

Lesson 31: Living the Ethic of Love

Romans 12:9-21

⁹ **Let love be without hypocrisy.**

Abhor what is evil; cling to what is good.

I. Exhortations to sincere love in the Christian community

¹⁰ Be devoted to one another in brotherly love; give preference to one another in honor; ¹¹ not lagging behind in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord; ¹² rejoicing in hope, persevering in tribulation, devoted to prayer, ¹³ contributing to the needs of the saints, practicing hospitality.

II. Exhortations to sincere love in general

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

¹⁵ Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep.

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.

III. Exhortations to sincere love outside the Christian community

¹⁷ Never pay back evil for evil to anyone.

Respect what is right in the sight of all men. ¹⁸ If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men.

¹⁹ Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, "VENGEANCE IS MINE, I WILL REPAY," says the Lord.

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."

²¹ **Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.**

NASB

Introduction

Back in the early sixties when my mom was in college, the movie West Side Story won 10 academy awards, including best picture and best musical. It's the classic love story of boy meets girl from two rival gangs. In her final song Maria sings this about Tony.

I have a love and it's all that I need,
Right or wrong, and he needs me too.
I love him, we're one; [...]
When love comes so strong,
There is no right or wrong,
Your love is your life!

The lyrics mix love and ethics. "When love comes so strong there is no right or wrong."

Paul does the same thing in Romans 12:9-21. He combines the terminology of love with the terminology of ethics, right or wrong, good or evil. Though Paul's message is quite the opposite of Maria's message. In West Side Story, Maria claims that love removes ethics, removes categories of right and wrong. In Romans, Paul argues that genuine love is understood in terms of good and evil.

The two messages start with different definitions of love. For Maria, love is the romantic feeling of attraction. Maria's love is the love of Romeo and Juliet. It is a love that can break boundaries but can also end in senseless death. This is the love of modern music. It is a love that can soar high and just as quickly turn to hate. It is the love of Hollywood. It is the love of the sexual revolution. "When love comes so strong, there is no right or wrong, your love is your life!"

The Bible is not against romantic love. God gave us the Song of Solomon. God gave us the command of Proverbs 5:18-19.

Let your fountain be blessed, and rejoice in the wife of your youth. As a loving hind and a graceful doe, let her breasts satisfy you at all times; be exhilarated always with her love.

The Bible affirms romantic love and sexual expression of love in the context of marriage between a man and a woman. The Bible is not against romantic love. The Bible does, however, urge us to a deeper, lasting, more challenging love.

When I was in college, I remember Josh McDowell telling us that love is an action. Love is a decision of the will. He was helping us renew our minds, helping us counter the pattern of this world. Love is not something that carries a husband and father uncontrollably into adultery. That's not God's love. It's a form of modern love. "When love comes so strong there is no right or wrong." No! Love is the decision of a man to value the good of his wife, to value the needs of his children even above his own selfish passions. Love is the choice and the action to care about the needs of others, even if those needs are contrary to your own.

Later, I heard from John Piper a different message. His message was different because his audience was different. He was not countering the wrong pattern of the world, he was countering a wrong pattern in the church. He challenged us to remember the emotional element of love. He was targeting a cold, heartless Christianity that emphasized an ethic of emotionless duty, that implied the more you dislike something the more spiritual it is that thing. Christianity is doing what you don't like to do. Piper said, "No!" We have been created to love the Lord our God with all our mind, "Yes!", and all our strength, "Yes!", and all our heart, "Yes, yes!" God is working in us a deeper desire of love. Romantic love is not the only feeling of love. There is a love that truly cares and delights in the well-being of another human being. The most natural expression of this love is the love a mother can have for her child, a true delighting in the good for someone else.

