

The Response of Grace

Romans 12:14-21

Slide 1

Last week, in Romans 12:9-13, we learned that God has called us to supernatural living as we looked at the believer's duty toward fellow Christians.

This next section widens the list to include our duty to everyone, believers and unbelievers alike. These verses could be considered a summary of the core expectations of supernatural living.

If we love the way Christ loves us, we should be willing to love others. If we've experienced God's grace, we should want to pass it on to others.

But you have to understand that what's requested here isn't difficult, it's impossible!, without God's grace. Remember, grace is God's undeserved favor.

Also understand that by giving undeserved grace, we're not excusing misdeeds. We're showing them grace, forgiving them, and loving them in spite of their sins against us; just as Jesus did, and still does for us.

Slide 2

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

This first passage highlights what our grace response should be to any individual. It's a command that's impossible for an individual with an unredeemed human nature to do: *"Bless those who persecute you;"*

The obedient Christian must not only overcome hating and retaliating against those who may harm or curse them, but we're commanded to go even further and bless them.

In this verse, Paul's echoing the teaching of Jesus in Luke 6:27-28, *"But to you who are listening I say: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you."*

In order for the people not to think He was simply asking for non-mistreatment, Jesus expanded His command by explaining what *agape* love was capable of in the next two verses:

Luke 6:29-30, *"If someone slaps you on one cheek, turn to them the other also. If someone takes your coat, do not withhold your shirt from them. Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back."*

Commenting further about our attitude in such situations, Jesus explains His reasoning in Luke 6:32-33, *"If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners do that."*

This *agape* love is something the world doesn't have. To truly bless those who persecute us is to desire their eternal salvation. This is why Paul continues with, *"bless and do not curse."*

Beyond withholding our hand from doing them harm, we're not to wish them loss or harbor ill-will toward them either. We're to bless them and do them good.

In other words, we're not to desire the outpouring of divine vengeance on our persecutors but we're to bless them desiring their salvation.

We should be people who have let go of all persistent attitudes of resentment, hostility, and retaliation.

Then, in verse 15, we're told to enter into the feelings of others, *"Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn."*

One way to verify that our heart is in the right place is to identify with other people so that we can *"rejoice with those that rejoice."*

But we also need to be sensitive to their disappointments, hardships, and sorrows so we're able to *"mourn with those who mourn."*

This calls us to the duty of sympathy and empathy, to entering into the heartache of others.

This deep identification is not only for fellow believers, but for all those with whom we have a close relationship, be they believers or unbelievers.

A comforter's ability to help is not so much his talent for using words, but rather his capacity to be sympathetic.

That's the type of understanding Job longed for when his friends began trying to correct him. Dr. Paul Brand expressed this truth in his book, *Fearfully and Wonderfully Made*.

He writes: *"When I ask patients and their families, 'Who helped you in your suffering?' I hear a strange, imprecise answer. The person described rarely has smooth answers or a winsome, effervescent personality.*

It's someone quiet, understanding, who listens more than he talks, who does not judge, or even offer much advice. 'A sense of presence.' 'Someone there when I needed him.'

A hand to hold. An understanding, bewildered hug. A shared lump in the throat."

Sometimes, in trying so hard to say the right thing, we forget that the language of feeling speaks louder than words. That's why we were told to *"weep with those who weep."*

Sympathy is two hearts tugging at one load. Helping others in distress begins by sharing the pain.

Finally, verse 16 teaches us not to be partial or proud, *"Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited."*

This being of the same mind is being in agreement with one another because we have the mind of Christ.

Believers are to agree among themselves and the way to be like-minded is to be one in spirit and purpose. But to live in harmony, it's necessary that every manifestation of pride be banished.

Few kinds of pride are worse than snobbery because snobs are obsessed with questions of status. They make economic distinctions about the company they keep.

We're never to be condescending but make real friends among the humble and poor. Which is why we're not to be wise in our own estimation; thinking ourselves superior, even to fellow Christians.

We must not think we know or understand everything. We're to let the Holy Spirit and the Word of God be our wisdom.

Slide 3

Next, Paul addresses what our grace response to our enemies should be.

