

A Conqueror in a Conflict

Romans 12:14–21 (ESV)

INTRODUCTION: There are some aspects of the Christian faith that are deemed acceptable, even preferable, in a civilized society.

- Honor your father and mother. No matter the religion or holy book you read, you will find some teaching to honor your parents.
- Judaism, Hinduism, and Islam all include some form of the Golden Rule.
- Commands to help the poor are common in almost all religions.

Yet some teachings set Christianity apart from all other religions.

- The exclusivity and divine nature of Christ.
- Salvation by grace alone, through faith alone.
- And then the one before us today: the command to LOVE your enemies.

Love your enemies??? Are you serious? It is one thing to love a friend. It is one thing to love a relative, even a stranger. It is another thing entirely to love your enemy. IT'S UN-AMERICAN. Nevertheless, at times, our Lord Jesus Christ points His nail-scarred hand toward the person you most dislike, distrust, and disapprove of and says, *"Go love that one."*

CONTEXT: For eleven chapters Paul has been building the most magnificent theological cathedral ever constructed. Ruin in sin, righteousness by faith, union with Christ, life in the Spirit, the sovereign mercy of God. Then in Romans 12:1 he turns the corner with one word: "therefore." Doctrine now becomes duty. In this section of Romans we've recognized a series of **Metaphors for Life**.

- Toward God, we are a **Living Sacrifice** on an altar (12:1–2).
- Toward one another, we are a **Member of a Body** (12:3–8).
- Toward one another, we are also a **Member of a Family** (12:9–13).
- And today, toward those who oppose us, we are a **Conqueror in a Conflict** (12:14–21).

Where do I get that? From the very last verse of our text. Paul ends with a military word: "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

GREEK NOTE: The word translated "overcome" is *nikaō*. It means to conquer, to win the victory, to prevail. You know it from the **Greek goddess of victory, Nike**, and from the shoe company that borrowed her name. It's the root of the word Paul used back in **Romans 8:37** when he said, "No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us." That word is *hypernikōmen*, literally "we are hyper-conquerors." Paul has already told us we are conquerors. Now, in **Romans 12:21**, he

tells us **how** the conqueror fights.

Before We Look at the Text, Let Me Clarify a Few Things:

a. Paul is Speaking to Individual Christians

Remember, the Bible addresses four realms of existence:

- The Self
- The Family
- The Church
- The State

Jesus is Lord over all four, but He relates to each realm differently, and each realm has a vested responsibility.

- There are some things the **State** can do that the **church** can't. For example, the power of the sword is placed in the hands of the State.
- The **family** can do things the **church** can't. The parent is given the rod.
- And there are things the **church** can do that the **State** can't. The church is given the keys and administers the gospel of grace.

As you look at any Scripture text, you must recognize which realm it addresses. In **Romans 12:14**, Paul is addressing the **individual believer**.

- He is not talking about national defense. This is not an argument for **pacifism**.
- He is also not talking about protecting your family. He's not forbidding **self-defense**.
- He is not talking about a **police officer** doing his job. In fact, just a few verses later, in **Romans 13:4**, Paul says the governing authority "is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer."

So **Romans 12:14–21** is a **KINGDOM STRATEGY** for responding to **PERSONAL OFFENSES**. And as a strategy, it is expected to work. There is a tactic to the truth. If you follow the Lord's directive here, ***you will advance the agenda of the Kingdom further and faster than if you don't.***

b. Enemies Are Assumed

In order to love our enemies, we must have a category called "**enemy**." There must be some people out there that you look at and say, "There goes one of my enemies."

In both **Matthew 5** and **Luke 6**, God assumes we will have enemies. Sometimes we get the idea that if a person has enemies, he must be doing something wrong. The fact is, Jesus **had** enemies, and Jesus **has** enemies.

One of the most quoted Old Testament passages in the entire New Testament is a promise that the Messiah will have enemies, and that they will lose: **Psalms 110:1 (ESV)**

¹ The Lord says to my Lord: “Sit at my right hand, **until I make your enemies your footstool.**”

We are repeatedly told that certain people are enemies of the gospel.

