

Fourth Sunday of Epiphany
January 29, 2006
Romans 12:17-21

Sermon by Pastor Paul Janke

Love Your Enemy and Leave Revenge to God

1. God loves his enemies
2. God will avenge evil
3. God works through our love for our enemies

^{NIV} Romans 12:17 Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. ¹⁸ If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. ¹⁹ Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. ²⁰ On the contrary: "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head." ²¹ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Fellow Believers,

In some circles, revenge comes highly recommended. You've heard the recommendations: "Don't get mad, get even." "Punish your enemies and reward your friends." And even, "Do unto others before they do unto you." From the playground to the political arena, from the board room to the family room, you can find people who not only recommend revenge--they practice it. They call it "payback" or "evening the score" or "giving 'em a dose of their own medicine."

Revenge isn't just what happens between the Bloods and the Crips or the Hatfields and McCoys. The impulse to repay evil with evil rises from deep inside of our sinful nature. You've felt that urge, too, haven't you? When someone hurt you or said something unkind about you, did you think, "Fine. See if I ever do anything kind for you again"? And maybe the memory of that hurt lingered and later surfaced in the form of the silent treatment or harsh words or some other kind of getting even.

As St. Paul describes it in Romans 12, our reaction to our enemies is a kind of litmus test that indicates how well the message of God's mercy has gotten through to us. The real test of our Christian convictions

comes when we deal with those who have in some way sinned against us. We return to the 12th chapter of Romans this week where Paul has been writing about how the gospel of God's mercy transforms our lives. As he closes this chapter, he urges us: Love Your Enemy and Leave the Vengeance to God.

1. God loves his enemies

We hear Paul say here, *"If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone."* I'm fine with that, aren't you. If they don't bother me, I won't bother them. Live and let live. But what if someone else disturbs the peace? What if they "start it" and sin against you? The Holy Spirit has anticipated that question. He says, *"Do not take revenge, my friends."*

"Hopelessly naïve," some will say. Abandoning the impulse to take revenge and loving our enemies, they argue, is idealistic, impractical, and a sure-fire way of finishing last. But let's think about this a bit. God loves his enemies, doesn't he? At the beginning of it all, God must have been terribly hurt and disappointed as he saw Eve choose to believe the word of a fallen angel rather than the word of her loving Creator. And Adam's decision to join his wife in eating the forbidden fruit must hit God like a slap in the face, because Adam knew what he was doing and did it anyway. In a matter of moments the perfection, the peace and the harmony of God's perfect world were shattered. Sin and death and lies and fear came slithering in. And yet God's reaction was not to destroy his errant creatures, however much that might have been merited, but to make provision to save them by sending Eve's descendant to crush the serpent's head for them.

We, too, were God's enemies once. A few chapters earlier in this letter, Paul had written, **"The sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God."** (8:7-8) That hostility to God is our natural condition. You can well imagine that our lawless mindset and lawless acts did nothing to endear us to God. But God sent Jesus to overcome that hostility and reconcile us to himself. He sent his own Son, Paul says here in Romans (8:3), **"in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering."** No enemy has ever been treated as well as God treated us.

What the Bible declares about God's love for his enemies we see revealed in the life of Jesus. How unusual it was to hear a victim of crucifixion to pray for the forgiveness of his tormentors, but that's what Jesus did. Seeing Jesus love his enemies even at the cross

caused the apostle Peter to write, "**When they hurled insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats.**" (1 Pet. 2:23)

The call to repent of our vengeful thoughts, then, is really a call to follow our Savior more closely. Whether the one who hurts or slights us is a co-worker, a classmate, a neighbor, or a member of our family, God wants us to be children of our heavenly Father and love our enemies, just as he loves his enemies. Jesus said it this way in the Sermon on the Mount, "**You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.**" (Matt. 5:43-45)

OK. So we forgive our enemies...and they just go right on hurting and harming us and other people. Is that our fear, that evildoers will get away with it? Is it our concern that an injustice will be done that causes us to think we have to be judge, jury and executioner all rolled into one? Then we must remember that God has promised to avenge evil.

2. God will avenge evil

It says here, "*Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord.*" Sometimes God metes out an immediate punishment of evildoers. Many times he uses his servants in government, law enforcement and the justice system to serve wrongdoers their just retribution. But clearly it's not our job to punish those who sin against us; it's God's job.