When we put McDowell's message together with Piper's message, we get a more integrated picture of love. Biblical love comes from a new heart and is performed as a decision of the will that leads to concrete acts of love. It is heart, will and strength. It is true that our heart is not always in it. But that is a struggle of the flesh. As we grow in Christ, we grow in the enjoyment of loving unconditionally. That is the direction we are headed in, loving with all our heart and our mind and our strength, God and neighbor. If our heart is not there yet, we can still put our faith in the Holy Spirit to empower us to choose to do the loving thing, as McDowell urges. And we can ask him to keep working in our heart to catch up, as Piper urges.

Jesus gave us the ethic of love. After washing his disciples' feet, Jesus says, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another (John 13:34)." He gave them a symbol of concrete service, foot washing, and then he gave them the command to put their love into action for each other. And the command is important enough to repeat. Two chapters later, Jesus says again, "This is my commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends (John 15:12-13)." It is a message of sacrificial love. Give up your own interests for one another. Lay down your life. Not necessarily dying but laying down the moments of your life to take time to serve someone else. In that context of John 15, Jesus taught that this kind of love only comes by drawing your life and your power from him, as a branch draws nourishment from the vine.

I mentioned in our last lesson that Paul always includes a section on love when he teaches about the body of Christ and the gifts of the Spirit. We do not want to make the mistake of the Corinthians, being high in gifts and low on love. We also do not want to fall into a wrong pattern on thinking about love. Paul is giving us here another scenario to which we need to apply the pattern of Romans 12:1-2. As we respond to the grace of Jesus and present ourselves to God in Christian community, we need our minds renewed to better understand his call to love.

Let's read the text, Romans 12:9-21.

[Read Romans 12:9-21]

Notice how Paul frames this passage. The first sentence is not a complete sentence in Paul's Greek. It is simply the three words, "The Love Unhypocritical." Paul then goes on to give exhortations in line with sincere or genuine love. If you want to pursue real Jesus kind of love, love without hypocrisy or without a mask, then you should be doing these kinds of things from a genuine heart.

Paul then does something interesting, after giving us the title, "The Love Unhypocritical," he moves from the language of love to the language of right and wrong, good and bad. He writes, "Abhor what is evil; cling to what is good." Paul comes back to this language in the last verse, too. "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." Paul puts our basic morality as Christians, our basic ethic or rule for behavior, in this relational context. Do you want to know if you are a good Christian? Ask yourself, "Do I love people? And do I show that love in concrete ways?" When you ask God, "How then shall I live?", He is saying, "Love." Our basic ethic is love. Growth in Christ is revealed in acts of love. Paul is defining good and evil here according to how we treat other people.

Now in regard to the structure of the text, I see a three-part division to the text. Following Douglas Moo, I have adopted David Black's structure of the Greek text (D. A. Black, "The Pauline Love Command: Structure, Style and Ethics in Romans 12:9-21," *Filologia Neotestamentaria* 1). In part I, verses 9-13, Black describes a 2-3-2-3-2 chiastic structure. It's recognizable by the Greek style. I will arrange my comments according to that pattern. Part II consists of three general exhortations. And part III ends with another chiasm, though one based on content rather than style. Each part has a slightly different group in mind that we are supposed to love. We could say that:

Part I is comprised of exhortations to sincere love in the Christian community, that's verses 9-13;
Part II is comprised of exhortations to sincere love in general, that's verses 14-16;
And part III is comprised of exhortations to sincere love outside the Christian community, that's verses 17-21. So, let's start with part I.

I. Exhortations to sincere love in the Christian community (12:9-13)

A. 2 exhortations

Our first two exhortations here in verse 9, "abhor what is evil and cling to what is good" serve both as the beginning bookend of the whole passage, 9-21, and the first frame of this part I, 9-13.

I have said that good and evil are defined by love, to love is to do the good, to not love is to do evil. We can also say it the other way around. Love will cling to what is good. Love will abhor what is evil. This is where we disagree with Maria from West Side Story. Love does not blind a person to good and evil. Genuine love shrinks away from the pure selfishness of evil. And genuine love desires what is good for the one loved.

