

ISH
Extreme Measures
Romans 12:14-21

People cause pain. People hurt people. The worst pains in the world are not caused by natural disasters but by human cruelty. Extreme examples abound. I have stood in the concentration camps in Poland where hundreds of thousands of Jews and Poles were enslaved, starved, frozen, tortured, mutilated, massacred, incinerated, and then thrown into mass graves like garbage. I shudder every time I recall the context, pictures, and memories I have of that awful place. But that place is a picture of what still exists in our world in varied form. People still horribly mistreat people. People still bring the greatest pain to people. Not all pain that is inflicted by humans on humans is as graphic and horrid as what happened in Auschwitz. **But you and I both know that we feel every injustice and slight against us as if it were a knife through our heart.** And something has to be done with that pain and about that injustice, but what?

Every time you experience some sort of mistreatment at the hands of another human being, you will make a choice about how you will respond. It may be immediate or it may come slowly, but make no mistake; you WILL RESPOND to the people who mistreat you! **The question that I want us to consider today is not just about HOW you will respond to mistreatment, but about WHO will CONTROL how you respond to this mistreatment? Will it be the “Old you” or the “Transformed you?”** Romans chapter 12 is all about being transformed by the renewing of your mind. The transforming work that God does inside of us is EXTREME! He is not interested in miniscule makeovers; he wants to lead us to total transformation. We are all in need of radical restoration, and it will require some extreme measures! But this is not an easy work, so some of you may not be willing to follow his lead. **In fact, what I am going to teach today may cause some of you who are not Christ-followers to think that I have lost my mind! Before you conclude that however, I want you to consider how NORMAL PEOPLE respond to the ones that cause pain in their life: HURT PEOPLE HURT PEOPLE.** People who get hurt by people like to hurt the people who hurt them, or at least see those people get hurt by other people. Right?

That makes perfect sense. If you hurt me, then watch out! I am either going to figure out a way to make you pay, or I am going to be there to celebrate when you do finally pay. You have no right to get away with hurting me without getting a scratch on you. That just IS NOT FAIR! I agree. **But is the response you normally take the most helpful one for you personally? In other words, will it bring about good things for your life if you choose to personally CELEBRATE - or even CAUSE - the hurt of those who hurt you? Does it make you MORE loving and more sensitive to the needs of others? Does it truly HEAL you?** Furthermore, what benefit comes to you when your enemy finally “gets his due?” When pain comes to the one who hurt you, it often seems far inferior to the pain that they inflicted. I remember a scene in the movie “Schindler’s List” about one German officer in Auschwitz who

was hung for his crimes as some of his victims stood by to watch. The depth of his crimes made the punishment seem absolutely token. He needed to suffer more. Human justice alone is ultimately inadequate. Meanwhile, what is the cost of seeking personal vengeance? Let's consider it together.

First, a vengeful response to hurt usually causes us to RETREAT from healthy intimacy with all people. **We become cynical and fearful about opening up because we begin to believe that being vulnerable opens us up to more hurt (It does), so we refuse to forgive those who hurt us. If you are a believer, the FAILURE TO FORGIVE is NOT an OPTION. Jesus said that forgiven people forgive people, and that people who will not forgive others will not be forgiven themselves. Take that up with him.** The failure to forgive has practical implications. **We become LESS LOVABLE when we respond wrongly to hurt. Being hurtful doesn't PROTECT us; it CUTS US OFF from the people that actually do love us, especially when they happen to hurt us in the normal course of an imperfect life.** It becomes a boxing match or a knife fight. It is hard to love you when you are holding that knife in your hand! Next, when you determine that the person who hurt you must experience hurt, then you spend much of your energy watching for or working for their payback. **This is not only emotionally draining; it makes your ENEMY your FOCUS!** How smart is that? Do you really want to spend that much of your time THINKING about the person who has treated you so cruelly? Imagine the amount of energy that is WASTED that could have been spent on plans and dreams and duties that benefit life. Even if your enemy finally gets a taste of his own medicine, how much of your life have you wasted waiting for that to happen?