Paul wept over them: **Philippians 3:18 (ESV)** ¹⁸ For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, **walk as enemies of the cross of Christ.**

Earlier in this very letter, he said of unbelieving Israel: **Romans 11:28 (ESV)** ²⁸ As regards the gospel, **they are enemies for your sake...**

To the magician Bar-Jesus, Paul said: **Acts 13:10 (ESV)** ¹⁰ “You son of the devil, **you enemy of all righteousness..**

And Jesus warned that some of those enemies would be close to home: **Matthew 10:36 (ESV)** ³⁶ And **a person’s enemies will be those of his own household.**

Consider the fact that our Lord, who was perfect in every way, the very essence of holiness, had a plethora of enemies, to such a degree that they ultimately crucified Him. If that is true of Jesus Christ, God in the flesh, how much more will they oppose you and me, who are far from perfect, yet preaching His words?

c. Enemies Are Self-Defined

That is, *they* determine to be your enemy. You don’t decide to be theirs.

It is sinful to declare someone an enemy because they stand in the way of your achievement. If you have put someone on a blacklist because they stand in the way of your achievement, I call you to repent, rip that list up, nail it to the cross, and ask God to forgive you.

The enemies Paul is talking about are those who have determined to harm you, damage you, do you injustice, and cause you grief, stress, anguish, and strife. That person who has set himself against you is the enemy Paul is referring to.

Ephesians 6:12 (ESV)

¹² For **we do not wrestle against flesh and blood,** but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

Satan and his demons are our ultimate foe. Your spouse is NOT your ultimate enemy. Your boss is NOT your ultimate enemy. Your ex-spouse is NOT your ultimate enemy. And what is the battle for? The enslaved hearts and minds of people.

d. Jesus Gives a Third Way

The world sees two ways to respond to enemies: **fight or flight**. You can hate your enemy and seek to destroy him, or you can run from him and cut him out of your life. Jesus always gives a third option. Not fight, not flight, but **what's right**.

That was the heartbeat of the Sermon on the Mount. Over and over, Jesus said, "You have heard that it was said... But I say to you..." There is a different way, a Kingdom ethic, and it is VERY POWERFUL. Paul gives us four marks of the conqueror who fights God's way. Let's look at our text:

1. A Consecrated Tongue (v. 14)

The first weapon a conqueror surrenders to God is his mouth.

¹⁴ **Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.**

I love how specific Paul got here – he offers a positive as well as a negative command.

Bless – the word is primarily something you do verbally. **GREEK NOTE:** "Bless" is *eulogeō*, from *eu*, "good," and *logos*, "word." It's where we get the word eulogy. To bless someone is to speak a good word to them and about them, and ultimately to speak a good word to God on their behalf.

Curse - is *katareamai*, to call down harm on someone. Both verbs are present imperatives. Paul is not describing a one-time act of heroic restraint. He's describing a lifestyle: keep on blessing, and keep on not cursing.

Paul doesn't say – Just don't curse them. He says, positively, bless them.

Jesus said something similar in **Matthew 5:44–45 (ESV)**

⁴⁴ But I say to you, **Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,**

Do you see the freedom that gives you? You don't have to pay them back; you don't have to live in hate; you can literally wake up in the morning, smile, and ask God to bless them.

STEPHEN - Where do you think Paul learned this? From Jesus, of course, but also - **Remember Stephen?** As the stones were flying, Luke tells us something we often read past: "the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul" (**Acts 7:58**). Saul was the coat-check boy at Stephen's execution. And what did Stephen do with his final breath? **Acts 7:60 (ESV)** ⁶⁰ And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, "**Lord, do not hold this sin against them.**" And when he had

said this, he fell asleep. A few chapters later, the young man holding the coats was converted, and he became the Apostle Paul, the man who wrote Romans 12:14.

Augustine is often quoted as saying, “*If Stephen had not prayed, the church would not have had Paul.*” Who’s to say that the person cursing you today is not the Apostle Paul of tomorrow? Your blessing might be part of how God gets him.

