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## Romans 12:14, 17-21      “How to Respond to Hatred and Hurt”

Intro. We have all been hurt by others. When was the last time someone hurt you with their words? When was the last time you were hurt with rejection, or some thoughtless deed? Sometimes the deepest hurt can involve family and friends. Some of you have been hurt from marital conflict. Some have experienced divorce. Sometimes your own children hurt you. A friend may betray you. A co-worker or fellow student can act in hateful ways toward you at times. Often we feel like we have done nothing to deserve such treatment.

The Christians in Rome experienced painful conflict. History tells us that shortly after Paul wrote this letter to them, they faced severe persecution. Like Jesus, they would be despised and rejected of men. Furthermore, there is some evidence that the church had experienced bouts of internal conflict between Jew and Gentile over various issues.

As long as you associate with people, you run the risk of getting hurt. The answer is not withdrawal. The answer is not to get even. Rather, Paul teaches us in this text of Scripture how God wants you to *respond* in such cases. You have little control over what people do. But God holds you responsible for how you respond to what people do.

Now I want to warn you that what God says here is just the opposite of how we feel, and think. You are not going to naturally agree with much of what I will say today. It is also the opposite of what the world thinks & does. But don't reject what the Bible teaches just because it goes against your natural thinking. In Isa. 55:8 God says “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways.” Also Prov. 3:5 says, “Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding.” And right here is this chapter Paul says that our lives are to be transformed by the renewing of our minds (v.2). The Christian life involves a new way of thinking, that leads to a new way of living. So it is my heart's desire that the way you respond to hatred and hurt will be dramatically transformed by God's Word today.

So notice first of all:

### I. REJECT THE WRONG WAYS TO RESPOND TO THOSE WHO HURT US

When people say hurtful words to you, or when they do something to you that demonstrates animosity, how are you to respond as a Christian?

A. Don't Respond with Cursing – Paul says in v.14, “Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse.” The Greek word for “curse” (*kataraomai*) is used of Jesus cursing the fig tree and it withered (Mk. 11:21). So what Paul specifically has in mind is wishing evil or harm upon someone. You are not to pray a curse upon them, or use profanity to wish that they would go to hell, or experience eternal damnation. That is such a common practice of non-Christians, but we see here that no Christian is to engage in such a verbal assault.

Jesus is our great example. 1 Peter 2:23 says of Jesus, “when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously.”

Application: Anyone can control their tongue in certain situations, but the real test is when you are angry from being hurt. If you have been born again, and if you rely upon the help of the Holy Spirit, you can obey this command.

B. Don't Respond by Doing Wrong in Return - Paul says in v.17, "Repay no one evil for evil." The Greek here can be translated, "To not even one paying evil for evil." When someone does wrong to you, does that give you the right to do something wrong in return? It is wrong to do wrong. We are not to indulge in vindictive retaliation. This is not just an isolated teaching. We find this same specific instruction at least 2 other times in Scripture (1 Th. 5:15, 1 Peter 3:9). This is the way we are to live.

Once again, this is opposite from the behavior of the world. They say, "If you slit my tires, I am going to slit yours. If you burn my house, I am going to burn your house." So often people get caught up in a never ending cycle of paying back evil for evil. They have been fighting in the Middle East for centuries. This is why wars never cease for long from the face of the earth. This is one reason why gang violence in the streets of America seems to be getting worse and worse.

I remember an incident when I was in high school. We were sitting at the lunch table, and a boy took my milk and poured it into my soup. Well, I wanted to take his milk and pour it into *his* soup, or better yet, I wanted to pour his milk on his head! But at that point in my life I had begun studying the Bible, and I knew that I should not pay back evil for evil, so I didn't do it. Another reason I didn't do it was because I only weighed 120 pounds, even as a Junior in High School! But even if you are in a position to successfully pay back evil for evil, don't.

One of the finest illustrations of this truth in the Bible is from the life of David when he was treated so shamefully by King Saul. In fact, Saul tried to murder him on several occasions, and often persecuted him. Yet when Saul slept in a cave where David was hiding, David would not take advantage of his enemy. He did not pay evil for evil, but rather good for evil.

So the next time someone hurts you, and does evil to you, resist the temptation to respond in like manner.