When revenge is the focus of our attention, we also become a PRISONER of our PAST PAINS! I have seen this happen so many times. People who were deeply hurt some 10 or 20 years ago still live as if that pain happened yesterday. These prisoners spend much of their time REHEARSING THEIR HURT, thinking about all that this person stole from them. And in doing so, they allow this offender to steal from their todays and their tomorrows as well. What a tragedy? Are you constantly rehearsing some hurt in your life? If so, then you are making it even worse than it was, no matter how awful it actually was. **You are also CREATING MORE ANGER within your own heart over the offense. You are reinforcing the bars of your prison with your own thoughts.** This will ultimately lead to BITTERNESS, and bitterness turns you into poison in the lives of even the people that you love! I don't know any people who like to be around bitter people. We RUN from them. **You see, the normal response to injury is ISH: Childish, Foolish, and Hellish!**

Now, I want us to look at how God tells his children to respond to their enemies. **It is one of the hardest commands in the New Testament, but it is also the most effective tools for transformation that the Savior can hold in his hands.** We find it in **Romans 12:14-21 NLT**

14 Bless those who persecute you. Don't curse them; pray that God will bless them. 15 Be happy with those who are happy, and weep with those who weep.

16 Live in harmony with each other. Don't be too proud to enjoy the company of ordinary people. And don't think you know it all! 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. 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. 20 Instead, "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." 21 Don't let evil conquer you, but conquer evil by doing good.

Don't pay back EVIL with MORE evil! Conquer evil by doing GOOD! Wow! That is completely different from our normal response to injury. God's ways are NOT our ways. But we can learn them. It will again require us to begin to THINK with our RENEWED SPIRITUAL MINDS rather than with our old, fleshly minds. God's Word is eminently practical, so Paul gives us some very "down-to-earth" ways of responding to our enemies with good that are not of this world. The first thing he tells us is:

Control your tongue.

We can see this in **Romans 12:14 NLT**

14 Bless those who persecute you. Don't curse them; pray that God will bless them.

Cursing comes naturally. The first thing that we want to do when someone mistreats us is to crush him or her with words. We rehearse out loud what we want to happen to them with our friends or just to ourselves as we drive down the road or work around the house. We feel like we cannot help it. Our tongues reveal our hearts. But Paul knew that our tongues also LEAD our hearts. He tells us to make the choice to BLESS them rather than CURSE them. Now, cursing does not refer to profanity (although our curses often contain cuss words!). To curse someone means, "to wish evil upon (someone)," or "to call down doom from God" against an individual. It is a reference to giving voice to your desire for evil from God to happen to them. It is spiritual VOODOO! Paul tells us NOT to do this. In fact, the correct translation of this verse is, "**STOP cursing them!**" He knows. **This command to control your tongue is also to be a HABITUAL practice in the face of habitual abuse. Paul uses a Greek tense that means, "Keep on blessing those who keep on persecuting you."** What? This does not mean that you act as if they did nothing wrong. No! This command is about how you control your tongue by the Spirit for the sake of your heart. This command is about how you talk TO GOD about your enemies instead of to your self or to your friends. Bless means, "to ask God's favor and good will" on a person. **Seek for them what God seeks for them.** Don't ask God to curse them, ask him to pour out his blessings on them! This is a call to LOVE YOUR ENEMIES. This was one of the clearest teachings of Jesus in the New Testament. Listen to his words: **Matthew 5:43-44 NLT**

43 "You have heard the law that says, 'Love your neighbor' and hate your enemy. 44 But I say, love your enemies! Pray for those who persecute you!

This begins by PRAYING for your enemies. It is a PROCESS! When you do this, you are INVITING God into your pain in a way that pleases him. He loves to hear this prayer and answer it in a way that brings him GLORY and brings us GOOD! The curses we spew out tend to always get all over us, but the blessings do the same thing! When your enemy hurts you, pray for him. When he hurts you again, pray for him again. This is the power of Christian love. Paul not only instructs us to control our tongue. He also tells us:

Practice sympathy.

We see this in **Romans 12:15-16 RSV**

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 conceited.

