



14 Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. 15 Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. 16 Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight.

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.

A highlight of each summer is the church canoe trip down the Kickapoo. Of course the scenery is amazing but being the fact that it's a river, you might get wet. And what are all of the ways you could get wet? Well, you might get stuck on the rocks and have to get put and push the canoe forward. You might be silly enough to stand up in the canoe. There's a much higher likelihood you will fall in when you do that. Or, there's a small chance someone will splash you. OK, maybe there's a bigger than small chance that someone will splash you. Now I am not saying who that person might be, just that it *could* happen.

You may be guessing that I am the guilty party. But let me say some things in my own defense. I have splashing rules. I am not a canoeing madman who terrorizes everyone on the river. For example, one rule is not to splash small children. That would be mean. Rule number two is if you really don't want to get splashed, I will respect that completely. That be rude. Rule number three- if you splash me, expect some "love" in return. Once you splash me or even attempt to get me wet, you are now no longer an innocent civilian--you are a willing combatant.

Last year I stood in waist deep water helping arriving canoes stop at the end at exit the canoes without getting wet. Wasn't that nice of me? ;-) One teenage girl, who also happened to be a Bible quizzer who memorized Romans chapter 12 last year, complained that I got her wet. It's

not like I hand out my canoe splashing rules in advance of the trip, but right then I invoked rule number three. She got wet because she had been a willing combatant. Rule number three baby-- you splash me and I'm gonna splash you back. Actually, I said something toddler-like "Well, you started it first!" Without missing a beat, from memory she quoted verse 17 to me. *Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all.* She was kidding, of course, but her timing was impeccable. How can you argue with such clear Biblical reasoning?

Kidding or not, this is good advice, but it's more than just that, isn't it? It's Biblical truth about relationships. The Bible was not written as a counseling handbook. The Holy Spirit didn't inspire dozens of Biblical writers just so you could get along with your cranky next door neighbor. However, if you follow these principles, all of your relationships will improve. Now that sounds a bit like a late night infomercial. We don't preach and apply the gospel just to help your marriage, but the gospel will help your marriage. These principles of mercy and vengeance are built into God's very being and they will change the way you live. Everyone of us have been hurt and no doubt some of that hurt would fit into the category of abuse. So why is it that some Christians carry around their hurts like 300 pound weight for the rest of their lives while others who experienced similar hurts seem to run free? There's something they get that others do not.

Let me remind you where we have been the last 3 weeks. Here are the first 2 points on our outline.

1. Trust in the gospel to cover your sins.
2. Trust in God's wrath for justice.

We are still on point number 2, working out the meaning and application of God's vengeance. It's kind of a strange thought to be comforted by God's vengeance, but this is what God intends for us. But let me get back to where I started with verse 17. *Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all.* Repay no one evil for evil. This is not the way the world typically works, is it? You splash me and I'm gonna splash you. That's all in fun but it's not fun when it actually happens. An eye for an eye. A tooth for a tooth. You started it, but I plan to finish it.

We already know one reason that we should not repay evil for evil, because vengeance is not our domain. "Vengeance is mine. I will repay," says the Lord. But in verse 17 we are give not so much a reason as an alternative to eye for an eye kind of living. Give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. This verse strikes me as particularly difficult because it says "in the sight of all." I more or less know what God thinks is honorable kind of behavior, but how do we do something that is honorable in the sight of all? Now this doesn't mean that every last person will think it honorable but the general consensus is that most will.



But how is that possible because we are talking about the watching world here and the last time I checked, there is not an overwhelming number of honorable people in the world. That's true but even the world knows honor when they see it. Did you see who was voted as the TIME Person of the Year in 2014? The list of persons of the year is populated by popes and presidents. Richard Nixon was Person of the Year in 1971 and 1972 and then he was impeached in 1973! So they don't always choose wisely. But this year

they got it right. In 2014 TIME's Person of the Year was the Ebola Fighters: the brave men and women who work in ebola hot spots caring for the sick and dying. One of these was on NPR this past week. Dr. Rick Sabra three weeks recovering from his near death experience with Ebola in a special medical unit in Nebraska. He contracted the virus working while delivering babies in Liberia. If you were fortunate enough to recover from ebola, what would you do? I am not sure I would do what Dr. Sacra is doing, which is returning to the exact same hospital in Liberia. Listen to the answer he gave when asked a very pointed question about his motivation for returning

“Ever since I was young, I’ve been motivated to do this kind of work. As a Christian I look to Jesus as my model. He spent his days going to people who didn’t have everything they needed and were lost and forgotten and healing them and touching them and encouraging them and he asks us to do the same. That’s my motivation.”

Even unbelievers recognize a good thing when they see it. Unbelievers know what an honorable act looks like. Even though they might not want to place themselves in harm's way like he is doing, they respect the man. They know he is doing an honorable thing. Dr. Sacra gave "thought to do what was honorable in the sight of all."