B. 3 exhortations

After these two exhortations, we have a set of three exhortations, beginning in verse 10. The first two are "one another" statements that indicates for us that we are talking about the body of Christ, one another in the body of Christ. The first exhortation is "Be devoted to one another in brotherly love." The Greek word used here for love means love of brothers or love of sisters. As members of the body of Christ, we are to be devoted to one another as an extended family. You do not always have to click with your extended family. You don't always have to like your extended family. You just have to love them. Family is family. And we have a special responsibility to the brothers and sisters in our local Christian community similar to the special responsibility we have for family. In fact, Paul urges us to be "devoted" to one another. He is calling for serious action, serious consideration to be given to our brothers and sisters in Christ.

The second exhortation is also a "one another" statement. "Give preference to one another in honor." Remember Paul's admonition for us not to think more highly of ourselves than we ought. This goes a step further. Not only should I not seek my own honor, but I should show honor to my brothers and sisters in Christ. Instead of seeking opportunities of self-recognition, I should make effort to see that others get recognized.

The style of Paul's Greek suggests that the first exhortation in verse 11 should complete this group of three. "Do not lag behind in diligence." The ESV translates this as "Do not be lazy in zeal." In context, Paul is urging us to show acts of brotherly love to each other. And as we do that, we are not seeking honor for ourselves. We are looking for ways to show honor and recognition to others. In both of these things we should not be lazy or lag behind. Acts of brotherly love take effort even when those acts come out of our spiritual giftedness. We have some motivation in us. We still have to put forth some effort. And Paul has said, if you are gifted in teaching, teach, if you are gifted in service, serve. If we are moved to love through mercy or leadership or giving, these are ways that we can show love for the body. The Spirit is working in us, but we are going to have to take some effort to actually apply our gifts. And even in the use of our gifts is not a means of accruing honor for ourselves. It's a way of devotion, the using of gifts and talents for the good of others. And in this we are not to lag behind. We are not to be lazy. Our zeal should move us toward acts of love.

The exhortation here is not "Keep busy." The opposite of being lazy is not attending every possible church event or filling up every minute of down time or being involved in every ministry. There is a better way. Diligence can happen by seeking out a place you can consistently give in. We should be thinking in this way. "Is there a weekly role I can play in our small group? Are there certain people I can regularly seek out to encourage? Is there a ministry of mercy I can volunteer with once or twice a week? I need to meet my responsibilities at work. I need to meet my responsibilities of love for my family. In addition to that, where is a place I can give in the body that may require some sacrifice but is not detrimental to my health or to my sanity or to my family. And that would be effective, it would be useful. I can give in a way that truly helps. That's not lagging behind in zeal when you find a place that you can fit in, and you can give regular service to.

C. 2 exhortations

Now, our two central exhortations come in the rest of verse 11. First, be "fervent in Spirit." And this literally means, be set on fire in the Spirit! Living the Christian life is not meant to be a boring affair for Paul. That's not how Paul sees it at all. Duty is not a bad word. Consistent duty without emotion is not a picture of the Christian life. Not one that we see in the Bible. If our heart does not overflow with love to Jesus, something is wrong with our heart. If we do not kneel in awe as we contemplate the majesty of God, something is wrong with our heart. If we do not yearn for the fame of God's name to be spread through the nations, something is wrong with our heart.

To be honest, we get that. Let's just say it. Something is wrong with our heart. We struggle to connect emotionally with the reality of our faith. Paul seems to be saying here, "Do not be satisfied with that. Ask the Lord to light a fire in your heart or to fan up the flames." Maybe that fire is going strong like it does in the romance phase of a human relationship. Maybe that fire is a consistent glow that burns in the heart like it does in a healthy, intimate ongoing, human relationship. We cannot live off the highs of romance all the time. I don't think that's what we should imagine for this fire burning in our heart. We need that slow burning fire that does not always shine bright but when poked reveals an intense heat and a strong glow. However you envision it, Paul exhorts us to be fervent, to be on fire for Jesus.

