

Rev. Lex DeLong / General Adult

Romans Road to Recovery / Romans 12:14–21

Transformed believers overcome personal opposition and persecution by choosing to bless their enemies and leaving ultimate judgment in the hands of a righteous God.

Notes

6/28/2026 — Romans 12:14-21

Title: "The Gospel Response to Evil"

Subtitle: Replacing the Myth of Personal Retaliation with Divine Vengeance

Main Idea: Transformed believers overcome personal opposition and persecution by choosing to bless their enemies and leaving ultimate judgment in the hands of a righteous God.

Companion Scripture: Proverbs 25:21-22

- Date: June 28, 2026
- Text: Romans 12:14-21
- Title: The Gospel Response to Evil
- Subtitle: Replacing the Myth of Personal Retaliation with Divine Vengeance
- Main Idea: Transformed believers break the world's cycle of evil by surrendering their right to personal retaliation, weaponizing radical grace, and leaving absolute justice in the hands of a righteous God.
- Series Theme: Romans Road to Recovery / Christlike Disciples
- Companion Scripture: Proverbs 25:21-22

Introduction

The 250th Anniversary and the Revolutionary Act of Forgiveness This week, our nation celebrates its Semi quincentennial—250 years since the signing of the Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776. As Americans, we naturally reflect on liberty, justice, and the courage it took to stand against tyranny. But as we hold our earthly citizenship in one hand, we must hold our heavenly citizenship in the other.

In Ephrata, Pennsylvania, lived a devoted Christian pastor named Peter Miller. In his town lived a man named Michael Widman, who despised Pastor Miller. Widman relentlessly mocked the pastor, once even spitting in his face.

During the war, Widman was caught acting as a spy for the British. He was tried and

sentenced to hang. When Pastor Miller heard this, he walked seventy miles on foot to Valley Forge to see General George Washington and plead for the man's life. Washington listened but shook his head: "I am sorry, but I cannot pardon your friend."

Miller replied, "My friend? General, this man is the most bitter enemy I have in the world." Washington was stunned. "You walked seventy miles to save the life of your worst enemy? That puts things in a different light." Washington granted the pardon, and Peter Miller walked Widman back home—not as an enemy, but as a brother whose life was saved by radical grace.

How far would you walk for someone who was just an acquaintance, but what if I took that question further and asked how far you would walk for an enemy?

Connecting the Context: The Road to Recovery

Several weeks ago, when we crossed the threshold into Romans 12 in our series, "**Romans Road to Recovery**," we transitioned from the theology of "Saving Faith" (Chapters 1–11) to the practical reality of "Changing Faith" (Chapters 12–16).

This is how we become **Christlike Disciples**. We have seen that God doesn't want to just put a new coat of spray paint on a melting ice sculpture; He wants to fundamentally rehabilitate our moral center.

Today, in verses 14 through 21, the Apostle Paul begins to share what that rehabbed moral center looks like by confronting one of the struggles of the early church during his time. Paul begins by focusing on the animosity that can come from persecution and oppression for believers in Rome.

Paul starts here by bringing us to a rhetorical question that is important for us to ask ourselves in our present time, "Are we yet conforming to the world's broken, default operating procedure of revenge? Or has our faith actually put us on the road to recovery—changing us enough to become living, Christlike disciples who bless the very people trying to break us?"

If we are honest with ourselves, blessing the people who are actively trying to break us goes against every instinct of our flesh. Walking seventy miles to save an enemy is completely unnatural. The natural human mind demands retaliation.

So, how do we actually live this out? Where do we find the strength to step off the world's path of revenge and walk this road to recovery?

To do the impossible, we need a supernatural power source.

In our text this morning, Paul shows us exactly where that power begins: it begins with the death of our ego. Before we can overcome evil, we must first lay down our pride. Look with me at verse 14, as Paul reveals..."

There are...

I. Three Prerequisites of Radical Humility That aid us to use the Power God has Given Us to Do the Impossible (vv. 14-16)

To respond to evil with the Gospel, the believer must first experience the death of vengeance, and completely put to death the act and thought of putting self over others. The natural human mind cannot execute verses 17-21 apart from letting go of self over others. You will never have the power to overcome evil with good until you have first surrendered your right to self-exaltation in verses 14-16.

