

Transformed

How to Love a Thief

“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.” 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.” Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

- Romans 12:19-21

My wife, Rachel, and I lived in Uganda from 2012-2021. Over these years, we spent many wonderful Christmas seasons with our community there. Every year though, we were always reminded by our Ugandan friends to be extra vigilant since the incidence of property theft always increased in December as some people became increasingly desperate for a little extra income leading up to the Christmas holiday. Only one time in those 9 years did we experience someone trying to break into our compound. A few weeks before our very first Ugandan Christmas, someone cut through the fence surrounding our house. We assume that our trusty pair of dogs succeeded in scaring off the wannabe intruders and nothing was actually taken from us. We heard reports from neighbors that multiple homes were targeted over the following days. A week later, we heard a report that the thieves were discovered hiding in an abandoned house a few blocks away from us. With the hoard of stolen items being the only evidence needed, a crowd formed and quickly beat the thieves to death, an unfortunately common form of mob justice in Uganda.

Verses 19-21 of Romans 12 instruct us to allow God to advocate on our behalf, defend in our place, and judge where judgement is due. While our perspective is often limited, and even clouded by selfish desires, we can trust that God’s perspective is not. God judges in infinite wisdom, based in his holiness, and expressed in his wrath. While the idea of God’s wrath is a divine characteristic that is uncomfortable for many to contemplate, it is a reality and vengeance certainly does belong to the Lord (Deuteronomy 32:35). This is consistent with God’s statement in Exodus 34:6-7 that he *“will by no means clear the guilty”*. While this is another seemingly harsh statement, it should be remembered that the context of this affirmation is that God is also merciful, gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love, and offering forgiveness of sins. We can certainly trust this God of great love and compassion to stand in our defense and trust his ability to judge the offending thieves better than any mob that thinks they know best.

We often use our time and energy to defend or justify ourselves to others and to make sure that our enemies are suffering what they ‘deserve’. Instead, how are we called to live as we navigate this broken and sinful world? Jesus instructs us to love the Lord our God and the people around us with all our effort, attention, and ability (Matthew 22:37-40). This practical demonstration of love and concern for the physical, emotional, relational, and spiritual needs of others will be the result of obedience in following Christ’s teaching (John 13:35), will be

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evidence of the Spirit at work within us (Galatians 5:22-23), and is the normal and expected response to the salvation we have received by grace (Matthew 25:34-40).

How is it possible to live this kind of radically transformed lifestyle, to respond to those thieves with love rather than hate, to not *“be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good”*? It is only possible by remembering that we are saved by and serve a king who has already overcome all the powers of evil in this world, putting evil to shame, and triumphing over it at the cross (Colossians 2:15). Some days this comes easily, but often we must make the conscious choice to live according to the reality of Christ’s victory over evil rather than concentrating on the struggles we see day by day. Let us not follow the mob in reacting to the troubles and offenses of this world, but rather be transformed by fixing our eyes on Jesus who teaches us the humility needed to turn the other cheek and pray for those who cause us heartache (Matthew 5:38-45).

- 1. Think of a time that you were wronged or faced injustice, why might it be easier to respond according to the ways of the world (following the mob) rather than responding to evil with good?**
- 2. Sometimes we may not be able to identify ‘enemies’ in our life, but more subtly you may have someone who is actively or passively challenging for you to interact with. How might it look for you to offer ‘food’ and ‘drink’ to someone such as this?**
- 3. This passage quotes Proverbs 25:21 in saying that treating an enemy in a loving way will *“heap burning coals on his head”*. What might this statement be referring to? What are ways that we might expect an enemy to react to our loving response? Should the way that they will potentially react influence our attitude and actions towards them?**
- 4. What might be the consequences if we let our responses to others/situations be overcome by the evil perpetrated against us?**
- 5. How does your relationship with Christ and the fact that you are saved by grace transform how you respond to others?**



Dr. Daniel Graham graduated from Oregon State University’s veterinary school in 2009, worked in small animal practice, and then moved with his wife, Rachel, to Soroti, Uganda in 2012 where they served for 9 years. Daniel’s work was in the areas of community development, discipleship, and ministry training. Daniel and Rachel have one son, Nathan. Along the way, Daniel also completed a Postgraduate Certificate in International Animal Health and a Masters in Global Leadership. He currently serves as CVM’s Missions Mobilization Strategist, helping others through the process of preparing to serve long-term overseas and strategizing opportunities to engage Unreached People Groups.

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