Furthermore, we see a similar concept in v.19, where we see another way we should not respond to hatred & hurt:

C. Don't Respond with Personal Vengeance – There Paul says, "Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, 'Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,' says the Lord." Here he is saying that we are not to take justice into our own hands. You are not to take it upon yourself to judge, convict, and punish those who hurt you. You may say, "I am not going to respond by doing the same wrong, but I am going to punish him in some way." Notice that Paul also says we are to "give place to wrath." In other words, in order to avoid violating this principle of Scripture, you need to control your anger. You see, we usually respond to hurt with anger, but when you get angry, you will be more likely to respond in the wrong way. Now it's Okay to rebuke them, and then give them an opportunity to explain or defend themselves, but you are not to rush to judgment and take vengeance upon them.

Instead of becoming angry, you should turn them over to God. In fact, "wrath" is preceded by the definite article, and points to a special wrath, God's wrath. "To give place" to God's wrath means to leave room for it. The essence of ungodliness is that we presume to take the place of God, to take everything into our own hands. The way of faith is to recognize that God is judge, and to trust Him to take care of the execution of vengeance and retribution. He is the One who always judges righteously.

Think of the example of Christ: "who, when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously" (1 Peter

2:23; cf. Psalm 37:5-13). We know that He will protect all who are His own and that He will bring justice and truth to full light in His own time.

There are several reasons why it is best to leave vengeance to God & others. First of all, you do not know the heart of that person and all of the circumstances involved, but God does. You and I can misjudge people, but God does not. He knows if that person meant to hurt you, or whether it was just a moment of weakness. Secondly, you cannot be an impartial judge and jury in your own case. So leave it to others to inflict punishment. If they are a Christian, have the elders of the church decide (1 Cor. 6:1-8). If not, have civil authorities decide. And if they let him off without punishment, then remember that God is the final judge.

There is another reason why you should not pay evil for evil, and take vengeance into your own hands that is given right here in the text. Paul says in v.21, “Do not be overcome by evil....” When you do evil in response to evil, then you have become evil and the side of evil has won. Don’t let a sinful person bring you down to their level. Don’t let evil have the victory in your life. When you respond with animosity, unforgiveness, and vengeance, you end up poisoning your own soul.

So the next time you are hurt by someone, don’t respond with vengeance. Don’t pay back evil for evil. However, we are not to take this teaching, and apply it to the government. These admonitions are concerned with our private, personal relations to one another and not with judicial administration. In v.4 of the very next chapter, we are going to see that the magistrate is even given the power of the sword to avenge the evil-doer. So when a person breaks the law and does evil to you, this verse does not mean that you should not report crimes and otherwise cooperate with civil authorities, especially if they have demonstrated a habit of hurting people. When someone is going down the wrong path in life, they need to be stopped, but you are not to take matters into your own hands.

Some may object and say, “If I follow what Paul is saying here, people will take advantage of me and continue to treat me dirty all the time.” You may think that way, but if you also follow the rest of the commands that I will show you, you will actually face less hatred and hurt in the long run than you would otherwise. So we should not only reject the wrong ways to respond to those who hurt us, but we should also:

Paul now tells us that we are to act in positive love toward our enemies.

## II. ACCEPT THE RIGHT WAYS TO RESPOND TO THOSE WHO HURT US

Paul does not just give negative commands. He also gives some positive commands for us to follow. First of all, let’s consider what our goal should be:

A. We Should Strive to Live at Peace with Everyone – Paul says in v.18, “If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men.” Peaceableness of disposition and behavior is a virtue to be cultivated in our relationships with all men. And notice that we are to live in peace “with all men.” While we are especially admonished to live in peace with our family and fellow believers, we are also to live at peace with non-believers. We are also to do nothing to stir up strife among others. Instead, we are to be peacemakers.

But notice the two qualifying phrases here. First, he says, “If it is possible....” At times living in peace is impossible in this old sinful world. At times others just will not allow it. Some are bent on conflict. Furthermore, there are times when we are to stand up for what is right, even when we know it will result in conflict. For example, we have fought for changes in our Southern Baptist seminaries and other institutions, even while the liberals in power at the time were calling for peace. We felt that affirming the truth of the fundamentals of the Christian faith was more important than

maintaining a peace that compromised with doctrinal error. It would violate the witness of Jesus to demand peace at the expense of these priorities (cf. Matt. 10:34-36; Luke 12:51-53).