Here are **Three Prerequisites of Radical Humility That aid us to use the Power God has Given Us to Do the Impossible**, as followers of Jesus Christ.

1. Surrender Moral Superiority (v. 14)

Romans 12:14 "14 Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse."

- Why does Paul have the right to give us this impossible imperative command? Because of the indicative truth of Romans 1–11.
- Because God has utterly justified us through Jesus Christ by grace through faith, we can finally surrender our drive to justify ourselves.
- We cannot bless someone who is harming us unless our pride, our self-priority has been entirely broken by the grace we received when we were yet enemies of God (Rom 5:10).
 - We were enemies of Jesus Christ. He saw that we were to be condemned as His sworn enemies, so Jesus did what Pastor Peter Miller as a follower of Christ did.
 - Jesus walked all the way down the Via Delarosa to the cross, all the way through the burden of becoming our sin on the cross, all the way through death and resurrection, so that He might plead before the Father in heaven on our behalf, so that He might secure a pardon for us. Now Jesus is walking us home as those that are saved by grace.
- **Context:** Paul wrote this to believers living in the literal shadow of the Palatine Hill. Just seven years later, Nero would burn Christians alive on that very hill. Paul is asking them to look up at the palaces of their future murderers and refuse to operate in that same pride.

The first prerequisite to use the power God has given us to do the impossible is to "Surrender our Moral Superiority."

2. Surrender Emotional Superiority (v. 15)

Romans 12:15 *"Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn."*

- Our default human condition is to make everything about how we feel. In counseling there is a saying, "feelings fool," but sadly much of how we respond to others is based on feelings rather than fact.
- To step into someone else's joy without jealousy, or to step into their grief without offering shallow platitudes, requires a radical de-centering of the self.
- We have to make their condition more important than our own.

Think back to Pastor Peter Miller for a moment. To save Michael Widman, Miller had to do more than just practice the emotional surrender of verse 15. He also had to willingly associate with a condemned man. Remember, Miller was a brilliant scholar who translated documents for the Continental Congress; Widman was a convicted traitor standing at the gallows with a noose around his neck. To walk that man home as a brother, Miller had to completely step down from his emotional and social pedestal.

So, in the same way we also must ...

3. Surrender Social Superiority (v. 16)

Romans 12:16 *"16 Be of the same mind toward one another; do not be haughty in mind, but associate with the lowly. Do not be wise in your own estimation."*

- Here, Paul explicitly names the root issue of our flesh: pride. The Greek word he uses is *hypselophroneō*—literally meaning "high-mindedness."
 - The ancient Roman world was hyper-stratified. Your entire worth was determined by your class, your wealth, and who you knew.
 - The natural, fleshly mind always seeks upward mobility; you only associated with people who could elevate your status or improve your image.
 - If we are honest, our modern culture operates the exact same way. We spend our lives climbing ladders, guarding our status, and curating our circles.
- But Paul commands a radical reversal of that upward mobility; he

commands *downward* mobility. He tells the church to willingly step down and associate with the lowly. Why? Because that is exactly what Jesus did for us.

- Harmony for a follower of Jesus Christ is only possible when we remember that we were completely spiritually bankrupt, with absolutely nothing to offer, when the King of the Universe chose to step out of heaven and associate with us. You cannot look down on anyone else when you remember how far Jesus had to reach down to save you.

And this is exactly where the theology of the Gospel meets the pavement of our daily lives.

When we finally surrender that pride—when we put to death the demand for moral, emotional, and social superiority—something amazing happens to our hearts.

We stop needing to win every fight.

We stop demanding payback.

Because our pride is out of the way, we are finally free to handle conflict like Jesus.

Once the prep-work of humility is done in our hearts, we are ready for the active work of peace.

That brings us to our second point in verses 17 and 18, where Paul gives us **two steps to break the world's default cycle**.