Romans 12:17-19, *“Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: “It is mine to avenge; I will repay,” says the Lord.”*

These verses relay four imperatives that summarize the core of Christian relating. All four say the same thing, just in different words.

The first command is to never to pay back evil for evil to anyone. Retaliation and revenge are forbidden to the followers of Jesus.

Our way of relating to our enemies should not be retaliation but service. Verse 17 tackles man's natural response, *“Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone.”*

We’re never to move beyond the verbal curse prohibited in verse 14 to an act of revenge. Vindictiveness is the desire to get even with someone for a wrong suffered.

Even the Old Testament law of *“an eye for an eye, tooth for tooth,”* is civil law and isn’t intended for personal revenge.

Its intent was to take away retaliation for any offense from occurring by those whose vengeance is fueled by hurt and anger toward a guilty party.

Vindictiveness is of the world, not of the church. We’re to live out our distinctiveness. Unbelievers will take note of this rarity. A right attitude includes keeping our *“affairs right in the sight of all.”*

Lives well-ordered by consecration to God and a love for all, including persecutors, will gain us respect.

If our public behavior in the affairs of the world is above criticism, it should commend us and our witness to others who observe our conduct.

Then, in verse 18, Paul reminds us we're to promote peace not only as peacekeepers but as peace-makers, "*If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.*"

Fulfilling our duty as a peace-maker is conditional because it also depends on the attitudes and responses of our enemies.

"If possible" implies that peace isn't a compromise of good or truth and isn't to be pursued at any price.

We must do all we can to promote peace and tolerance without betraying the will of God. Paul says, "*as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.*"

He knew that some people-problems may never be resolved. It takes two to quarrel, but it also takes two to reconcile.

Our responsibility is to make sure that our side of the relationship is right, that our inner desire is sincerely to be at peace with all men, even the meanest and most undeserving.

Short of compromising God's truth and standards, we should be willing to go to great lengths to build peaceful bridges to those who hate or harm us.

We must forsake any grudge, settle any bitterness, and fully forgive, from the heart, all who harm us.

But some people just want to be cantankerous. They have a chip on their shoulder. They're looking for a fight.

You find them in the workplace, at school, and even in the church. We can't keep them from being that way, but we can choose how we respond.

Paul says that we should try to live at peace with everyone. That can mean giving up the right to get into an argument even when we know we're right, and even when we can prove it.

It takes wisdom to know when making your point is useful to the other person; and when it just feeds their desire to have a conflict.

Just because someone is fishing for a fight doesn't mean that you have to take the bait!

Instead of reacting immediately, take a deep breath and pray for that person who's sadly trapped in a 'destructive' habit of picking fights to feed some unsanctified inner compulsion for conflict.

You can choose to not energize that person. But note, Paul says to avoid unnecessary conflict *"if possible."* Sometimes, it's not possible. The other person is simply out-of-bounds in word or action.

In that case, be assertive, be direct, and be tough. You don't have to let anyone violate personal boundaries.

Indeed, letting someone walk all over you might be feeding their sin habit. But, generally speaking, as much as possible, strive to live in peace with all men.

This is why Paul included verse 19. It teaches that vengeance is God's domain, not man's, *"Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord."*

Just so there's no misunderstanding, Paul reiterates the denouncing of returning evil for evil. We, who have received God's grace, should ask God to extend the same grace to others.

In His divine time, the wrath of God will come, and just retribution awaits the unforgiven. God isn't complacent toward evil, but His wrath is just and not vengeful, as ours too often is.

God's wrath is a last resort, not a first option. Revenge is a weapon of such devastating power that God alone can handle it.

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Lastly, Paul concludes with the victory of grace. Romans 12:20-21, *“On 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. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”*

Verse 20 instructs that we should treat our enemies in way that should win them over to Christ, *“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.”*

Not returning evil for evil doesn't fulfill our responsibility. We're asked to minister to our enemy which may be even more difficult than not retaliating.

To withhold vengeance only requires us to do nothing, but to actually return good for evil requires an action that overcome our natural tendencies and feelings.

Yet that was the obligation of godly men, even under the Old Covenant.

