



HICKORY GROVE

BAPTIST CHURCH

Evangelistic Suffering

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Romans 12:17-21

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¹⁷ Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. ¹⁸ If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. 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." 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." ²¹ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

(Pastor prays)

December 7, 1941, is what Franklin Delano Roosevelt called "a day that will live in infamy." It was on that Sunday morning, when much of the base was at church, that the Imperial Japanese Navy launched a surprise attack on the Pacific fleet stationed at Pearl Harbor. It was an attack so devastating that it wouldn't be rivaled on American soil until the terrorist attacks on 9/11.

Leading the Japanese attack in his Mitsubishi Zero was Captain Mitsuo Fuchida. As he approached the harbor, he called to his squadron, "Tora! Tora! Tora!" And with that, the Imperial Japanese aviators decimated the American Pacific fleet and Fuchida became Japan's most decorated warrior.

Amazingly, he survived that terrible war and, in 1947, Fuchida told Douglas MacArthur of an American nurse named Peggy Covell who treated Japanese POW's and the kindness she displayed even after her parents, who were missionaries in Japan, had been brutally killed by the Japanese soldiers and died praying out loud for their killers. This struck a nerve in Fuchida. Their prayerful suffering and their daughter's kind service ultimately resulted in him coming to faith in the crucified, resurrected Jesus. He went on to be a renowned evangelist known as

“God’s Samurai”! He even toured with Billy Graham, all because he saw how Christians respond to their enemies. Sometimes we live out the Gospel like Hearts and Hammers did yesterday, building a wheelchair ramp in the name of Jesus. Sometimes we live it out at the food pantry, meeting basic needs for people in the name of Jesus. Sometimes it's a verbal witness to the Gospel of Jesus – the holiness of God and the sinfulness of man and the substitute Jesus on the cross and the need for faith in Jesus. Sometimes though, in an even higher and holy way, we live out the Gospel in how we suffer at the hands of our enemies.

And I think that is what Paul is getting at in this great passage. He is writing to a church in Rome that would suffer at the hands of Roman citizens and, eventually, the Roman government. And the way they suffered, in the name of Jesus, would start a revolution.

One of the things that we forget as well-fed Americans is that Christians suffering, especially at the hands of other people, is a tool used by God to display the glorious gospel of peace. In whatever way you've been wronged by another person, cheated on, lied to, divorced, bullied, excluded, mistreated and even hated, there is a Gospel purpose in it. I think this passage is telling us something.

Make Sure Your Suffering Points to the Savior.

From this passage I'd like to provide four avenues for taking your pain and making it productive. I'll have four short phrases and four things I'm going to ask you to do.

Trust God

Let's read verse 17. *17 Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all.* The desire to retaliate almost overwhelms us when we have been treated unjustly. But Paul says something amazing here. Don't fight evil with evil. Don't fight fire with more Hellfire. Instead, fight it with living water. It was Jesus Himself who said, “you have heard it was said an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, but I say to you, do not resist the one who is evil; but if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. If anyone takes your tunic, give him your cloak also. If someone asks you to go one mile, go two miles.” It's a living, tangible, flesh and blood display of the remarkable grace of Jesus found at the cross. In fact, Paul backs it up in verse 17. Notice what he says, repay no one evil for evil BUT give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. In other words, the biggest concern for you shouldn't be that you get what's *fair*. Your concern in this mistreatment is a *watching* world. Are you going

to act like everybody else acts or are you going to remember what is at stake and respond in a way that points to the ultimate sufferer, Jesus?

There's more. Paul says almost the same thing down in verse 19. There Paul gives four reasons to trust God. This is a Bible theme. In verse 19, Paul quotes Deuteronomy 32. Divine justice is God's business. Retribution is His to make, not ours. God's vengeance is a billion times worse than mine. Verse 19 says, "“vengeance is mine; I will repay”, “ says the Lord. The wrath of God is so much more catastrophically worse than yours. Yours is a water pistol, His is a hydrogen bomb. You give your enemies over to God and your heavenly father will see about them.

There's a third reason. God is a much better score keeper than any of us. See what verse 19 says. 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.”* Your Bible might say, leave room for the wrath of God or leave the place. In other words, you step back and let God fill that up. Some have said, I don't believe in a God of vengeance. Then you don't believe in *justice*. The recognition that God is, in fact, a God of vengeance and judgment and punishment means that we can leave the fate of our persecutors and enemies in His hands, knowing that He is good and just and does all things well.

There's one other thing tucked in here. In a commentary by Tom Schreiner, he drew me back to verse 19. God is omniscient, thoroughly holy and completely just. But don't forget, you are *loved*. If you are in Christ and a child of God, you are covered by the love of God. See that little phrase. *Beloved, never avenge yourself*. It's the Greek word, *agapétos*. It's a Godly, sacrificial, pure love. Isn't it funny that Paul would insert that little word right here when he's talking about anger and vengeance and payback? It's like a gentle reminder to soothe your soul.