II. Two Peaceful Steps That Break the World's Cycle of Retaliation (vv. 17-18)

1. Stop the Cycle of Vengeance (v. 17)

Romans 12:17 *"17 Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men."*

- Paul starts with a sweeping, absolute prohibition: "Never pay back evil for evil to anyone."
 - The Greek word for "pay back" is *apodidontes*, which is a commercial transaction term meaning to return what is owed, or to settle an account.
 - Our flesh treats conflict like a business transaction—if you hand me an insult, I owe you an insult in return. If you damage my reputation,

the ledger demands I damage yours.

- But Paul says the Christlike disciple breaks this economic system of revenge. If we return evil for evil, we haven't defeated the evil; we have let the enemy and his ways infect us.
- We become a mirror reflecting their brokenness instead of a window reflecting Christ.

But how do we actually stop this reflex of retaliation? You've probably heard the old law of physics that 'nature abhors a vacuum.' If we create an empty space, something is going to rush in to fill it. The exact same thing is true in our spiritual lives. We cannot simply command ourselves, 'Don't retaliate,' and leave a blank space in our response.

If we just try to *stop* reacting, but we don't intentionally fill that void with something else, our flesh will eventually rush right back in and demand payback.

We can't just empty out the desire for revenge; we have to replace it. And that is exactly why Paul doesn't leave us with just a negative command. He gives us the replacement in the second half of the verse.

Respect [or take thought for] what is right in the sight of all men." This is where that incredible Greek word **pronoeō** comes in.

- So how do we stop that automatic transaction? How do we keep from sliding into revenge? Paul tells us in the second half of the verse: "Respect [or take thought for] what is right in the sight of all men." This is where that incredible Greek word pronoeō comes in. It literally means "to think ahead" or "premeditate." Determine beforehand.
- Retaliation is an automatic, knee-jerk reflex. If we don't have a plan before the offense happens, our flesh will default to revenge every single time.
- Paul is saying we have to map out our integrity in advance.
 - we have to decide on Monday how we will respond when we are slandered on Thursday.
 - The world premeditates its revenge; the Christlike disciple premeditates their grace.
 - We ensure our public response is so undeniably honorable that even the outside world looks at it and recognizes the character of God that they just witnessed.
- **Question:** When someone wrongs you, does your mind immediately begin calculating a defense, or calculating a blessing? Are you secretly keeping a ledger of offenses that you hope God will use to punish them, or are you

actively premeditating a path of grace for their restoration?

Stop the cycle of vengeance by premeditating grace. Next...

2. Set a Boundary for Peace (v. 18)

Romans 12:18 "18 *If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men.*"

- If we are honest, some of us are simply exhausted from dealing with toxic workplaces, hostile family members, or a culture that seems to hate our faith.
- We try and we try to make peace, and we feel like we are failing. But notice the profound grace Paul offers us here. He recognizes that we cannot force an enemy to reconcile, so he draws a boundary line for us.
- Our responsibility stops at the edge of our own obedience ("as far as it depends on us").
 - We are responsible for keeping our side of the fence peaceful; we are not responsible for how they act on theirs.
 - If we have extended grace, if we have refused to retaliate, and the other person still chooses hostility, we can rest.
 - We are free from the burden of managing their reaction.
 - We can find peace in knowing we have been obedient to our King, even when the relationship remains broken.

So far this morning, we have seen the impossible standard God calls us to. In our first point, we realized that to even step onto this road to recovery, we must experience the death of vengeance—putting to death our flesh's demand for moral, emotional, and social superiority.

Then, in our second point, we saw how we must replace that reflex with premeditated grace, doing everything in our power to keep our side of the fence peaceful.

But let's be honest about how our hearts actually work. Even when we lay down our pride, and even when we do everything we can to live at peace, it still hurts when we are wronged.

If we lay down our right to retaliate, does that mean justice just disappears? Do the people who hurt us simply get away with it? Does evil just win?

Not at all.

We can only let go of our need for revenge if we implicitly trust that someone else is

handling the scales of justice.

We are only able to step down from the judge's bench because we know the True Judge is already seated.

In verse 19, Paul shows us exactly what we are supposed to do with our unmet desire for justice...

III. There is Absolute Promise of Divine Justice That Frees Us from the Burden of Revenge (v. 19)

This verse is the physical hinge of the entire passage. It pivots us away from our own exhausted efforts and hands the burden of justice over to the sovereign capability of God.