Tim Keller makes the point that you cannot keep praying for someone’s good and keep wishing him harm. One of them will win. Either the prayer will melt the bitterness, or the bitterness will kill the prayer.

APPLICATION: Often I will pray, “God, I don’t love this person. Will You love them through me?” You can’t choose who will love you, but you can choose whom you will love. Here are three practical ways to consecrate your tongue this week:

- **Speak well TO them.** Take the initiative. Say hello. Say thank you. Say something true and kind.
- **Speak well ABOUT them.** Don’t feed the gossip machine. When their name comes up, say the best true thing you can say.
- **Speak well FOR them.** Pray for them by name, and pray for their good, not just for their correction.

A Consecrated Tongue...

2. A Compassionate Heart (vv. 15–16)

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.

Now, remember the context – this is speaking about enemies who are attacking you. Rejoice with the wins of a personal enemy. Weep with the losses of a personal enemy.

God even addresses how we react when our enemy falls: **Proverbs 24:17–18 (ESV)**

¹⁷ **Do not rejoice when your enemy falls,** and let not your heart be glad when he stumbles, ¹⁸ lest the Lord see it and be displeased, and turn away his anger from him.

ILLUSTRATION: 2 Samuel 16:5–12 (ESV) ⁵ When King David came to Bahurim, there came out a man of the family of the house of Saul, whose name was Shimei, the son of Gera, and as he came he cursed continually. ⁶ And he threw stones at David and at all the servants of King David, and all the people and all the mighty men were on his right hand and on his left. ⁷ And Shimei said as he cursed, “Get out, get out, you man of blood, you worthless man!” ⁸ The LORD has avenged on you all the blood of the house of Saul, in whose place you have reigned, and the LORD has given the kingdom into the hand of your son Absalom. See, your evil is on you, for you are a man of blood.”

⁹ Then Abishai the son of Zeruiah said to the king, “Why should this dead dog curse my lord the king? Let me go over and take off his head.”

¹⁰ But the king said, “What have I to do with you, you sons of Zeruiah? If he is cursing because the LORD has said to him, ‘Curse David,’ who then shall say, ‘Why have you done so?’ ” ¹¹ And David said to Abishai and to all his servants, “Behold, my own son seeks my life; how much more now may this Benjaminite! Leave him alone, and let him curse, for the LORD has told him to. ¹² ***It may be that the LORD will look on the wrong done to me, and that the LORD will repay me with good for his cursing today.***”

NOW, I don’t know how to explain this, but I’ve observed this for years – when someone unjustly attacks me... and I don’t repay evil for evil... I have learned to get ready; the windows of Heaven are likely to open, and a blessing is coming.

A Consecrated Tongue, a Compassionate Heart...

3. A Controlled Hand (vv. 17–21)

Now Paul moves from the tongue and the heart to the hand. This is the part where everything in us wants to swing back.

a. Reject Revenge (v. 17)¹⁷ ***Repay no one evil for evil,*** but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all.

Think of a **tennis match**. Somebody serves you an insult, and every instinct in you says, “Return it, and put some spin on it.” They hit it back harder. You hit it back harder. And the volley goes on for years. Tommy Nelson has a simple word for that: **don’t volley**. Let the ball die on your side of the net. Somebody has to be the end of the rally. Let it be the Christian.

Somebody will say, “But the Bible says an eye for an eye!” Yes, it does, in **Exodus 21**. But that was a law given to judges, and it was a **limit** on revenge, not a **license** for it.

It said, “You may not take two eyes for one eye.” Jesus took that limit and drove it all the way down to zero for the individual follower:

Matthew 5:39 (ESV)

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.***

ILLUSTRATION: Assuming you are right-handed, to strike someone on his right cheek you must backhand him. In that culture, the backhand slap was the classic way to insult someone. What Jesus is saying here is, if someone insults you, let him. He is not

saying never defend yourself. He is certainly not saying don't defend the helpless. He is saying: don't return insult for insult.

b. Pursue Peace (v. 18) ¹⁸ If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

Notice the two qualifiers: "If possible," and "so far as it depends on you." Paul is a realist. It takes two to make peace, but it only takes one to make war. You can't control whether they lay down their weapons. You can only control whether you lay down yours.

