

The Revenge Alternative

Romans 12:17-21

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We don't need to see statistics to know that we are living in violent times. People are quick to be offended and to strike back. If you accidentally cut someone off in traffic, they may pull a gun on you. If you make a mistake adding up someone's groceries don't be surprised if you have someone scream at you in the middle of the store. If you fail to give people the attention they think they deserve, they will treat you as an enemy as if this slight was a capital offense. If you use vocabulary that offends someone it could lead to physical violence or the loss of your job. If you make a mistake or have an accident someone may sue you for everything that you have and much more. We are living at a time when people don't just want "justice" they want to destroy you.

These words of Paul call us to a lifestyle that runs counter to everything that is going on. As we read these words, we need to see that these are commands that only Christian men and women can carry out. The natural person cannot do so.

The General Command

Paul begins with the overarching standard that should always apply.

¹⁷ Never pay back evil with more evil. Do things in such a way that everyone can see you are honorable. ¹⁸ Do all that you can to live in peace with everyone.

Paul says, as a Christian we are NEVER to respond like the world around us responds. He doesn't say, "Do this sometimes . . ." it is to NEVER pay back evil with more evil. We may agree that people shouldn't respond to evil with evil . . . until someone offends us! At that point we feel justified. We feel like our situation is the exception . . . but it is not.

It is our natural response to respond with vengeance when we feel we have been treated wrong. In the Old Testament the Lord even set up "cities of refuge" so people could go somewhere to escape the vengeance of those who sought to avenge the death of a relative. It was not a place to hide those who were wicked . . . it was a city to protect those who accidentally killed another.

When we read the story of David turning over the Kingdom to his son Solomon, David directs his son to pass out some revenge that he had been thinking about (stewing about) for many years. Paul is telling us that is not what God wants from His people.

In 1 Peter 2:23 we are shown the example of Jesus.

When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. ²⁴ He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed.

Our Lord showed us what it looked like to not respond to evil in kind, but to respond in a way that brings honor to the Lord. The leaders marveled at the silence of Jesus. It was unheard of.

To obey this command I believe at least four things have to happen. First, we must control our anger. Anger causes us to re-act rather than respond thoughtfully. How many times has someone committed a crime out of anger before they even had a chance to think about things. They say, "I don't understand what happened, "something" just came over me." We MUST get hold of our anger! We need to learn to stop ourselves when we feel the anger rising and give ourselves a spiritual talking to. Memorizing this verse or the many of the others on controlling anger may be helpful to this end. Anger does not accomplish God's purposes

Lloyd-Jones hits makes us uncomfortable with these words,

As Christian people we should not be disturbed in spirit, we should not be agitated. The Christian should never lose the peace of God and the peace of Christ. . . For a Christian to be agitated is always wrong; it is sin. . .the moment you lose control of yourself you have been overcome by evil. It does not matter how great the provocation, it does not matter what somebody may have done, if you have lost control and are saying or thinking or trying to do wrong, then the devil has won, and you are defeated

Ouch! I can't imagine too many people who are not convicted by these insightful words.

Second, we must listen more to the Word of God rather than to our emotions. We usually do this the other way around. We tend to interpret the Word of God in light of our emotions instead of interpreting our emotions in light of the Word of God. We must not be "feelings-driven," rather we should be truth driven!

Third, we need to focus more on conquering the sin nature than focusing on particular sins. To merely focus on one sin is like being in the garden and just pulling the top off a weed and not getting at the roots. Satan is fine with us taking aim at a particular sin, because while you are distracted, he will shackle you in other areas. Sometimes we will even become proud or judgmental because we have conquered the one sin only to embrace these two others.

Finally, we must seek God's glory more than our own. This may be the hardest of all. We have this deeply ingrained desire to be on center stage. We want to achieve our goals, be heard, and be recognized. The idea of seeking first HIS kingdom is a real challenge for us. We must learn to look at every situation in terms of how it impacts the Kingdom of God, more than how it impacts us. We must be mindful of how our actions are impacting His reputation. We must be more concerned with his honor than our own.