1. Trust the Absolute, True Judge (v. 19a)

"Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath..."

- When we try to take revenge, we are essentially crowding God out of His own courtroom. We are saying, "I don't trust You to handle this, so I will take care of it myself."
- To "leave room" for His wrath simply means we step down from the bench and give the True Judge His rightful place as Judge.
- In doing so, we need to clarify this so we don't get confused.
 - When Paul tells us to lay down our gavel, he is forbidding personal, vigilante revenge.
 - However, he is not saying that crimes shouldn't be punished.
 - In fact, in the very next chapter—Romans 13—Paul explains that God has established human government, law enforcement, and the courts to execute civil justice.
 - God uses those institutions to protect society, and we should support that.
 - But in our personal lives—when a neighbor insults us, when a coworker undermines us, or when an enemy slanders us—we are strictly forbidden from taking the law into our own hands. We don't get to be vigilantes.

- Instead, we relinquish the gavel and hand that pain over to the only One qualified to hold it.

2. Trust God's Perfect Accounting (v. 19b)

"It is mine to avenge; I will repay, says the Lord."

- Why is God so insistent that we let Him handle the vengeance? Because when we take revenge, we are terrible, corrupt judges. We don't know all the facts. We can't see the hidden motives, the secret struggles, or the broken past of the person who hurt us. And worse, we almost always overcharge the ledger. When someone wounds us, our flesh doesn't just want fairness; we want them to suffer like we suffered. Our vengeance is tainted by our own woundedness, but God's justice is perfect.
- (Ekdikēsis): God's wrath is completely different from ours. This word "avenge" does not mean unhinged, out-of-control, emotional anger. It means pure, uncorrupted, holy justice. God never acts out of a temper tantrum; He acts with perfect righteousness to set broken things right.
- (Antapodōsō): The word Paul uses for "repay" is antapodōsō. In the ancient world, this was a strict financial accounting term. It meant to audit and balance a ledger down to the very last penny. God is the ultimate auditor. He never miscalculates, and He never sweeps our pain under the rug as if it didn't matter.
- This is where we find our deepest comfort.
 - We can let the offense go because we know the debt will be handled.
 - Every single wrong committed against us will be perfectly balanced by God in one of two ways: either that person will face the righteous judgment of God for what they did, or that exact sin was already paid for in full by the blood of Jesus Christ on the cross.
 - Either way, the debt is settled.

Because God is keeping perfect books, we don't have to. We can finally drop our own ledgers and walk away in freedom.

Look at the miraculous progression Paul has taken us on this morning.

First, we prepare our hearts by putting to death our pride and our demand for

vengeance.

Second, we stop the cycle of retaliation by intentionally keeping our side of the fence peaceful. Third, we finally step down from the judge's bench because we completely trust that God is keeping perfect ledgers and will handle the justice.

Now, we have considered that there is Absolute Promise of Divine Justice That Frees Us from the Burden of Revenge

If the text ended right there, we would have plenty of work to do. Just walking away and leaving the judgment to God feels like a monumental spiritual victory.

But Jesus doesn't just want us to tolerate our enemies from a distance. He doesn't call us to a passive, cold-shoulder truce. He calls us to go on the offensive.

Think about it: once we have finally laid down our gavel, our hands are empty.

Now God wants to fill those empty hands with radical, unexpected grace.

Look at verses 20 and 21.

Paul shows us exactly what we are supposed to do with the very people who just tried to break us.

We don't just endure evil...

IV. God has Given Us Supernatural Weapons of Grace That Actually Conquer the Power of Evil (vv. 20-21)

So what does this offensive strategy actually look like in real life?

It isn't just feeling a sense of forgiveness in our hearts; it requires moving our hands and feet to serve the very person who hurt us.

Paul reaches back into the Old Testament book of Proverbs to give us our first marching orders on this road to recovery.

Look at the practical command in verse 20...

1. Disarm Your Enemy with Intimate Grace (v. 20)

Romans 12:20 "20 "But if your enemy is hungry, feed him, and if he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.""

- (Psōmizō): Paul uses a specific, tender Greek word for eating. It literally means "to feed bite-by-bite," like a nurse feeding a helpless infant. You are treating

the one who persecutes you with shocking, vulnerable gentleness.