Our goal of living at peace with others is further qualified by the phrase, “as much as depends on you.” We are commanded to exercise every means within *our* power to maintain peace with our fellow-men. The responsibility for discord must to no extent be traceable to failure on our part to do all that is compatible with holiness, truth, and righteousness. Be sure that, if there is to be enmity, it is all on the other side. We have little control over the conduct of others; but the initiative in disturbing the peace is never to lie with the Christian. Nor are we the ones who are to perpetuate conflict. There may be some who will quarrel with you. Don’t quarrel with them even if they continue to quarrel with you.

Are you a peacemaker? Or are you a troublemaker? Clearly Paul teaches here that we are to pursue peace with others. Don’t initiate conflict, and when conflict is initiated by others, remember Proverbs 15:1 says, “A soft answer turns away wrath....”

Secondly:

B. We Should Respond with Blessing - Paul says in v.14, “Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse.” Instead of responding to hurt with cursing, we are to bless. The word translated “bless” (*eulogeo*) has two meanings. First of all, it literally means to “speak well of, praise, extol.” It is hard to speak well of your enemies, isn’t it. But one way to win over an enemy is to speak well of them, complement them as much as possible.

Back in the days of the Civil War, Robert E. Lee was called into a conference with President Jefferson Davis. Robert E. Lee started to say some wonderful things about one of his officers. One of the other officers that was with him said, “General Lee, don’t you know that the man you have just spoken of is one of your harshest critics?” To which General Lee responded, “President Davis asked my opinion of him. He did not ask his opinion of me.”<sup>1</sup> General Lee followed the spirit of v.14.

But its meaning here probably has to do with the opposite of “to curse,” and that is to invoke God’s blessing, goodness, mercy and grace upon someone. What Paul says here is reminiscent of the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus said in Matthew 5:44, “But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you....”

Jesus is our great example. From His cross of suffering He asked God to forgive His enemies, “for they know not what they do.” This does not mean that we are to ask God to prosper his evil ways, but to deal with him so that he will see his folly and repent. Then, blessing will come to them.

So the next time someone curses you, or speaks evil to you, respond with blessing. No practical exhortation places greater demands upon our spirits than to “bless them that persecute” us.

Furthermore, when people hurt us:

C. We Should Do Good Instead of Evil – Paul says in v.17, “Have regard for good things in the sight of<sup>2</sup> all men.” There are two words translated “good” in the New Testament. *Agathos* refers to intrinsic goodness, and *kalos*, which is used here, refers to goodness that is seen on the exterior of a person, the outward expression of an inward goodness. In regard to such outward expressions of goodness, Paul literally says that we are “to think of beforehand” (*pronoieo*). Here it means, “take thought for, take into consideration, have regard for, plan ahead to do good things before and for

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Lee Tan, *Encyclopedia of 7700 Illustrations: #951* (Rockville, Maryland: Assurance Publishers, 1979).

<sup>2</sup> Or “before” (*enopion*), “in the presence of.”

men.” Peter exhorts, “Holding your manner of life honest among the Gentiles” (2:12; cf. 2 Cor. 8:21). That is, the Christian is exhorted to take careful forethought that his manner of life is honestly representative of what he is as a child of God. The idea here seems to be that the true follower of Christ is to face life with definite consideration of all that he must do; to ponder the effects of his movements on other people; so to live his life that the things that are noble, good, pure, true, will mark him. His life is such that everyone who knows him will know that the smutty joke will fall flat in his presence; the ignoble will be spurned. A Christian man then is bound to live a life which all men will acknowledge to be good.

This duty is especially owing to our enemies. Again, Jesus said in Matthew 5:44, “But I say to you, love your enemies, ... do good to those who hate you....” After all, they are our keenest critics. Do not give your enemies any reason to be your enemies. To “have regard for good things in the sight of all men” is a possible way of disarming some hostility.

This reminds us that the norms of behavior governing conduct are norms that even unbelievers recognize as worthy of approval and that when Christians violate these commands, they bring reproach upon the name of Christ and upon their own profession. The Christian must have regard to what can be vindicated as honorable in the forum of men’s judgment.