Jesus said the same thing as Paul in Matthew 5:38-48

³⁸ "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' ³⁹ 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. ⁴⁰ And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as

well. ⁴¹ And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. ⁴² Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you.

⁴³ “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ ⁴⁴ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵ so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. ⁴⁶ For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? ⁴⁷ And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?”

In verse 18, Paul summarizes,

Do all that you can to live in peace with everyone.

Notice a few things. We are to do everything we can do to obtain or maintain peace. We are not let off the hook simply because someone is difficult and determined to keep things stirred up. In other words, another person’s bad behavior does not excuse our bad behavior. However, at times it is not all up to us. If another person refuses to live in peace, we must do the best we can.

Paul is also not suggesting we pursue peace at ANY price. We cannot negotiate the truth of the gospel. We must not compromise with evil. We should never stay in a situation that is dangerous. We must not excuse sin to gain peace. There are times when we do have to say, “Enough!” I also believe we don’t need to do this as often as we do. Consider how many times you walked away from a relationship rather than do the hard work to live at peace with someone. One commentator rightly wrote,

We cannot fix every problem or heal every relationship. Jesus is the Deliverer; we are not. Certain people utterly reject the way of peace. There is a time to stop trying to make peace with them. Paul directs, “As for a person who stirs up division, after warning him once and then twice, have nothing more to do with him” (Titus 3:10). (Dorani, p. 448).

Responding to the Negative Positively

It is not enough to not do evil . . . the Lord calls us to take positive action. The first thing he tells us

¹⁹ Dear friends, never take revenge. Leave that to the righteous anger of God. For the Scriptures say,

“I will take revenge;
I will pay them back,”
says the LORD.

So the first positive thing is refrain from making judgements that only God can make. We must trust Him. This statement can easily be misread to mean: you don’t have to worry about ‘getting

even, God will do that for you.” However, what Paul is saying is we should not trust our own judgment. We need to remember that we respond to our interpretation of what occurred. The Lord alone sees objectively. He sees the motivation, and what the person was trying to do/say. He has ALL the facts, we only have a few of the facts. We jump to conclusions and rush to judgment. God does not. Let me give you an illustration,

A pastor led a healthy small-town church, but faced a little resistance when he lengthened the worship service by fifteen minutes so that it ended at 10:45 instead of 10:30. One man who sat near the back of the church seemed especially unhappy about the change. Each week, he stood up at precisely 10:30, straightened his jacket and pants, and walked out of the service as the sermon neared its conclusion. The pastor told me: “He never said anything, but I could feel his displeasure over the longer services. Sometimes I had to stifle my anger at his weekly display.” Then one week, the pastor changed the order of worship and put the sermon first. The man’s wife called later that day and said: Pastor, you can’t imagine how happy my husband was today. You see, he has to report to work at 10:45 on Sundays. He waits until the last possible minute each week, and it grieves him that he can never stay till the end of your message. But today he heard the whole sermon. He was so pleased, I just had to tell you. (Doriani, Daniel p. 447).

When we encounter an offense that makes us want to respond in retaliation, we can diffuse this desire by consciously leaving it in the Lord’s hands. We trust that He

- He will judge fairly
- He alone knows any contingent circumstances
- He will appropriately temper justice with mercy (as He does with us).

The Lord has promised that He will vindicate us. In other words, when we are falsely accused, when we have been slandered, He will come to our aid. He will bring justice. However, when one is repentant, when there was misunderstanding (perhaps by us), when they are victims, God will also defend them. The bottom line is: when we entrust matters to the Lord we can be sure that no one is “getting away with” anything. And we do not need to fret and stew about any situation.

When we determine that we will be the one to exact revenge we are taking the role that is God’s alone to take. He alone knows what is right to do.

Coals of Fire

Paul takes this a step further.

“If your enemies are hungry, feed them.
 If they are thirsty, give them something to drink.
 In doing this, you will heap
 burning coals of shame on their heads.”

