

"THEOLOGY IN APPLICATION IN ROMANS 12"

(Romans 12:9-21)

(Frank Theilman)

This passage teaches Christians that the love God expects them to show to others arises from God's transforming work within them, not from outward coercion. It also contributes to Christian teaching on non-retaliation and provides a strategy for practicing a kind of love for the church's enemies that does not excuse or perpetuate injustice.

Love That Arises from an Inner Transformation

In Romans 12:9-21 Paul describes the important role that simple acts of kindness and faithfulness to others, performed from the heart, should play in the lives of believers. They should love and honor each other, serve the Lord, adopt a prayerful attitude of hope and steadfastness in their commitment to the gospel, and share what they have with other believers who are in need (12:9-13). Paul is careful to communicate along with these admonitions, however, that obeying them should be the free choice of the believer acting from the transformed mind Paul has described in 12:1-2. Expressions such as "without pretense," "loathe," "cling," "enthusiasm," "ardent," and "rejoice" were intended to remind Paul's audience that their new way of life as Christians was not something imposed on them from outside themselves but was the fruit of the new way of thinking God had given to them when he transformed and renewed their minds.

This is a steady feature of Paul's ethical instruction. In 14:20-23 he will appeal to those in Rome who disagree with each other over the observance of the Mosaic law simply to let the disagreement stand since the really important issue is not whether one does or does not observe the Mosaic law but whether one acts in a way that is consistent with one's inner conviction about the truth of the gospel. Similarly, Paul wanted the Corinthians to contribute to his collection for needy believers in Jerusalem because, like the Macedonians, their desire to do so welled up from within as a result of their prior commitment to the Lord (2 Cor 8:2, 5; cf. 9:7). He hoped that Philemon would release Onesimus from slavery so that Onesimus could work with Paul for the gospels progress, but he refused to pull rank on Philemon and order him to do this. The reason for such an approach, Paul tells Philemon, is so that his "goodness might not be by compulsion but of [his] own accord" (Phlm 14; cf. 8-9).

Does this mean that believers should only do good when they "want" and "feel" able to do it? Clearly this is not the case, since Paul will later emphasize that doing what is good involves "not pleasing" one's self but pleasing one's neighbor (15:1-2) and will point out that Jesus did not please himself when he suffered in the place of others (15:3). The inner enthusiasm for obedience that Paul talks about here must operate at a deeper level than some surface feeling. Rather, it must refer to a basic desire to do God's will, even when doing so is costly and runs against the current of one's surface feelings.

The theological principle that obedience to Christian ethical instruction should arise from within the person who obeys is as applicable to those who are giving Christian instruction as it is to those receiving it. Paul's focus on inner convictions implies that no believer should ever coerce the obedience of another believer, much less those outside the church. Large amounts of ethical instruction are necessary for forming the character of believers, as Paul demonstrates in 12:1-15:7, but Christians who instruct others must also follow Paul's example in patiently leaving the inner change that produces obedience to the work of God.

Non-retaliation

There is perhaps no more costly form of Christian obedience and no requirement of Christian ethics that runs more powerfully against human intuition than the principle of non-retaliation that Paul develops in 12:14 and 17-21. "It is a difficult sacrifice which Christ demands of us when he demands that we abandon our attempts at vengeance," said Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "perhaps it is the most difficult sacrifice of all. For it is entirely natural for



humans to seek vengeance against their enemies." Bonhoeffer made this comment in a sermon he preached on [Romans] 12:16-21 in late January, 1938. This was only a few months after the Gestapo had closed the small Confessing Church seminary he led at Finkenwalde and less than two weeks after the Gestapo had arrested him and twenty-nine other believers at a church meeting and then interrogated them for seven hours. Eventually Bonhoeffer would become a key player in a military plot to kill Hitler, but this was an effort to defend others against the horrors of the Third Reich, not an act of personal revenge.

Because much is sometimes at stake in following Paul's advice, it is important to be clear about what he is saying. When Paul speaks of blessing ones persecutor (12:14) and living in peace with everyone (12:18), he is not implying that believers should capitulate to the demands of bullies or that conciliation is more important than addressing injustice. In a context where blessing is contrasted with cursing, both terms refer to something that one is asking God to do for or to someone else, whether good or evil. Paul, then, is instructing believers to ask God to bring good to those who are doing them harm. Since it is not in the best interest of the wicked that they continue their rebellion against God and hatred of others, the blessing that Paul refers to must include the prayer that they turn from injustice and seek God's mercy. This understanding of 12:14 seems to be confirmed by 12:20 where, on the most likely understanding of the believers role in heaping coals of fire on the enemy's head, the believer s kindness is a way of encouraging the enemy's repentance.

The teaching of Jesus on the same subject provides a reason why Jesus's disciples and hearers should do good to those who hate them: God is kind and merciful to those who are themselves ungrateful and evil, and Jesus's followers should imitate God. They are to be merciful [οικτιρομενος], even as [their] Father is merciful [οικτιρομων] (Luke 6:35-36). In other words, their willingness to treat their enemies better than they deserve is an active witness to an essential aspect of the character of God and of the gospel. It is difficult to think that Paul's advice, coming on the heels of his reference in 12:1 to Gods compassionate actions (των οικτιρομων) in the gospel, is not also grounded in this idea of bearing witness to the merciful nature of God as he is revealed in the gospel. Believers were themselves once God's enemies, and while they were still hostile to him, he took the initiative in seeking reconciliation with them and provided the costly means by which they could be at peace with him through the death of his Son (5:6-10).

Leaving Punishment to God

Just as God did not seek retribution against believers while they were his enemies but made peace with them, so Paul says in this passage that believers are not to take justice into their own hands and avenge themselves against their enemies. Instead they are to work at peace with all people, including their persecutors. His statement "if possible, to the extent that it is up to you," however, implies that the just peace believers seek with their enemies may not be possible. Their adversaries may have hearts so hard that they never respond to the loving overtures of believers. In this situation Paul continues to call on Christians not to retaliate, but now the reason for their non-retaliation shifts to the principle that God's people cannot usurp God's authority over the judgment and punishment of sin.

According to William V. Harris, this is a matter of "the Christian authorities ... telling the faithful to avoid anger" but encouraging them "to think that God would annihilate their enemies." This, he argues, sent an ambiguous message about anger and whether it was permissible. When Paul speaks of the "wrath" of God (οργη) in 12:19, however, he is speaking of the perfectly just punishment meted out by an omniscient being. This, at least, is how Paul defines God's "wrath" in 1:18-32. Far from being a problematic concept, the concept solves a massive problem. Christians may not take the law into their own hands, exacting "just" punishment upon their enemies, because the sinful tendencies that still operate within them almost guarantee that their revenge will be unjust. Does this mean that justice can never be served? That evil has triumphed over good? The eschatological wrath of God demonstrates that this is not the case. Since God is merciful and wants the wicked to repent, his justice may come slowly from the perspective of the victims, but it will come, and when it comes it will confirm that God has not turned a blind eye to evil but remains committed to the triumph of the good.