He follows that up with the next exhorting, "serve the Lord," Which seems like a pretty bland or general command after just exhorting us to be on fire. Maybe that is the intent. Maybe he is directing our zeal. Worship might help us to be on fire or preaching might stir up our heart, but don't let the flame die out there. Direct that intensity towards acts of service for God. We need to be stirred up to serve. Worship that moves us emotionally is not intended to leave us there. We might fall into the danger of thinking our main spiritual service of worship is an emotional experience. There is an intensity in the heart meant to moves us to action in a way that is acceptable and pleasing to God. If zeal for God does not lead to loving service, worship can become a selfish end in itself. Love for God is not meant to be kept inside, but to rise up and spill over and be a blessing.

B' 3 exhortations

The set of three exhortations in verse 12 connect with the working of the Holy Spirit in our heart. Just as the fire of the Spirit moves us to acts of loving service, the Spirit provides the internal power we need to rejoice in our hope, to persevere in tribulation, to be devoted to prayer.

We see that work of the Spirit connected to hope and tribulation and prayer back at the beginning of chapter 5 and the end of chapter 8 where Paul affirmed work of the Spirit in each believer, pouring out God's love into our hearts and witnessing with our spirit that we are sons and daughters of the king. That's what lights our heart on fire, when we see God and when we love God, when we know that we are his. Specifically, in 8:18-27, you can see Paul moving us from the theme tribulation to hope to prayer, just as he mentions here. Rejoice in hope, persevere in tribulation, be devoted to prayer. He is challenging the Romans to keep it up.

A' 2 exhortations

Moving to our last two exhortation in verse 13 Paul gets very, very practical. What does sincere love look like in the body of Christ? What does it look like to be devoted to one another in brotherly love? Here are two things. "Contribute to the needs of the saints and practice hospitality." I imagine you have people in your mind who are good at doing this. I can immediately think of models of generosity. Christians who give their time and effort to make sure those in need are cared for. And three or four couples, also, come to mind when I think of hospitality. They are Christians who invite people into their homes, seemingly effortlessly. I don't know how much effort goes in, but when you are there, you don't notice. They invite you in and make you feel welcome, known, included. What a blessing these people are to the Christian community. I am not one of them. I can't do this to the same degree they do it or with the same level of spiritual blessing. It is not my spiritual gift. But I try to learn from them so that I can offer hospitality in a pleasing way when God calls me to do it. We all are given opportunities to show hospitality.

II. Exhortations to sincere love in general (12:14-16)

Next, we move on to part II. And this is verses 14-16. And here we are moving from exhortations of love in the body to general exhortations of sincere love, love in the body or outside the body. The first is classic Jesus. "Bless those who persecute you; bless and curse not." Hopefully, this is coming from outside the body, if you are being persecuted. And it can be in big ways or small ways. How naturally do words of blessing come out of your mouth the moment you are cut off in traffic or treated rudely by the person behind the counter or put down by your boss or a professor? When someone looks down on you because of what you believe in or because of your moral stance, is your first response to utter words of blessing from the heart? Of course, it isn't! We have a heart problem. Our response is not to bless the offender but to curse the offender, even if we just mutter it under our breath. It's not nice thoughts. Jesus commands another way. Sincere love to someone who annoys you or worse, who seeks your harm, requires seeking their good. Sincere love seeks their good, their blessing, even when your sinful heart desires for them to be cursed. By faith, speak a sincere blessing. And if you cannot control your voice, don't do it. Speaking a Christian blessing in a rude, negative, judgmental way, doesn't count. "I just want you to be blessed." That doesn't get it. If you can't control your voice, then keep your mouth closed and speak a blessing in your heart. By faith, in prayer to God, pray for the person who has hurt you or the person who has persecuted you, or the person who has put you down. And you don't pray for vengeance, as much as you want vengeance. You pray for their good. You offer blessing, not curse.