Do you remember some hurt that was inflicted upon you. It may have been an unkind word, a brutal lie against you, some kind of physical or sexual abuse, a relationship that was destroyed because of the words or actions of someone else, someone who ripped you off in a shady business deal? You can still feel the churning in your heart, can't you? Now hear the words of Paul telling us to show kindness and love to these people. It is enough to make us angry, isn't it?

Paul says, when we are kind to our antagonist we heap burning coals on their head. That sounds a little like revenge, doesn't it? The New Living Translation tips us off to what is meant by translating the text "burning coals *of shame* on their heads.

Paul is quoting from Proverbs 25:22 which says this,
 If your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat,
 and if he is thirsty, give him water to drink,
²² for you will heap burning coals on his head,
 and the LORD will reward you.

Notice, it says the Lord will reward us for taking such action. So, this is not something negative but something positive and good. When we do good to someone who did evil toward us, the contrast in behavior and motives may cause the other person to feel shame (or if you will, to "burn with a sense of shame.") This in turn may lead the person to repent and ultimately be saved. Our faith never shines brighter than when it leads us to respond as Jesus did by "turning the other cheek."

Even when we have been hurt by another we should be concerned for their spiritual state. We should act in a way that hopefully will lead them to repentance rather than the hospital!

A Principle to Live By

Paul ends this section with a summary verse

²¹ Don't let evil conquer you, but conquer evil by doing good.

We can adopt the ways of the world and become just as aggressive as everyone else. We can lock horns and battle until one of us is no longer standing . . . or we can try it God's way.

Paul indicated that we have a choice. Our society's way is not working (no matter how much more evolved we think we are). Violence is increasing at an alarming rate. Paul's suggestion is radical, but it is not new. Jesus said the same thing in His Sermon on the Mount. . . He told us to love our enemies and pray for those who use us. (Matthew 5:44; Luke 6:27). He gave us the example of this very thing. Paul is not coming up with someone new . . . he is applying the words of Jesus.

Christianity is practical. It is a totally different way of doing things from what we are used to. the best way to impact our world is to do what He says . . . despite how much we may want to follow the way of the crowd around us.

The words we looked at today contain great power. Our job is to use that power in the right way. There is a familiar story from the late Corrie Ten Boom. She and her family worked against the Nazis in World War Two, hiding Jews in their home. When she was caught, she was sent to a concentration camp where she was stripped of her dignity, saw her father and her sister (Betsie) die, and suffered more at the hands of other people than we could possibly imagine. This is precisely why her encounter with forgiveness is so memorable:

“It was at a church service in Munich that I saw him, the former S.S. man who had stood guard at the shower door in the processing center at Ravensbruck. He was the first of our actual jailers that I had seen since that time. And suddenly it was all there – the roomful of mocking men, the heaps of clothing, Betsie’s pain-blانched face.

He came up to me as the church was emptying, beaming and bowing. ‘How grateful I am for your message, Fraulein.’ He said. ‘To think that, as you say, He has washed my sins away!’

His hand was thrust out to shake mine. And I, who preached so often to the people in Bloemendaal the need to forgive, kept my hand at my side.

Even as the angry, vengeful thoughts boiled through me, I saw the sin of them. Jesus Christ had died for this man; was I going to ask for more? Lord Jesus, I prayed, forgive me and help me to forgive him.

I tried to smile, I struggled to raise my hand. I could not. I felt nothing, not the slightest spark of warmth or charity. And so again I breathed a silent prayer. Jesus, I cannot forgive him. Give me your forgiveness.

As I took his hand the most incredible thing happened. From my shoulder along my arm and through my hand a current seemed to pass from me to him, while into my heart sprang a love for this stranger that almost overwhelmed me.

And so I discovered that it is not on our forgiveness any more than on our goodness that the world’s healing hinges, but on his. When he tells us to love our enemies, He gives, along with the command, the love itself.”

Corrie Ten Boom discovered that God works in those who are obedient to Him. He is not promoting weakness but strength under control. Our world needs some radical disciples. It needs people (will they be us?) who will follow these commands of God as counterintuitive as they are. May God help us to dare to trust Him so we too can experience the depth and power of His grace as we dare to extend it to another.