- Proverbs 25: In the ancient Near East, if a family's hearth fire went out in the winter, they could freeze. They would carry a pan on their head to a neighbor's house to ask for hot coals. It was a life-saving act of neighborly kindness. Giving them coals literally saved their household. It was an act of Grace.
- However, giving them this radical act of grace is not just an immediate provision for them. By treating your enemy with this life-saving grace, you create a burning conviction in their conscience as well, a burning that is meant to bring them to repentance.
- Note: Proverbs 25 ends with "and the Lord will reward you." Paul intentionally leaves that part out here in Romans! Why? Because on the Road to Recovery...

Our motivation for blessing our enemies is no longer about getting a personal reward; it is entirely about reflecting the character of Jesus Christ.

But what actually happens when we choose to reflect Him in the face of hostility?

When we give radical grace to someone who knows they deserve our retaliation, it completely short-circuits their anger. It creates a holy shock to their system. And when we do this—when we meet their hostility with intimate grace—we are participating in the ultimate spiritual victory. Look at Paul's final, defining command in verse 21

2. Conquer the Power of Evil with Good (v. 21)

Romans 12:21 *"Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."*

- The Greek verb for "overcome" is *nikaō* (victory). Evil is not defeated by using evil tactics. If you use evil to defeat evil, evil still wins; it has simply infected you. The only weapon that actually destroys evil is good.

We have to realize that this entire offensive strategy—disarming our enemies with intimate grace and conquering their evil with absolute good—is exactly how we were saved.

We have to remember that we were the enemies. We were the ones spiritually starved, hostile, and freezing in our sin. And Jesus didn't retaliate. He didn't crush us with the justice we deserved. Instead, He stepped down and fed us with His own body.

When humanity was at its most evil, nailing the Son of God to a cross, He didn't return evil for evil. He looked at us and said, "Father, forgive them."

By pouring out that radical, life-saving grace, He heaped the burning coals of conviction onto our hearts and awakened us to repentance.

Jesus overcame the greatest evil in human history with the greatest act of good.

And this is the road to recovery He is calling us to walk today.

Because He has already settled our ledgers, and because He conquered our evil with His good, our hands are finally free to do the same for others.

Conclusion

As the fireworks go off this Saturday evening for our nation's 250th birthday, we hopefully will be reminded of the high cost of freedom.

The founders of this country pledged their lives, fortunes, and sacred honor for political liberty.

We should be profoundly grateful for that inheritance.

But there is a deeper tyranny that no constitution can overthrow: the tyranny of bitterness. The dictatorship of resentment.

When you refuse to forgive, when you plot your personal retaliation, you are locking yourself in a prison cell and handing the key to your enemy.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ offers you a Declaration of Independence from bitterness.

By choosing to bless those who hurt you, and by trusting the supreme justice of God, you are stepping into the glorious liberty of the children of God.

Look to the cross.

Jesus was the ultimate fulfillment of Romans 12. As He was mocked, beaten, and crucified, He didn't call down legions of angels for revenge. Instead, He prayed, "*Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.*" He left room for God's wrath—and on that cross, He absorbed it for us, overcoming our evil with His ultimate good.

Because of the cross, we don't have to fight like the world fights.

Transformed believers break the world's cycle of evil by surrendering their right to personal retaliation, weaponizing radical grace, and leaving absolute justice in the hands of a righteous God.

This week, as an act of true spiritual freedom, lay down your sword of retaliation. Trust the Judge of the Earth to do right, and go out into your community to overcome evil with good.

Some of us walked into this room this morning carrying a heavy ledger. We know exactly who hurt us, we know exactly what they owe us, and we have been waiting for payback. This morning, Jesus is inviting us to drop the ledger.

Right now, in the quiet of this sanctuary, I want you to picture the face of the person who wronged you. Picture the offense. Now, I want you to mentally take that ledger, walk it over to the bench of the True Judge, set it down, and walk away. Pray something

like this in your heart right now:

'Lord, I am stepping down from the judge's seat. I trust Your perfect justice. I give you my right to retaliation.'

Leave the gavel here today. You don't have to carry it out to your car. Leave it here with your heavenly Father.