Finally, in v.21 we see a similar concept:

D. We Should Overcome Evil with Kindness – Paul says in the last of v.21 that we are to “overcome evil with good (*agathos*).” The world tries to overcome evil either with weak compromise, or with stronger evil. But we are to overcome evil with good, for God is good, and God is stronger than the devil and all evil.

In the quotation of v.20 Paul gives two examples of good we can do: “Therefore ‘If your enemy is hungry, feed him; If he is thirsty, give him a drink....’” The best way to get rid of an enemy is to turn him into a friend, and so “overcome evil with good.” We are not to be vanquished ethically by the evil heaped upon us. On the contrary, by well-doing we are to be the instruments of quenching the animosity and the ill-doing of those who persecute and maltreat us. The kindness enjoined is a practical and concrete way of exemplifying the disposition to which we are exhorted in v.14.

It is reported that a man in Massachusetts many years ago found his neighbor’s horse in his field. He was angry about it and took the horse to the public pound. Meeting the owner soon after this, he told him what he had done, and added, “If I catch him there again, I will do the same thing.” The neighbor replied, “Well, the other night I looked out of my window and saw your cattle in my field. I took your cattle and drove them over to your house, and put them in your barn, and fixed the gate. If I catch them there again, I will do the same thing.” That man was so struck with his neighbor’s soft reply that he at once took the horse out of the pound and paid the charges himself.<sup>3</sup>

Paul gives a good reason why God’s way is better: In the quotation from Proverbs 25:21 he says, “For in so doing you will heap coals of fire on his head.” The original force may have been, “Treat your enemy kindly for that will increase his sense of burning shame.” There was an ancient Egyptian ritual that a man would perform when he wanted to demonstrate his public shame and his spirit of repentance. He would do so by carrying a pan of burning coals on his head, which were supposed to represent the burning pain of shame and guilt. Paul is saying that when you treat an enemy with love by showing kindness to him, you create a burning shame in him for the evil he has done. In any case, by placing the proverb in this context and omitting the last clause, Paul gives it a nobler meaning: “Treat your enemy kindly, for this may make him ashamed and lead to his repentance.” The hot coals of love and goodness will often melt a hard, cold heart.

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<sup>3</sup> John F. Brand, *Echoes From the Brierpatch*.

Conclusion: The father of Immanuel Kant, years ago, was traveling through the forest of Poland. On the way he was met by a band of robbers. They took his possessions, and grabbing him by the throat, they said, "Is that all that you have?" He said, "Yes, that's all that I have." Then the band of robbers let him go, and went on their way. After they had left & were totally out of sight, he felt something in the hem of his garment he had forgotten about. He had some gold sewn into the hem of his garment. So he took off, pursuing his robbers. He found them, and he said, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to tell you something that wasn't true. I discovered that I had some gold sewn in the hem of my garment. Here, take it." Do you know what happened? Not one of the robbers would take the gold that he offered. Not only that, but the robber that had his prayer book returned it. The one that had his purse returned that as well. The robber that had his horse brought his horse to him. Every one of those robbers asked him to pray for them, and then sent him on his way. What a classic example of the fact that we can overcome evil with good.

The only way you can live this kind of a life is with the love of God in your heart. It is not necessarily the easy way to live but it is the right way to live. With the world's way you only get never ending conflict. With God's way, you will either win your enemies over to salvation and friendship, or they will at least leave you alone and be at peace with you.

Sources: Donald Grey Barnhouse, *Expositions of Bible Doctrines Taking the Epistle to the Romans as a Point of Departure*, vol. 4, "God's Discipline" (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964); F.F. Bruce, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: The Epistle of Paul to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963); Bruce Corley & Curtis Vaughan, *Romans: A Study Guide Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976); John MacArthur, Jr., *Supernatural Living: Study Notes on Romans 12:9-21* (Panorama City, CA: Word of Grace Communications, 1985); Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture*, Vol. 12 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977 reprint); John Murray, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1965); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible [CD-ROM]* (Ontario: Timnathserah Inc., 1996); Kenneth S. Wuest's *Word Studies From the Greek New Testament*, Vol. 1, Romans (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1955). Other sources listed in the footnotes. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).

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