Next, we have "Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep." My wife is my model for this exhortation. When Brenda hears good news for someone else, they won a free cruise, or they were selected for a special honor, she jumps up and down with joy for them. It's natural. I, on the other hand, immediately think, "Why can't that ever happen for me? Why can't I win the free cruise?" Brenda models rejoicing with those who rejoice. She also models for me the other side of this exhortation. She sincerely "weeps with those who weep." This is empathy, an important

component of genuine love. It is a stepping outside our own circumstances and emotional state to empathize with the reality of someone else's circumstances and emotional state.

Verse 16 more clearly brings us back into the Christian community, with the "one another" pattern, urging us to a consistent equality in our love. The previous exhortation urged us to share a common heart. Not that we always feel the same thing but that we recognize what others are going through and show love by entering into their emotional circumstances. Here Paul shifts to the mind. "Be of the same mind." It could mean that we should share in a common understanding of the gospel. But that's not the context. Paul seems to be saying that we give each person equal regard in our thinking. We accept each one in the body as created uniquely in the image of God, equally valued by God. To really do this, we have to go further. We have to recognize and reject our own prejudices. Because we are prejudiced. Whether it is based on race or poverty or education or social ability or gender or work success, we create value judgments in our minds. "Don't do that," says Paul. Be of the same mind one of another.

Recognize what truly matters: he or she is created in the image of God, loved by Jesus, born again, growing in character. Second, recognize the value of variety, there are different types of intelligence, people are good at all manner of different types of things, there are different personality types, there are different giftings, there are different life experiences. There is so much variety that we should seek to enjoy and value the giftedness and the talents and the perspectives of other people in the body. We should also recognize that some have done much more for God with the little they have been given in life than the little done by those who have been given much. I do not say that to create a new kind of comparison, but we need to lean towards considering others with sober judgment. Remove your prejudices. Share the mindset that we are equally valued by God. Which of God's precious children is too lowly to associate with?

III. Exhortations to sincere love outside the Christian community (12:17-21)

Now we are ready to move into part III, verses 17-21. Here Paul exhorts us to sincere love fous outside the Christian community.

Let's remind ourselves of the whole text. These are verses 17-21.

A ¹⁷ Never pay back evil for evil to anyone.

B Respect what is right in the sight of all men. ¹⁸ If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men.

C ¹⁹ Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, "VENGEANCE IS MINE, I WILL REPAY," says the Lord.

B' 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."

A' ²¹ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

A *Never pay back evil for evil.*

The beginning and ending of this part III use the good and evil language. So, we start in verse 17 with "Never pay back evil for evil to anyone." We end in verse 21 with "Do not be overcome with evil, but overcome evil with good." In context, evil refers to hurtful actions done to you by another human being. First Paul tells us what not to do. "Do not pay back evil." To whom should we not pay back evil? You should not pay back evil "to anyone." That is a hard command to swallow and certainly does not line up with the stories we love to tell and the stories we like to watch. We love the stories where the man or the woman or the child gets back at the evil person who has belittled them or harmed them. We rejoice inside when they come back with a clever comment, a quick punch, a smart plan. We love justice, especially when the weak overcome the strong. There is something good in that, but there can be something wrong, too. Our minds are conformed to the pattern of this world. If we truly want to do the good, pleasing, acceptable will of God, then we need our minds renewed on this point. He is calling us to a higher pattern.

B Seek peace with all.

What is our general approach to people in society outside the body of Christ? We start with the second half of verse 17, "Respect what is right in the sight of all men. If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men." The Christian stance towards secular society is not one of absolute good versus absolute evil. We are called to acknowledge the natural morality that is present in our society. There are things that all people, or at least a large group of people, recognize as good. Not everybody is trying to do it. But they recognize it. We can find common ground in caring for the poor, helping out our neighbors, living with financial integrity, being honest, being considerate. There is a general recognition of right and wrong in society that allows us to connect with other people.