It is fairly easy for us to join in with the emotions of the people that we love. We hurt when they hurt and we celebrate when they are happy. It's natural. What God is leading us to do in this passage is NOT natural; it is SUPERNATURAL. Only a transformed person can weep with sorrow when his enemy suffers pain or rejoice when his enemy gets a promotion! But this is what we are being told to do. These verses are not just about how we are to sympathize with the joys and sorrows of our friends, but about how we IDENTIFY with them. God is leading us to do for our enemies what CHRIST DID FOR US when we were lost. Jesus entered our world! Jesus sobbed with sorrow over the plight of sinners, even though he had never sinned. We can only do this when we realize what we have IN COMMON with our enemies. I love to read Romans 1 and 2 with this concept in mind. Look at these verses with me: **Romans 1:28- 2:1 NLT**

28 Since they thought it foolish to acknowledge God, he abandoned them to their foolish thinking and let them do things that should never be done. 29 Their lives became full of every kind of wickedness, sin, greed, hate, envy, murder, quarreling, deception, malicious behavior, and gossip. 30 They are backstabbers, haters of God, insolent, proud, and boastful. They invent new ways of sinning, and they disobey their parents. 31 They refuse to understand, break their promises, are heartless, and have no mercy. 32 They know God's justice requires that those who do these things deserve to die, yet they do them anyway. Worse yet, they encourage others to do them, too. 1 You may think you can condemn such people, but you are just as bad, and you have no excuse! When you say they are wicked and should be punished, you are condemning yourself, for you who judge others do these very same things.

When we come down off of our high horse and see how much we live in need of God's mercy, then we can develop a proper perspective on the sin and sorrows of

this world. Remember, HURT PEOPLE hurt people. The hurt that they inflicted on you was almost certainly inflicted on them at some point in their past. Yes, they are sinners, but they are also victims of sin and suffering. If you respond to their actions in the same way that they did, then you do nothing to BREAK the CYCLE OF HARM that goes on generation after generation! But you do not have to do that any longer because you have been FREED from slavery to that cycle of hurt. **Healed people heal people!** Like Jesus, choose to align yourself with their sorrows and joys for the glory of God rather than pouting and praying for their demise. Unlike him, you are not so different from them!

Finally, Paul FORBIDS us to seek personal revenge for the wrongs done against us (We will look at the alternative to this next week), but he gives us the freedom instead to:

Kill your enemies with kindness.

This is such a great principle! We see it fleshed out in **Romans 12:17-21 NLT**

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

Do your part to live in peace with everyone else, even if they do not want to live in peace with you. Conquer evil by doing GOOD! This allows us to play a part in the death of our enemies, but it is the kind of death that I would wish upon all people: The death of their old life and the BIRTH of their new life. This is why I said that our response to abuse is one of the most effective tools for transforming this world that God can hold in his hands! God is constantly showing mercy to people on the earth, no matter how rotten they may be! This is why Paul said in **Romans 2:4**, "The kindness of God leads us to repentance." What a great truth! **Now, God wants you to ECHO his INVITATION to them by your actions.** This is why Jesus went on to say more about loving our enemies in **Matthew 5:45-48 NLT**:

45 In that way, you will be acting as true children of your Father in heaven. For he gives his sunlight to both the evil and the good, and he sends rain on the just and the unjust alike. 46 If you love only those who love you, what reward is there for that? Even corrupt tax collectors do that much. 47 If you are kind only to your friends, how are you different from anyone else? Even pagans do that. 48 But you are to be perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect.

Our responsibility as transformed children of God is to bless people around us with our words AND our actions. God calls us to do the same thing for them that he does.

When you show kindness to your offenders, you lead them on a journey that has no alternative but to LEAD THEM into the presence of God. They have to see God in your responses, even if they never acknowledge him. You and I do not control their response to our kindness. This is why it acts as “coals of fire.” Those coals of fire can warm their hearts up (through shame and sorrow), or they can add to the fires of God’s wrath as they face him in eternity with their unrepentant, obstinate heart in spite of so much undeserved mercy! That is between them and God, but they have to CLIMB OVER the mercy of God and the love of his people in order to do so. That is extreme. Let’s bow our heads for a moment together.

Who is controlling your response to the mistreatment that you are suffering? Is the NEW YOU obeying God, or is the OLD YOU following a normal pattern?

How can that begin to change? Start this way:

Begin to pray FOR your enemy EVERY TIME you think of his actions against you and every time that you see him. Get creative. Ask for God’s wildest blessings upon him. His blessings do not rob you of yours! Step out in faith and do this and see if God does not begin to soften YOUR heart.

Next, let those abuses you have suffered remind you of how much you have been forgiven of in your life. Refuse to let yourself rejoice when your enemy suffers or cry when he does well. Direct your emotions to respond like Christ.

Finally, find APPROPRIATE ways to meet the basic needs of your enemy if you find yourself in a position to do so. Don’t put yourself in harms way, but don’t avoid the opportunity to do them good.

Let’s pray.