Proverbs 25:21-22, *“If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat; if he is thirsty, give him water to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head, and the LORD will reward you.”*

When someone hurts you, instead of giving him what he deserves, we're to befriend him. This extension of forgiveness breaks the cycle of retaliation and opens the way for reconciliation.

It may even help your enemy feel ashamed and help him change his or her ways. It'll certainly free you from the heavy load of bitterness.

But, if you find it difficult to feel forgiving toward someone who has hurt you, try responding as we're commanded... with kind actions. If you do this a change of attitude will follow.

The phrase *“heap burning coals upon his head”* probably refers to an ancient Egyptian custom.

When a person wanted to demonstrate public contrition, he would carry a pan of burning coals on his head to represent the burning pain of his shame and guilt.

The point is, when we love our enemy and genuinely seek to meet his needs, his conscience will shame him for his hatred.

Thus, God expects us to leave all punishment to Him and busy ourselves in loving our enemies. The best way to get rid of our enemies is to turn them into friends.

A Christian must not play God and try to avenge himself. Returning evil for evil, or good for good, is the way most people live but the Christian must live on a higher level and return good for evil.

Of course, this requires love, because our first inclination is to fight back. It also requires faith, believing that God can work and accomplish His will in our lives and in the lives of those who hurt us.

In *Rumors of Another World*, Philip Yancey tells a story that illustrates the kind of "revenge" Paul spoke about in Romans 12:20, when he said that showing kindness to an enemy will "*heap burning coals upon his head.*"

When Nelson Mandela became president of South Africa, he appointed a commission to bring to trial those who had been guilty of atrocities during the time of apartheid.

Any white officer who voluntarily faced his accusers and confessed his guilt would not be punished.

One day an aged woman was brought face-to-face with the officer who had brutally murdered her only son and her beloved husband.

Asked what she wanted from him, she said, "*Although I have no family, I still have a lot of love to give.*" She requested that he visit her on a regular basis so she could mother him.

Then she said, "*I would like to embrace him so he can know that my forgiveness is real.*"

Yancey writes that as the elderly woman made her way to the witness stand, the officer became so overwhelmed with shame and remorse that he fainted.

The pain that woman inflicted was not sinful revenge but the purifying fire of a God-given love that can lead to repentance and reconciliation. That's redemptive revenge.

The antithesis of good and evil in verse 21, is the climatic summary of the argument, "*Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*" No alternative, no neutrality, no middle way is given us.

If we curse, repay evil for evil, or take revenge then, because these are evil responses, we have given in to evil.

We must not be sucked into the sphere of evil's influence and be used by it or be overcome by our own evil responses.

Our own evil responding is infinitely more detrimental to us than the evil done to us by others. It's evil itself that must be overcome and that can be accomplished only with good.

If we refuse to retaliate but instead practice good toward others we'll bless our persecutors, practice the public good, become active in peace-making and peace-keeping.

We need to leave all judgmentalness to God, love and serve our enemy, and perhaps win him over to God.

Then and only then have we have overcome evil with good. As light overcomes darkness, goodness can overcome evil.

Slide 5

Conclusion

The world at its worst returns evil for good. The world at its best returns good for good and evil for evil. Followers of Jesus are commanded to return good for evil.

In our thinking and living we need both restraint and action. Both are good. It's never good to retaliate, because if we do, evil uses us to do its work.

Do the positive good: bless, minister to, seek peace with, and serve and work good so that our enemy might be converted to Jesus and become our eternal friend.

To repay evil for evil is to be overcome by evil. To repay good for evil is to overcome evil with good. This is what Jesus did on the cross. The way of the cross is God's masterpiece of love and grace.

The person who thinks he must repay every angry look he sees or any hurtful deed that's directed toward him will have a never-ending and profitless job. In fact, in the end he's the one who will suffer the most.

As heirs of the grace of God, we should be gracious in our attitude toward others. The spirit of the world says, *"Get even with those who mistreat you."* The Spirit of Christ says, *"Love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you."*

If you want to know how spiritual you are, ask yourself, *"What is my attitude toward those who mistreat me? Am I kind, considerate, and loving in my words and actions toward them?"*

To live like Christ is not natural; it's supernatural.