In addition to recognizing common good and common evil, we make an effort to be at peace with all men, so long as it depends on us. If our neighbor complains that our Christmas lights are shining in his bedroom window all night, we buy a timer to make them go off. If our dog is barking through the night, we do something about our dog. If our neighbor's tree falls in our yard, we cut it up and give him the firewood. Granted, if it falls on our car, living together in peace is going to be more difficult. But as a starting principle, if it is in our reasonable power to put in some effort to live at peace with the people around us, God says, "Do that. Do not intentionally make yourself smellier than you have to be."

C' Never take your own revenge.

What if someone wrongs you? That moves us to the central point of the chiasm in verse 19. "Never take your own revenge." That is pretty absolute. The Christian is not permitted to take revenge, period. We can discuss that, but the end answer is going to be, "No. You are not allowed to take revenge." This is a point of faith. We are told, "leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay,' says the Lord."

Revenge here applies to personally getting back at the one who has wronged you. If the tree falls on your car, and you want your neighbor to pay for it, that is fair. If he refuses, you can take him to court. God has provided means in society by which we can seek justice. That's coming up in chapter 13. We will talk more about that. People need to be held responsible for their actions. A rape victim may choose to forgive her attacker as an act of supernatural faith in Jesus, that does not mean she should argue against him going to jail. He can go to jail forgiven. Punishment is not wrong. Punishment is often in line with Scripture. But you don't take it into your own hands.

To take the lesser example, if the neighbor refuses to pay for the damage to your car caused by his tree and is somehow able to wiggle out of responsibility through our deficient, human justice system, you are not allowed to steal his car or to set it on fire. You don't even get to pour manure into his backseat. Now, that is a normal desire, I think. It's my normal desire. Mostly, it is a sinful desire, though there may be some righteous anger mixed in there somewhere. I am not sure. You are not being told here that you cannot seek recourse according to the system provided by your society. You are being told that if that system fails, you cannot, as a Christian, seek your own form of justice. By faith, you recognize the fallibility of human justice and recognize the reality of God's justice. No one escapes the courtroom of God's justice. We have this over the atheist. While we all share a desire for justice, all normal people do, we do not depend on the fallible justice of this world. We believe that justice will ultimately and eternally be satisfied by our good, impartial, all-seeing, holy God.

B' Heap burning coals on his head

Paul moves on to an odd statement in verse 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." We already heard the echoes of Jesus' sermon on the mount in Paul's command to bless and not curse those who persecute you. This exhortation reminds us of Jesus' command to turn the other cheek or go the extra mile. It is a direct command to love your enemy. Give him food. Give him drink. But what about the conclusion, "in so doing you will heap burning coals on his head?"

Paul is quoting Proverbs 25:21-22. Neither Proverbs or Paul give us much to go on by way of context. The metaphor of heaping burning coals on your enemy's head is lost on us. We do not have clear examples from Greek or Hebrew to draw from. Some have suggested that pouring coals on our enemy's head indicates that if our good acts do not turn them, then their punishment will be all the more severe. That is not completely unbiblical, but it does not fit well here with Jesus teaching in the sermon on the mount, already alluded to, nor does it fit with what Paul has said so far. We are encouraged to leave room for God's wrath. We are not encouraged to do good in order to increase wrath. The theme here is love without hypocrisy. This verse should fit with that theme. How does this show sincere love?

A suggestion I have heard preached is that coals on the head alludes to the practice of carrying a jar on the head with coals for lighting a fire. In that sense the coals are a positive, like food and drink. There are two problems with this suggestion. One, we do not have any ancient examples of a positive metaphor about carrying coals on the head. Two, it is not clear what the point would be. It seems the same as saying, "Be nice to your enemy for in so doing you will be doing something nice for your enemy." And that's not really helpful.

A third suggestion, and a better one, is that heaping burning coals on the head of your enemy is a metaphor for causing shame. Now, if causing shame is intended as an act of revenge, you're trying to get back at your enemy by making him feel bad, then the metaphor would not fit the context so well either. That would be like trying to increase his wrath. It is doing something good in order to cause bad to your enemy. But if causing shame is intended to bring your enemy to a recognition of his own wicked behavior, so to bring him to repentance and a right relationship with God and other people, then the metaphor fits the context. We do not bless our enemy with any guarantee of bringing him to repentance, but it is a possibility. This suggestion has the problem that it has got little support in ancient writings. But the positive that it fits pretty well the context.

