

Sermon 169: Romans 12:17-18: Blessed are the Peacemakers: Part One

OUTLINE

Imitating God
Repaying evil

INTRODUCTION

Frederick Nietzsche thought that Christianity was a slave morality. The whole idea of turning the other cheek and that the meek will inherit the earth was seen by him to be a subversion of the nobility of man. He thought that we became our best through a will to power and he mourned the fact that Christianity had over the centuries shaped society so effectively. He saw democracy as a weakening of the strong, as a slave uprising keeping our best down. The idea of loving our enemies which we see as a central jewel in God's crown has always been a startling aspect of Christianity. You merely have to read through Foxes Book of Martyrs to see the great impact the Christian martyrs have had throughout history. However, for many today who are prejudiced against Christianity, Christianity's response to evil is problematic. Firstly, the fact that Christians suffer seems to be an argument against a good and loving God. Secondly, many see this idea of forgiving and loving an enemy as a terrible weakness that sacrifices justice for mercy. Many see it as a pacifism in the face of evil that has prevented Christians from acting for justice. For example, we were burgled last weekend and a policeman came to dust for prints. He made an insinuating comment that God was not looking out for us because the burglary happened, so I made a comment about not knowing what God is going to do in the life of the people who did it, or how God would use this event. His reaction was something like, 'You are not one of those who just says we forgive you, are you?' Here is an officer of the law who exists to prevent crime and he perceives Christianity as undermining the task of upholding law and order. He perceives forgiveness as a problem that denies justice. We need to stress that there is no tension between justice and love in Christianity, in fact it is the way both of these things are satisfied in the cross that equips Christians to suffer evil with hope and love and not vengeful or self-destructive anger. Justice will be done but not without mercy being put on display. We will be attempting to untangle some of these knots as we proceed.

Paul in Romans 12 has spoken to us about the mercies of God compelling us to be living sacrifices to God, making all of our lives a worship offering to a God who has loved and served us so well. He has spoken about how this manifests itself in loving the church, but now he is speaking about what it looks like to be a living sacrifice as we live in a hostile world. Paul is drawing on Jesus own teaching as He equipped His people to walk in His persecuted steps. We have dealt with 12:14, now we pick up his further teaching on loving enemies in 17-21. Since we know that Paul is drawing on Jesus teaching here is a rubric that will help us understand these verses. Matt. 5:9, 'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.' So as you look down at the positive and negative commands of this portion you can see they all fall under the notion of being a peacemaker. Blessing not cursing, not repaying evil, seeking to do what is honourable in the eyes of all, pursuing peace with all efforts, not getting revenge and returning good for evil. All these ideas fall under this concept of being a peacemaker. Let me share a few key points about this beatitude before we look at the text. Since this is the main river from which Paul draws his teaching.

Imitating God

The beatitudes are a list of counter-cultural truths that subvert the expectations of the carnal mind. Each of the beatitudes begins with the word 'blessed' which means how happy, and in particular blessed by God. So true happiness as well as true religion is being defined here by Jesus. Each of the beatitudes is subversive because of the first century Jewish religion that had distorted the truth. The happy man was not thought to be the one who saw himself as poor in spirit, and bankrupt of any goodness before God but rather the one who was striving trusting in part in his own efforts to secure happiness and righteousness before God.

In this beatitude we are being told who the true sons of God are. This is the only beatitude that refers to sonship. When Rome was occupying Israel, the true Israelite was the one who would be willing to brandish a sword and drive out the heathen. Jesus turns this notion on its head. A peacemaker is the true son of God. A peacemaker is firstly someone who has found peace with God through faith in Jesus Christ and has peace within. A peacemaker is one who facilitates peace between a holy God and other sinners by preaching the gospel to them. A peacemaker is one who loves his neighbour and seeks to serve not oppress others. A peacemaker is one who calms troubled waters and does not stir up strife. Jesus elaborates on a peacemaker in Matt. 5:38-48, "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. "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? 48 You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.' Verse 45 emphasizes that enemy love shows us to be true sons of God and that this love to the good and the evil is how we imitate God's perfection. Paul puts it this way, Eph. 5:1-2, 'Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. 2 And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.' Our peacemaking is not defined by modern notions of pacifism but by God Himself. Like Father like son.

Let us return to the notion of justice. God in forgiving His enemies satisfies both his love and justice. On the way back from Wellington I had a wonderful opportunity to share the gospel with a Peruvian who had flown out from Australia to watch the game. As I do whenever I preach the gospel I present a courtroom scene. I asked him to imagine himself in a courtroom but he was there because his daughter had been raped and the rapist was on trial. I asked him to imagine the judge taking his seat to pronounce sentence and he says something like this: 'I am feeling pretty good this morning and I am a nice guy, so I am going to just let you off the hook, I forgive you.' I ask is this justice? The answer is no. Then I say, so imagine you are the one standing before God and He is reviewing your life and all your sins, how can a loving God be just on judgement day? Should He just overlook your sins, or do they need paying for? It is the reality of God as a just God who cannot simply overlook sin which helps an unbeliever realise the predicament they are in. It is at this point that I speak about the judge, who is God putting off His royal robes and taking our position in order that He might serve our sentence and satisfy what justice demands regarding our sins. God does not satisfy His love towards us by ignoring justice, but by fulfilling it. The cross is the key example to illustrate how God does not wink at evil.