If I'm getting worked up about something Connie might reach over and pat me on the leg. Here's Paul giving Christian people a gentle reminder even though you have been horribly mistreated by others. Maybe you've been lied to, cheated on and talked about. You should never forget that you are dearly loved by God. You are chosen to be His own, adopted and paid for at the cross of Jesus. Rejection and mistreatment by others leaves a deep wound, but the love of God found at the cross of Jesus is the very best healing. Make sure your suffering points to the savior. Trust God.

Make peace

Let me show you where I get that. Let's read verse 18. *If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.* Aren't you thankful for the way verse 18 is written? Let's take it starting at the end of the verse without all of the qualifiers. Live peacefully with all. Peace. It's reconciliation and wholeness and healing. It's calm waters. It's what Christians do in relation to other people. Not just in the church, but this text says we live in peace with all. We strive for peace and reconciliation with other people because in Christ we have been made at peace with God. Our sin had us at war with God and, as His enemies, we deserved to be punished in Hell. But because of His love, He gave us Jesus who is sinless and lived that way, then died on the cross and took the punishment that we sinners deserve, and He took it completely so that any person who believes that Jesus is their substitute can and will be at peace with God. And because of that, we can be people of peace.

But Paul knew there are going to be times where you just can't get peace in the relationship regardless of how hard you try. That's why he wrote it as he did in verse 19. Let's look at it again. ¹⁸ *If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.* If possible. Sometimes people won't cooperate. Sometimes they won't accept the apology or are not interested in reconciliation. Or sometimes people will want you to compromise biblical truth in order to live peaceably. We are not allowed to sacrifice truth in the name of unity. You will feel this more and more as you try to speak Christianity to LGBTQ friends. Verse 18 says, "so far as it depends on you." People should never be able to say that a conflict exists because we failed to do what we could to resolve it. The lack of peace can't be because we didn't try. Because in the name of Jesus that's what we do, make peace. I'm asking you to trust God and make peace. And ...

Do good

This passage here sounds a lot like Jesus even as Paul quotes Proverbs 25. 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."* The part that sounds like Jesus is when Jesus is preaching the Sermon on the Mount and says in Matthew 5, ¹³ *"You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet."* ¹⁴ *"You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden."* ¹⁵ *Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house."* ¹⁶ *In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.*

But that Proverb is intriguing to me. Opinions about it are all over the place. Most believe it means when you do good to those who mistreat you, your good treatment brings on them such a sense of shame in their life and that shame is the first step toward seeing their need for Jesus. There is a famous episode in the Apostle Peter's life that illustrates this. It is in Luke 22:54-60. Jesus has predicted Peter's denial and Peter of course waved it off and swore he would never deny him. So in the garden Jesus was arrested and was taken to the high priest's house. Peter followed and stood in the courtyard with a servant girl who confronted Peter about being with Jesus. And when the third denial happened, Jesus made eye contact with Peter and immediately that broke him. He went outside and wept bitterly. But at the cross he was restored. Why do we do good to people? We do good because it points to Jesus. You need to make sure your suffering points to the Savior. Trust God. Make peace. Do good and...

Fight darkness

²¹ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. This is really kind of a summary statement. It should really be a summary statement for our lives. The operating word in that verse is the word "overcome." It's the Greek word *nike*. It's where we get the word Nike. It's the word for victory; it's a victory in battle. We forget that everything is a spiritual battle. Everything. Verse 21 is Paul summing up every second of every day. He did the same thing in Ephesians 6:12. *For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.* He goes on to list the whole armor of God. ¹³ *Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm.* ¹⁴ *Stand therefore, having fastened on the belt of truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness,* ¹⁵ *and, as shoes for your feet, having put on the readiness given by the gospel of peace.* ¹⁶ *In all circumstances take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming darts of the evil one;* ¹⁷ *and take the helmet of salvation,* Then he goes on to say that there is one weapon to do battle with and that is the sword of the spirit, which is the word of God. That is the Bible.

Some of you are losing your war. You aren't fighting darkness with the sword of the spirit. This is more than just the discipline that you ought to read the Bible every day. It's more than just checking that off. This is God's word that is going to give strength to your heart. It's going to

put joy in your soul and comfort when you hurt. It's going to give you wisdom when you are making decisions. The Word is going to give you clarity where there has been confusion and conviction when we've been in sin. God's word will give you courage when you used to have fear. It's going to give you hope about the future instead of you being scared of what's coming. It's going to remind you that God is a God of grace who loves you in Jesus...that your sins are forgiven... that you are received because of Christ. It's going to give you direction as you wonder what is your next step in life. It's going to give you the Gospel that makes you wise unto salvation. I'm asking you to trust God, make peace and do good and fight darkness. You need to make sure that whatever suffering you are in, points people to the Savior.

(Pastor prays)