In the chiasmic structure this verse parallels the command, "Respect what is right in the sight of all men." And, if possible, to "be at peace with all men." And parallel structures often take a point and push it further. The further thought here is that we not only respect what is right for all, but we act in that way even to our enemies, which is unexpected. And just as the previous desire with all men was that we might have peace, so also, doing good to our enemy can have the desired effect of bringing peace. We can only do what we can do. We cannot achieve peace if the other party refuses to admit wrongdoing and refuses reconciliation. But we can choose to bless our enemy. We can treat him as a human being who has needs. We can help with those basic needs. And in so doing, if we somehow move him to shame and that leads to repentance, then we brought about peace.

A' Overcome evil with good.

Paul started this section by telling us what we are not to do. We are not to "pay back evil for evil to anyone." He ends in verse 21 by telling us what we are to do. "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." We are to overcome evil with good. The means do not justify the ends. We are to seek the good. And we are to seek to accomplish the good through good. If we seek to accomplish good through evil, then we lose. We are at that point overcome ourselves by evil. And this is a natural pattern in the world. It is quite normal for the victim of evil to become the perpetrator of evil. When hurt, we lash out, we strike back. We even do to others exactly what was done to us. Not only does our wicked response increase the damage to ourselves, compounding the consequences of sin done to us with sin done by us, but it also perpetuates a cycle of retribution. If we return evil with evil, it will be returned back on us again. And then we return it again. And then it comes back again. In personal relationship, for peace to be accomplished, someone must choose to break the cycle, to be the peacemaker. Jesus said, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God (Matthew 5:9)."

Conclusion

The first frame in the chiasm of part I served double duty, creating also the beginning bookend of the whole passage. That was "Abhor what is evil; cling to what is good." So also, here in verse 21 we have the final frame of part III and the ending bookend to the whole passage. "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

We overcome evil with good by pursuing the kind of radical, genuine love that Jesus taught and Jesus modeled. Paul envisions the body of Christ building itself up in love. Jesus envisions a watching world, and he tells us, "by this all men will know that you are my disciples if you have love one for another (John 13:35)."

Reflection Questions

1. What stands out to you as important, confusing, interesting or strange in Romans 12:9-21?
2. What is one example in this text of a teaching that challenges you in your thinking to put off being conformed to this world and to be renewed in your mind?
3. We have around 20 or so exhortations here. If these put you under the pile, remember to thank God that you are accepted by grace. You are not accepted because of your ability to fully live out this list. Also, thank God that he has begun a work in you to transform you, so that you will begin to live life according to this vision of what is good.

Consider the two following exhortations.

- a. Think of a time you cursed someone else for their behavior toward you. Words of judgment and ill will came from your heart and out of your mouth (even if under your breath). What words could you use to bless – both words that you could just say in your own mind and words you could say out loud?
 - b. In Part III *C' Never take your own revenge*, Michael said, "You cannot, as a Christian, seek your own form of justice." This statement depends on context. In what sense would you agree with this statement and in what sense would you disagree with this statement? What "form of justice" can a Christian not seek? What "form of justice" should a Christian seek? Support your ideas from this text or from other biblical passages.
4. Choose two more exhortations that especially stand out to you. For each exhortation go through the following thought process. (1) Take a few minutes to think about how you could apply each exhortation in your own social circle, whether in the body of Christ or outside the body of Christ – what could this look like concretely for you. (2) Then consider some of the challenges to living this out. What obstacles would you need to overcome to see this become a practiced reality in your life? (3) Finally, reflect on the blessing of living this out – what could be the fruit in your life or in your family or in your church or society? Start small. What are some of the simple, relational fruits that could result?