The Christian is therefore a person who takes evil very seriously, but like God it is not a case of either save or destroy, but we seek to apply both love and justice. The Christian is not a person who is indifferent to evil. We of all people should have the strongest feeling about evil. We do not have a worldview that sees evil as natural but it is unnatural. When one person murders another we do not excuse it by saying that it is simply a remnant of our evolutionary biology where we had to kill to live, or kill or be killed. Evil is not something that is merely uncivilised but it is alien to what God made us to be when He made us in His image. Our horror at murder cannot be explained as an instinct of our evolutionary biology that must now count what once served as survival as murder and now bad because it is threatening the common good. No, we have God's law written on our hearts, and as believers we have had that law freshly inscribed by the Spirit. Evil is not merely the absence of good but that which is opposed to God's law.

The word evil occurs several times in 12:9-13:4. We see the Christian is in the first place to hate evil, 12:9. Our love towards our enemies is not because we have no moral sense to not feel outraged at injustice. But like God we are called to love our enemies hating their sin all the while. Next we see that because evil is something we hate, we are not to return evil for evil. This is taught in 12:17 and 19. We do not condone evil or return evil and we wait with faith upon God who will avenge evil v19. And instead of returning evil for evil, we overcome evil with good. This is not a response to evil based on indifference or weakness. This is putting on display the character of God.

Another way in which love and justice can be seen side by side is to note the fact that Romans 13:1-7 follows 12:14-21. We are told by Paul that God will avenge evil; the natural question that comes to our mind is how? There are various ways God judges sin. We will see a final and full punishment of sin on judgement day. Rom. 1 reveals that God gives a partial judgement upon sin in handing sinners over to their own hearts and we see deterioration in society. God hates sin in the Christian as much as in the unbeliever and Fatherly chastening is a type of holy justice against sin, though it purifies and does not destroy. Every Christian's sins receive their due on the cross as Christ pays the price for our sins. But in Rom. 13:1-7 we see that through common grace God also acts to give a partial judgement against evil through the state as it punishes crime. And in this way mercy and justice can cohabit. The thieves who broke into the church broke the law as well as sinned, if they come to faith their sins will be forgiven, but this does not mean that the consequences of their actions will not follow them. They must still answer to the state for their crimes. The gospel does not deny civil justice, is not an enemy to civil justice but props it up, recognising God's activity in it.

There is no contradiction between a Christian seeking to obey the command to turn the other cheek and to agree with the governments right to punish crime. Here is a key distinction that we need as we try and reconcile the bible's teaching on these matters. It is the difference between private and public. With that in mind let us consider the first statement by Paul, 'Repay no one evil for evil.'

Repaying evil

Some have called this the negative version of the golden rule. Paul it seems is giving us a summary of Jesus teaching in places like Matt. 5:38-39, '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.' The teaching of Jesus at this point has had a number of bad interpretations. Because of a failure to

recognise that Jesus is not laying out state policy but is teaching us not to allow hatred to manage our personal relationships some have taken His teaching to a radical extreme the rest of the Bible does not support. Historically there have been those who have refused to enter the armed service or to work for the government or even the police because of these verses. Others like Gandhi have used this teaching as an official political manoeuvre to subvert oppressive governments. Jesus is not here teaching us to put away our judicial system nor is He teaching us a new trick to overthrow oppressive governments. This is teaching that is to be applied in our personal relationships.

Most people balk at Jesus teaching on turning the other cheek as it seems to encourage things like domestic violence and apathy in the face of bullying. It is not an invitation for your adversary to throw a second punch. Firstly, we need to underline the fact that Jesus is using picture language to help us understand what He means. The Sermon on the Mount is full of hyperbolic statements like, 'if your right eye causes you to sin tear it out and throw it away.' Secondly, the point of turning the other cheek is not to encourage domestic abuse but to underline the fact that we are not returning evil for evil, we are not striking back pound for pound, eye for eye, tooth for tooth. If your child is being bullied at school and they are Christian children, as a parent who is to protect your child you go to the school authorities to have the matter addressed instead of giving your child bad advice to either smack the bully back or silently take it. Jesus' point is that your child should not have hatred in their hearts towards the other person and allow that to fuel thoughts or actions of revenge. If a wife is being beaten by her husband she must not imagine that this teaching is making a victim of her with no recourse to justice. God cares about justice it is part of His common grace to the world. It puts on display His good gifts to us, and His nature. The OT is full of God's speaking out on behalf of the widow and the orphan, for the poor and oppressed. NT teaching does not suddenly come in and treat justice as if it were ceremonial law to be put away and replaced with this distorted version of meekness. To apply this verse in that way is not to honour God but to make Him out to be an unjust women hater who has not given us good laws, nor is He interested in defending the defenceless. It is not childlike faith to have such a flat view of Jesus teaching it is childish thinking.

