all the praise.

However, all of this requires us to be completely submitted to God. Is that easy? Absolutely not! But, is it worth it? Yes it is! Let me take you back to the Garden of Gethsemane as Jesus went there with His disciples just before He was arrested.

And after singing a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives. And Jesus said to them, “You will all fall away, because it is written, ‘I will strike down the shepherd, and the sheep shall be scattered.’ “But after I have been raised, I will go ahead of you to Galilee.” But Peter said to Him, “*Even* though all may fall away, yet I will not.” And Jesus said to him, “Truly I say to you, that today, this *very* night, before a rooster crows twice, you yourself will deny Me three times.” But *Peter* kept saying insistently, “If I have to die with You, I will not deny You!” And they all were saying the same thing also. Then they came to a place named Gethsemane; and He said to His disciples, “Sit here until I have prayed.” And He took with Him Peter and James and John, and began to be very distressed and troubled. And He said to them, “My soul is deeply grieved to the point of death; remain here and keep watch.” And He went a little beyond *them*, and fell to the ground and *began to* pray that if it were possible, the hour might pass from Him. And He was saying, “Abba! Father! All things are possible for You; remove this cup from Me; yet not what I will, but what You will.” And He came and found them sleeping, and said to Peter, “Simon, are you sleeping? Could you not keep watch for one hour? “Keep watching and praying that you may not come into temptation; the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.” And again He went away and prayed, saying the same words. And again He came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were very heavy; and they did not know what to answer Him. And He came the third time, and said to them, “Are you still sleeping and resting? It is enough; the hour has come; behold, the Son of Man is being betrayed into the hands of sinners. “Get up, let us go; behold, the one who betrays Me is at hand!” (Mark 14:26-42)

Did you notice how Jesus felt as He went into the garden with His disciples?

And He said to them, “My soul is deeply grieved to the point of death; remain here and keep watch.” (Mark 14:34)

Why was Jesus deeply grieved? Perhaps, because He knew the torture He was about to have to endure. Perhaps, because He knew that His closest friends were about to desert Him. Perhaps, because He knew that Peter was about to deny that he even knew Jesus. Perhaps, because He knew that He was about to bear the sins of every person who ever lived or ever would live. Perhaps, because He knew that even His Heavenly Father was going to turn away from Him in His greatest hour of need. Perhaps, because of all of these things.

And yet – He even carried His own cross to be tortured and despised so that He would pay the price for your sins and mine. And He did NOT retaliate!

Think about these things the next time someone does something to you and you want to retaliate, to get even, or even to get one up!

Let's pray