How would you rate God's performance on avenging evil? It was the prophet Habakkuk who dared to register a complaint about God's method of meting out justice. He said to the LORD, "**Why then do you tolerate the treacherous? Why are you silent while the wicked swallow up those more righteous than themselves?**" (1:13b) One psalmist offered the assessment that the wicked are always carefree and increase in wealth. He even confessed to envying the arrogant when he saw the prosperity of the wicked. (Ps. 73:3,12)

But people who say such things aren't seeing the whole picture. Sooner or later, evildoers will have their comeuppance. God himself nabbed Cain after he murdered his brother, Abel. The Assyrian king

Sennacherib sent his men to howl blasphemous taunts at the people of Jerusalem (2 Kings 18-19), but it wasn't very many days later that Sennacherib's army suffered a disastrous defeat and Sennacherib returned home, only to be assassinated by his own sons. Acts 12 tells us the story of King Herod Agrippa, who had the apostle James killed and planned to do the same to the apostle Peter. But by the end of the chapter Herod was struck down by God.

God may not operate on our timetable when it comes to avenging evil. And he may go about it in a different way than we envisioned. But don't doubt that God will get it done. The apostle Paul writes, "**God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you and give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his holy angels.**" (2 Thess. 1:6-7) It was Jesus who said that "**men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken.**" (Matt. 12:36) What all this means is that the impulse to get revenge lest an injustice be allowed to stand reveals both a lack of knowledge of the Scriptures and a lack of confidence in God. Rather than worrying that an evildoer won't be punished, we would be better advised to make sure we don't forget our own need of God's mercy. If God instantly avenged every sin against his majesty, we wouldn't escape either. Vengeance is best left to God.

No, it's misguided to think that taking revenge will accomplish anything good. What good thing did revenge ever accomplish in Northern Ireland or in Israel and the Palestinian territories or in the gang wars of urban California? It's forgiveness and love that accomplish something positive. God works through our love for our enemies.

3. God works through our love for our enemies

After reminding us that vengeance is God's job, Paul quotes the book of Proverbs, where it says, "*If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.*" In the following verse, Paul gives an explanation: "*Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*" Just as a heap of burning coals on the head would redden our faces with its heat, so an act of kindness toward an enemy can redden that enemy's face with embarrassment. By meeting evil with kindness, enemies can be led to a sense of shame over their hostility; enemies can even become friends.

We see examples of this in the Bible. What was it that caused the repentant thief to change his mind about Jesus, to stop mocking and start believing? It was very likely the kindness that Jesus showed even to those tormenting him. Why did the jailer of Philippi fall trembling before Paul and Silas and ask, "**Sirs, what must I do to be saved?**" Was it not that he heard them singing and praying while they sat with their feet in stocks after being flogged that day? Would the martyrdom of Stephen have had the same effect on his enemies if he had cursed them while they were stoning him, rather than praying for their forgiveness?

A couple of months ago I watched the documentary that was written about in last week's Saturday church page in the *Bee*. It's called "Beyond the Gates of Splendor." The movie details how five young men, Bible college graduates, decided to go to South America to serve as missionaries among the Indians. After a while, they determined that they wanted to try to meet a particularly violent and hostile people called the Waodoni. The Waodoni, with their habitual violence, were in danger of making their own tribe extinct. The missionaries flew to a place where they met some Waodoni. But after some initial indications of good will, other members of the tribe came and killed all five missionaries. But that's not the end of the story. Love and forgiveness prevailed. The wife of one of the murdered missionaries, Elisabeth Elliot, along with the sister of another of the murdered men, responded by moving to area where the Waodoni lived and they worked there to spread the same gospel for which one woman's husband and the other's brother had given his life. Their presence and their forgiveness of those who had taken their loved ones from them were such a powerful testimony to the Waodoni that the Lord used this to bring about the first conversions of members of the Waodoni tribe. Today one of the men who murdered Missionary Nate Saint, a man named Mincaye, travels all over with the son of the man he murdered, telling all who care to listen that the Creator used his Son's blood like soap to clean his heart and show him a new trail away from violence. Revenge for the slaying of the five missionaries would never have accomplished what forgiveness did.

There's an old saying that revenge is a dish best served cold. The Bible goes farther. It says that revenge is a dish best not served at all. As people who are the beneficiaries not of God's vengeance, but of his mercy, we are called to love our enemies and leave the vengeance to God. The call to forgive each other, just as in Christ God forgave us, applies even to our enemies. Amen.