When Jesus tells us not to resist an evil person, He is not insinuating that if someone breaks into your house to murder your family you should not try to stop them. His teaching is not advocating non-resistance apart from justice. Paul gives us a very good illustration of the fact that simply rolling over before injustice is not what Jesus intended. You will remember that Paul had been mobbed in Jerusalem and was nearly killed but was put under house arrest to await sentence. After a long period and it appeared as if he were to be handed over the Jews unjustly we read in Acts 25:11, 'If then I am a wrongdoer and have committed anything for which I deserve to die, I do not seek to escape death. But if there is nothing to their charges against me, no one can give me up to them. I appeal to Caesar.'" Here we see Paul who is a Roman citizen who would receive certain protections by the law. On account of that he appeals to a fair trial in the highest court in the empire, to plead his case before Caesar, to escape the injustice he was subjected to. Here is the apostle who encourages us to imitate him as he imitates Christ. We will talk more about responsible citizenship when we tackle Romans 13 but let it be clear that Jesus teaching is not an institutionalizing of victimhood, or an ignoring of justice.

Living in an age of democracy the Christian has many channels of addressing injustices against the church. Today you can make a stink by going to the newspapers, blogging, petitioning the government, speaking to your MP, and many other things. We will have to employ our wisdom at the time to determine whether a particular political action is the best course of action. Some will stop trusting God and trust in legislative action to preserve the

Church, this is wrong, but so is the other extreme of not using the common grace means God has put at our disposal like Paul did.

What we can say is this. The letters of the NT were written at a time when many were not Roman citizens having access to rights like Paul had. There were many Christians who were slaves who had less rights in society. In fact there were periods of history when Christianity was illegal and Christians were martyred. Paul was writing in such a time and so was Peter. And the call to not return evil for evil is still the same. Listen to Peter addressing servants who were suffering unjustly, 1 Pet. 2:18-25, 'Servants, be subject to your masters with all respect, not only to the good and gentle but also to the unjust. 19 For this is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly. 20 For what credit is it if, when you sin and are beaten for it, you endure? But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God. 21 For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. 22 He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. 23 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. 25 For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.'

Peter is not encouraging suffering for suffering's sake but suffering for doing good. Peter gives some good instruction which will help us today as we seek to not return evil for evil. In our modern day situation where we enjoy a radically improved working environment, and we have access to protocols and procedures by which we can better our working conditions, Peter is not forbidding us to pursue avenues that modern situations supply. We are not to deliberately suffer if there is a way of bettering your situation. So, if you are experiencing sexual harassment, someone stealing from your wage package, prejudice from work colleagues, do not feel that you must simply suffer it if there are possibilities you could pursue to right those wrongs. With that in mind I would like to talk about how to suffer injustice when we can't or shouldn't react.

Peter is reminding his readers in verse 19 that patient submission to suffering through being conscious of God is commendable. We need to note that this verse is telling us how to endure injustice, by being mindful of God. But what does it mean to be mindful of God? Well, notice firstly, that it has to do with your thoughts and thinking. You need to think about God. But what thoughts? You need to remember that God is just, that he will punish the wicked and reward you for what you endure. You need to think thoughts of eternity that this is not our home and that our suffering is for a short while. You need to remind yourself that Jesus also suffered and that you are called to follow his example. You need to think about God's ways and how suffering works to achieve his purposes. All of these thoughts are in Peter's letter to these suffering believers. These thoughts are not an escape mechanism that takes the pain away, no they simply put your pain into perspective. If you choose to think thoughts of self pity, of how much injustice you have suffered, of how much you would love to see your persecutors suffer, you will suffer inner turmoil, grief, despair, and you will not know the peace of the Spirit.

The truth is that we are not simply enabled to endure these injustices but even rejoice in them. 1 Peter 4:12-13, 'Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. 13 But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed.' In verse 13 he tells us that we should rejoice because we participate in Christ's sufferings. At first this verse can be misunderstood, because it can appear that our

suffering can somehow be added to Christ's suffering on the cross for us. This is not what is meant here. No, Peter is telling us that we have the distinguished privilege to bear the same reproach and treatment as Christ, we should count there to be no higher honour than to follow in Christ's footsteps. But the meaning is probably more like what Paul says in Col. 1:24 (ESV), "Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church,". Paul does not add to Christ's sacrifice for our sins, but his sufferings do bring benefit to the Church, and so can be seen as an extension of Christ's ministry of suffering to the Church. The noble service of suffering begun by Christ is carried on by the Church, we cannot pay for sins as Christ's suffering did, but we identify ourselves in the suffering way of serving that Jesus exemplified for us.

Peter tells us we should rejoice because after all the trials, and Jesus finally comes back we will be overjoyed. He is reminding them that they have a hope that greatly outweighs any amount of suffering they may have to endure here. We will experience a great relief, a great reward, and see our great saviour, and he will welcome us in saying good and faithful servant.

A peacemaker is not someone who is indifferent to justice, but who refuses to allow hatred to replace love for enemies in their hearts. This is not a religion for the weak, meekness is not weakness but a humble dependence upon God and a walk of faith. And suffering injustice is not a sign of our failure but the stage upon which Christ is displayed and God's purposes extended. We will continue exploring what a peacemaker is next week.