

ROMANS

I don't know how many times I have studied the book of Romans or how many times I have taught that book. But there is a theme to the book of Romans: How sinful people can be an accepting, loving, affirming community centered in Jesus Christ.

The leaders of the church in Rome have standards nobody can possibly meet so Paul tells them that the circle of acceptance must be broadened. Why? Because we are all sinners in need of God's grace, nobody is worthy, **No Not One**. Yet God in his merciful and loving wisdom wants the best for us all. And he wants Christians to be together. God wants Christians to bless each other. Not just tolerate each other, but bless...

In this world there is too much stress, too much tension, too much fighting, too many opinions, too many disagreements, too many expectations of what other people should do. I'm talking about within the church. Too many people distance themselves from the church because there is too much of this sort of behavior.

I love Romans 12:18, ***If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men.*** This verse is a refreshing, realistic bit of wisdom, that describes the power we have to change the world right now. You can only control **your** decisions, **your** behavior, the way **you** respond to other people.

“If it is possible...” leaves wiggle room. There may be times it is not possible to be friends with others. Yet make it a priority to bless others, go out of your way to do what is right for the other person's sake. Make blessing other people always a priority.

“as far as it depends on you...” You cannot control others, but you can control yourself. You do what you can do to get along with others, to bless others, to lift others up. If they refuse to accept your blessing, you can't control that...

“Live at peace with everyone.” I know what you are thinking, “I live at peace with most people.” If God wanted us to live at peace with most people and call it good enough, nothing would need to be said about living at peace...that’s easy. Paul has in mind the annoying people of your life, not the easy people.

Rom. 12:17-18. ***“Repay no one evil for evil. Have[e] regard for good things in the sight of all men. If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men.”*** I would love to preach the definitive sermon on how to achieve world peace, but this morning a more difficult and personal message: how to get along when the person sitting next to you makes you mad. The people you love. The annoying people God calls you to work alongside in life.

In Rom. 12:20 the word enemy is used. This is one of the subtle challenges of the Bible. How easy to dismiss this verse as not a real problem for you and me because “enemy” surely must mean members of Al Quada that are out to destroy the U.S. and the Western World. Enemy means the politicians that only seem to be out for themselves. Enemy must mean the rival across town that disrespected me and if I happen to run into him then don’t attack him.

Let’s make it personal and talk about the hardest enemy of all: when your enemy is your friend: those who are closest to you that seem oblivious to your needs. The pain of rejection. When you are overlooked. When your spouse seems to not notice you are tired too and ignores your needs. Satan’s first line of attack is always to divide within. Life would be easy if the scripture stopped with the phrase ***“Do not repay evil for evil”*** in Rom. 12:7. Then when I am hurt I could passively go on my merry way and have nothing else to do with you, but the scripture continues ***“DO what is right.”*** Be active in loving others.

“DO what is right.” ***“If it is possible, live at peace...”*** ***“Live”*** is an active word. Live peacefully, doing good to those who hurt you, those who annoy you, those who don’t deserve it. You may not get credit, you may not get accolades.

Work hard anyway and do your best - hold your head high, because God knows... keep on doing what God is telling you is right. Treat people kindly no matter how they have treated you. Keep an open door. Speak well of others even when you see no return. As we work our way through the rest of these verses, it boils down to this: **Kill them with Kindness.**

I think that's what the "heaping burning coals on his head" in Rom. 12:20 is about. When you are hurt and overlooked, kill them with kindness. Letting others get credit for what you have done is not easy, yet sometimes it is right if the goal is peace. God knows your heart. That is no hollow sentiment. Do what is right and you will have peace.

Revenge. John Kennedy said, "Don't get mad, get even." That's the way most people think, even Christians. Maybe the revenge is passive, like a secret prayer for failure. A couple of years ago a car flew around me and cut me off and I thought to myself, "I hope you get what you're asking for." That thought was barely finished when a police car came from nowhere, lights flashing, sped around me before I could even pull over, and nailed that annoying guy. YES, I cheered to myself, he got what was coming to him!

We root for failure for those who annoy us/make us mad. I found a website: "The Pay Back." It sounds like a joke, but it is a real business: **"ThePayback.com is your home for all of your revenge needs. So, you never had a chance to get revenge on your ex-boyfriend or ex-girlfriend? Your current spouse lied to you when he said that he would never cheat on you? Get Revenge On People Who Have Done You Wrong!"**

Contrast what Paul says: Rom. 12:19 ***"Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay," says the Lord."*** This is a test of our attitude. God has a different outcome in mind than we do. We want people to get what's coming to them. When God says, "I will repay" it is tempting to think of God as the big brother who we can call upon to beat up the bully that is threatening me. God has something different in mind.

When God says “I will repay,” our minds should go back to the wonderful truths of the book of Romans that God found a way to redeem sinners. God wants a transformed heart. The better attitude would be, “I hope this man learns something and no longer engages in dangerous driving.” God wants people to be changed.

When people are annoying, when they fight with you, when they are disrespectful... the temptation is to fight back, to want them to get what's coming to them, but God says there is a better way: push them towards God. Let them fight it out with God, not you, so that God can change them, so that God can forgive them, so that God can repay the offense through the cross of Christ!

Rather than us taking justice into our own hands, God says there is a better way Rom. 12:20-21. Be kind to your enemies. That's one of the ingredients of unconditional love. Overcome evil with good it says. Pay attention to the needs of your enemy. The people that hurt you. Don't look for opportunities to get revenge. Look for opportunities to help them. ***“Bless those who persecute you”*** is another ingredient of unconditional love.

Who Is My Enemy? Paul has in mind people who are close enough for you to be able to give a cup of water. The hardest enemies are almost always friends, colleagues or a family member that has hurt me. In the book of Romans Paul is writing to the leaders of the church because they are being too exclusive, writing people off as unworthy of being in the same church as them. Paul is saying even if you can see real fault, love them anyway by being kind.

In your families, friends, the people who are close to you, your workplace, your neighborhood, the way of God is to strive for peace whenever possible, to be active in making a difference through acts of kindness, building each other up, loving people, accepting them, forgiving them, for this is what God has done for us through Jesus Christ. Rather than seeking revenge, the better way Rom. 12:20 says is to “heap burning coals on his head.”

The GNT translation makes sense: *for by doing this you will make them burn with shame*. The thought is not we heap the coals, but rather, the result of returning evil with kindness will create in them guilt and shame. We use the phrase, Kill them with Kindness.

If I cause you distress and you return my evil actions with kindness, you are forcing me to live with my own conscience. Don't seek revenge on me with the desire to get what's coming to me, throw me on the mercy and justice of God and let God either change me or condemn me depending on how I respond to God! In the final analysis, it is between me and God. It was never between you and me anyway. Through deeds of love shown to those who have hurt us deeply, we may pave the way for their heart to be changed.

The goal is peace. Peace with God. Peace with others. The method to find peace with others is to overcome evil with good.