I realize that decisions like this one are very different from abuse and forgiveness. Nevertheless, the principle is that even the world knows an honorable act when they see it. It's not like the whole world will know your business either. What Paul means is that when the people around you see how you respond to offenses and abuses. If someone figuratively slaps you on the right cheek, what will you do? First, Paul says "Give though to it." Don't react, respond. We might see someone react during the Packer's game today. If a player gives a cheapshot, does the one receiving the cheapshot "Give though to do what is honorable in the sight of all?" Hardly. They push and maybe punch. They don't respond thoughtfully, they react. They retaliate. They repay evil for evil. But wouldn't it be great if they did what Paul says here? What would be the honorable action before the watching world?

What about your hurt? We know that God is watching us and holds us accountable for our actions, but what about those around you. Everyone expects you to repay evil for evil because that's what they would do. But what if you don't respond in this way? What if you exchange evil for mercy? I guarantee you that people will notice. They may not even understand your actions,

but they will respect them. It gives you the perfect opportunity to witness with your actions. So if there a conflict in your workplace to which this applies? Is your co-worker in the next cubicle over giving you a hard time and everyone in the office knows it? Do you realize that just gossiping about this person is a form of evil? Once you speak about them in an evil manner, you have already repaid evil for evil.

But this is the kind of thing where co-workers love to pull you into. They know you are being mistreated so they say, "Can you believe what she said to you? How rude was that?" What do you do at that moment? If you tear the other person down in front of your co-worker, you might as well have slapped them in the face. But what if you said something like this and truly meant it? "Yeah, I know it wasn't right. I need to think and pray about the best way to respond to it."

Conflicts, big and small, are opportunities to witness to the watching world. You do know that you witness every day, right? But you're thinking, "Well actually, no I don't. I almost never witness to anyone or share my faith." That's not a good thing either, but that's not what I mean. Every day you witness to those around you. How you handle conflict, if you repay evil for evil, if you gossip just like everyone else--that's witnessing. So each of us witnesses all of the time. The only question is, Is it a good witness or a bad witness? Now if you choose not to repay evil for evil, does that mean that your unsaved co-worker who sees this will repent and turn her life over to the Lord? Honorable actions in the face of evil are not the full gospel message, are they? But they give you the platform from which to eventually share the gospel. But if you backbite, gossip and spare with the best of them, how likely is it that your co-workers will listen to you when you do share your faith? The world is attracted to love and mercy because it stands out like a spotlight on a dark stage. Deep down, people know it is better not to repay evil for evil. Maybe they don't have a clue how to do it nor will they ever do it themselves, but they know that it's right and good.

And you and I have the power and the purpose to respond the right way. We have been talking about 10,000 talent hurts. These are the big tragedies and abuses of life. But each of us have \$10 and \$100 hurts all of the time. It's these day to day, smaller offenses that determine how we are likely to respond to the larger offenses.

Let me stop there and talk about the way I have been applying dollar values to sins and offenses. Someone commented to me that this may not be the best way to talk about sin. After all, all sins are the same in God's eyes, right? It's an excellent question, so let me address it. Is there such a thing as \$10 sins and \$10,000 talent sins? Yes and no. The Bible is very clear that all sin separates us from God.

James 2:10-For whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it.

Romans 3:23-for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

One sin will bring God's wrath and judgment. One sin eternally separates us from God. So in this sense, all sin is the same.

There's another way in which all sins are the same. From the Sermon on the mount we read: *21 "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.' 22 But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire (Matthew 5:20-22).*

Jesus said that the sin of anger is the same as the sin of murder. Anyone who actually commits a murder kills the person in their heart through anger before they ever pull the trigger. The same is true for lust and adultery. *27 "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.' 28 But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart (Matthew 5:27-28).*

So lust is adultery of the heart. Both sin are equally sinful. However, which has the greater consequences? If you commit adultery the consequences to yourself and others is much greater. Now I don't mean to downplay the seriousness of lust, especially habitual lust which will most likely lead to some form of pornography. Very dangerous, but I don't think anyone would argue with the fact that one instance of adultery has greater consequences than one act of lust. Furthermore, it also depends on who commits adultery. If you commit adultery, it's tragic and there will be consequences. But if I commit adultery, the consequences are multiplied due to my position as a local pastor. This church body would be deeply hurt with far reaching damage done.

The same is true for murder. No judge will convict me of first degree murder for what is in my heart but he will if I am holding a smoking gun in my hands. We all instinctively understand that even though all sin separates us from God, sins have different kinds of consequences. Jesus taught that these consequences can have eternal ramifications. *Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago, sitting in sackcloth and ashes. But it will be more bearable in the judgment for Tyre and Sidon than for you (Luke 10:13-14).* What Jesus meant was that even though the cities of Tyre and Sidon were hardened toward Christ, the towns of Chorazin and Bethsaida were that much more hardened against belief. Therefore, if sins have different consequences then it follows that there can be \$10 hurts, \$100 hurts and 10,000 talent hurts. We know this from experience and we know it from Scripture.