And I think it's important to realize what this verse does NOT say. Paul says, "Live peaceably." He doesn't say you must be their best friend. Some Christians live with such a sensitive conscience that they don't think they've obeyed the Lord until they're sitting around a campfire with their enemy singing "Kumbaya." You aren't called to that. As a matter of fact, you are repeatedly told in Scripture to be very careful about whom you get close to.

Sometimes it's not possible to be best friends. Sometimes it's not possible to even be decent friends. But as far as it depends on you, be at peace. Boundaries are biblical. Bitterness is not.

c. Release Retribution (v. 19) 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."

NOTE: "Leave it to the wrath of God" is literally *dote topon tē orgē*, "give place to the wrath." Step aside. Make room. Get out of the way.

Justice is not cancelled. It is reassigned. When you take revenge, you are climbing up into God's chair. You are saying, "I know the full story. I know exactly what this person deserves. I know their heart. I can measure out the right punishment."

Have you ever noticed that when we sin we always view it from the most generous perspective? I was tired, having a bad day, I'm Irish... whatever... but when we judge others, it's just the opposite – no excuse!

You do not have the faculties to render ultimate Justice. Only One can sit in that chair.

YOU SEE, the Bible teaches that no sin will go unpunished and no injustice will go uncorrected. There are three places where sin is dealt with:

- **ON EARTH.** Some people bear in their own bodies the penalty of their sin (Romans 1). There are human laws that, when violated, require a penalty. And there are spiritual laws that will not be broken: whatever you sow, you will also reap.

- **IN HELL.** At the final judgment, eternal retribution will be poured out on the ungodly.
- **ON THE CROSS.** Jesus suffered for the sins of all who would trust Him.

NO SIN IS EVER OVERLOOKED. They are ALL dealt with! Now, if you believe that, you don't have to worry about it. God says, "I've got this one." And friend, He will deal with it perfectly. He knows all the details. He will not get it wrong. But if you choose to seek revenge, you are saying, "God, I don't trust Your justice. I'd rather produce my own."

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.**

The Christian ethic is not merely passive. It's not just, "Don't hit back." It's "Go on the offensive, with good."

ILLUSTRATION: On the night Jesus was arrested, Peter pulled out a sword and cut off the ear of Malchus, the high priest's servant. And Jesus said, "No more of this!" Then "he touched his ear and healed him" (Luke 22:51). Jesus healed the ear of the man who came to arrest Him. He didn't say, "Well, sorry about your luck, dude." The last miracle Jesus performed before the cross was on an enemy.

The way this is worded indicates that if you respond to evil with a neutral approach, you will eventually be overcome by that evil. That's being a doormat. Evil wins the moment it gets you to become like it. If your enemy can make you bitter, he has conquered you, even if you win the argument. But you don't do that. **You ATTACK the EVIL with GOOD.**

CONCLUSION / INVITATION: *Throughout time, God has chosen not to eradicate His opposition, but to redeem it.*

A man came to a Christian counselor and said, "I want to divorce my wife." "Why is that?" asked the counselor. "Well, she hasn't been unfaithful. I just don't feel anything for her." The counselor said, "But the Bible commands you to love your wife as Christ loved the church." "You don't understand," said the husband. "I don't want to be around her." "Well," said the counselor, "then buy a house next door, because the Bible says to love your neighbor. That way she'll be your next-door neighbor." "Listen," said the husband, "I can't stand her." "Oh?" replied the counselor. "Then she's your enemy, and the Bible says love your enemies." The following week, that man found a new counselor.

Whatever category you put a person in, wife, neighbor, or enemy, Jesus has already covered it with one word: love.

By the way, you were His enemy once. Aren't you glad He chose to love you? God didn't wait for you to stop fighting before He fed you. He set a feast before His enemies, and He paid for it with the blood of His Son.