There's one more aspect of justice and vengeance I want to mention. How many people in the world like the wrath of God? No one does. It sound so mean and judgmental. I sold something to a guy online and I had an opportunity to witness to him. He told me he was raised a Mormon, became a non-denominational Christian and now is an agnostic. That's quite a range of beliefs, don't you think? In going back and forth, I asked him the classic probing question: What if you are wrong? This was part of his answer. "So I guess I'm pushing all my chips to the center of the table and saying "all in"... because if there is a force that made us... I want to believe it's kind and loving and won't judge me or anyone else because we didn't have the opportunity to see the dispensation of miracles."

This is so common, isn't it? People don't like a God who judges. No one should ever be judged because judgment is just plain wrong. But as these same people who hate judgment what they

think about justice. Everyone wants justice especially if they feel that have been cheated or harmed in some way. We want justice but we don't always like it when God acts in justice. This gets to the so-called Problem of Evil. If God is all-loving and all-powerful, then why is there evil in the world? Since evil exists, then they claim that God lacks either love or power--or both. It occurred to me this week that the very argument is self-refuting. People who have a problem with the so-called problem of evil want God to do justice and stop bad things from happening, including crimes and abuse. That's what a powerful and loving God would do. But they don't want God to be wrathful or judgmental or to harm anyone. But how can God eliminate evil and do justice without being judgmental? They demand a just God but they won't permit him to be act justly. It doesn't make any sense, does it? They can't have it both ways.

This helps us in two ways. First, it helps us better appreciate God's vengeance. We may not like the idea but we see how necessary it is. We would be utterly hypocritical to demand that God act in justice but deny him the ability to do so. Second, this is a way to engage someone who says that they don't like a God who is judgmental. Take a moment and very gently point out their inconsistency. I just finished reading a book called Tactics by Greg Koukl. I like how he puts it.

“My goal is to find clever ways to exploit someone’s bad thinking for the purpose of guiding her to truth, yet remaining gracious and charitable at the same time. My aim is to manage, not manipulate; to control, not coerce; to finesse, not fight. The goal of this kind of apologetics, then, is not necessarily to win someone to Christ. That may be an ultimate goal or an ultimate hope, but the goal of an individual encounter is nothing more than putting a stone in someone’s shoe. I want to give him something worth thinking about, something he can’t ignore because it continues to poke at him in a good way.

This leads us to the third point in our outline.

3. Trust that bitterness will destroy you.

Vengeance seems to imply that we actually take revenge on someone. Vengeance is literally repaying evil back to the person who gave evil to us. A \$100 hurt demands \$100 worth of vengeance. But most of us don't actually hit back, do we? I might splash back, but I will not hit back. So unless we are bold enough and mean enough to literally take revenge on someone, most of us don't enter that domain.

So what do bitterness and vengeance have to do with one another? Here's how they relate. Bitterness is silent vengeance. You may not have the guts to take execute literal vengeance on another person so you do it silently. That's bitterness. You wish them harm. You have this simmering anger that stays with you all the time. You certainly do not want to bless them, which Paul commands that we do. So you hold that vengeance in your heart. Silent vengeance, eating away at your soul.

But if bitterness is silent vengeance, what does God say about vengeance? "Vengeance is mine. I will repay," says the Lord. Remember from last week that vengeance is not our domain. This past Friday's night basketball game ranked up in my top 2 high school basketball games of all time. It was a stunning game. In all of the excitement, I confess that I started to slip out of my domain. I have kept my mouth shut all season so far but I put my foot across into the domain of the official. I regretted it. But that's nothing compared to silent vengeance. We falsely believe

that we have a right to our bitterness. Someone hurt us deeply so we have a right to be angry at them. But bitterness--silent vengeance--is not our domain. To be bitter is to play God. To hold onto bitterness is to say that you have a right to vengeance. You don't. You don't have a need for and you certainly don't have a right to it. You have as much right to bitterness as you do to ruling the universe. Would you like to give that a try? Can you keep the planets in motion and alignment? Can you feed the sparrows and teach the lioness to care for her cubs? Can you decide who deserves Heaven and who is going to hell? No? Then you don't have a right to be bitter either. It isn't your domain. And since it is not our burden to carry it, God has designed silent vengeance in such a way that it will destroy you. It is emotional and spiritual cancer which left alone, metastasizes and grows like a wildfire. If it doesn't kill you, it will literally trim years off of your life.

More than that. We don't have a right to be happy when God takes vengeance on our enemies. Proverbs 24:17-18 warns against that. It says, "*Do not rejoice when your enemy falls, and let not your heart be glad when he stumbles, lest the Lord see it and be displeased, and turn away his anger from him.*" Vengeance is God's domain. he will repay it. That's a promise, but we can't sit back and say, "Yeah, that's right. God get 'em God. Give them what they deserve. Let your wrath fall upon them with full force!" We must not delight in God's wrath on our enemies. However, as I said last week, vengeance *is* satisfying. It is satisfying to know that offenses and sins will be dealt with. We can dispense mercy but it's satisfying to know that God has ultimate justice wrapped up. But do not rejoice in it.

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