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DOING RIGHT WHEN YOU'RE WRONGED

Romans 12:17-21

By

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July 8, 2012

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Romans Lesson 87

Doing Right When You're Wronged Romans 12:17-21

What I said last week also applies to this message: I'm speaking on a subject about which I have almost no experience: Doing right when you're wronged. I've had many instances where people did wrong things to me, of course, but rarely anything traumatic. My parents loved me, brought me to faith in Christ, and taught me His ways. I had a relatively easy childhood.

But some of you have suffered traumatic wrongs. You may have had parents who were emotionally, physically, or even sexually abusive. Some of you have suffered (or perhaps are currently suffering) in an abusive marriage. You live daily under a barrage of verbal and emotional attacks that include either threats of physical harm or actual physical abuse. Or, perhaps your mate was unfaithful and you struggle with bitterness over being betrayed.

Some of you have been victims of major fraud or theft. A few may have been the victim of a violent crime, such as rape or assault. Perhaps a loved one was murdered. Some may have suffered injury or trauma serving our country in the military.

But here in America, few of us have suffered as much as our brothers and sisters in countries where there is open hostility toward the gospel. John Piper ("Do not Avenge Yourself, but Give Place to Wrath," on DesiringGod.org) tells the story of the martyrdom of Graham Staines and his two sons:

In January, 1999 Graham Staines and his two sons, Philip (10) and Timothy (6) were mobbed by radical Hindus, trapped inside their vehicle in ... India, and burned alive. The three charred bodies were recovered clinging to each other. Graham Staines had spent 34 years serving the people of India in the name of Jesus. He was the director of the Leprosy Mission in Baripada, Orissa.

He left behind his widow Gladys and daughter Esther. ... Her response was in every paper in India to the glory of Christ. She said, a few days after the martyrdom of her hus-

band and sons, "I have only one message for the people of India. I'm not bitter. Neither am I angry. But I have one great desire: that each citizen of this country should establish a personal relationship with Jesus Christ who gave his life for their sins ... let us burn hatred and spread the flame of Christ's love."

Everyone thought she would move back to Australia. No. She said God had called them to India, and she would not leave. She said, "My husband and our children have sacrificed their lives for this nation; India is my home. I hope to be here and continue to serve the needy." Then, perhaps most remarkable of all—listen to this all you who are teenagers—her daughter Esther was asked how she felt about the murder of her dad, and the thirteen year old, said, "I praise the Lord that He found my father worthy to die for Him."

Wow! *That* is a God-thing! There is no other way to explain it. A similar thing happened in 2007 in Turkey, where Islamic militants mutilated and murdered German missionary Tilman Geske, a father of three, and two Turkish believers, one of whom had two young children. Geske's widow also publicly forgave the murderers and vowed to continue her ministry in Turkey.

That's the high biblical standard that we're called to! I'm not going to tell you that I could respond as those godly widows did, unless God gave me unusual grace. But we need to understand how God wants us to respond when we are wronged, whether in a relatively minor or in a major way. We need to practice with the minor wrongs that we suffer so that we'll be prepared for the major wrongs. In Romans 12:17-21, Paul teaches that...

The Christian response to being wronged is to do right toward your enemy, leaving all vengeance with God.

As with the previous section (12:14-16), the thread of selflessness or self-denial runs through our text. Our aim must be (as Paul's was; Phil. 1:20), to exalt Christ in our bodies, whether by life or by death. Our desire should be that our enemy would come to know the same mercy and grace that we found at the cross. And so, rather than responding to the evil done against us with evil or with vengeance, we are commanded to respond with the radical

love of Christ that overcomes evil with good. The world says, "Don't get mad; get even!" But our Lord says (Luke 6:27), "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you."

1. The wrong response to being wronged is to pay it back with wrong.

Paul says this three times in slightly different ways for emphasis: Romans 12:17a: "Never pay back evil for evil to anyone." Verse 19a, "Never take your own revenge, beloved...." Verse 21, "Do not be overcome by evil...." Paul gives a similar command in 1 Thessalonians 5:15, "See that no one repays another with evil for evil, but always seek after that which is good for one another and for all people." (See, also, 1 Peter 3:9.)

John Calvin points out that returning evil for evil may not be as severe as seeking revenge, but it is still forbidden. For example, your husband snaps unkindly at you and you respond by being cold to him or by not speaking to him. You aren't plotting revenge, but you're not exactly blessing him. You're returning evil for evil. Or, if someone makes a cutting remark and you try to counter it, even in jest, you're returning evil for evil.

I still remember when the Lord convicted me of this. When I was in college, a bunch of guys met weekly for dinner and Bible study. While we were waiting for dinner and exchanging small talk, it often devolved into a "chop" session, where one guy would make a humorous put-down about another guy, and he would respond with a funny put-down of the first guy. We all would laugh and sometimes pile on with more humorous put-downs.

Then one night, a newer Christian in our group said with a serious look on his face, "Guys, we're sinning to talk like this." We all jumped on him with our excuses: "Come on, we're just having fun." But he stood his ground and cited verses like Ephesians 4:29, "Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a *word* as is good for edification according to the need of *the moment*, so that it will give grace to those who hear." One by one, we all finally admitted that he was right. We asked forgiveness of one another and the chop sessions ended that night.

Revenge, which goes a step beyond returning evil for evil, is motivated by pride. Someone's sinful actions against us wound our

pride, so we want to get even to restore our honor. Many cultures around the world are driven by these honor codes. One family or tribe offends another tribe, so the offended party retaliates by inflicting revenge. This momentarily puts them on top, but only until their rival can devise a way to get even. Sometimes these feuds go on for centuries, resulting in needless bloodshed and warfare. The same mindset is behind the Muslim "honor killings," where a family member who shames the family is killed to restore the family's honor. It all stems from sinful pride.

Pastor Bob Deffinbaugh (bible.org, "Loving Your Enemies: Overcoming Evil with Good") shows four reasons from these verses that it is always wrong to take your own revenge. (1) "Revenge runs contrary to what society deems to be right." Note verse 17b: "Respect what is right in the sight of all men." Our laws prohibit vigilante justice, where one person takes it upon himself to right some perceived wrong. And, while we sometimes chuckle at the absurd extremes that people take to get revenge, at least our culture usually knows that their behavior is wrong. The world generally knows that revenge solves nothing.

(2) "Revenge does not promote peace but incites men to hostility." In verse 18, Paul says, "If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men." Vengeance doesn't lead to peace, but to further vengeance. It keeps the vicious cycle going.

(3) "Revenge usurps a task which belongs only to God." In verse 19, Paul says, "Leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, 'Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,' says the Lord." We are incompetent to carry out personal vengeance, because we cannot know all of the motives and circumstances that were behind a person's wrongful action towards us. Besides, our emotions get involved and cloud our judgment. Only God, who knows all things, is a competent and righteous Judge.

(4) "Revenge succumbs to evil rather than overcoming evil with good." As Paul commands (12:21), "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." To take revenge is to respond to sin with more sin. It puts you on the same level as the one who sinned against you.

And so, as difficult as it is (and it *is* difficult!), it is *always* wrong to respond to wrong with more wrong. Paying back evil for evil or taking revenge is always motivated by selfishness or pride. It does not honor our merciful God. It will not lead to the conversion of the one who sinned against you. So you have to determine in advance that when you are wronged, you will not retaliate with more wrong.

2. The right response when you are wronged is to do what is right toward your enemy.

Paul states the right response to wrong several times for emphasis: Romans 12:17b: "Respect what is right in the sight of all men." Verse 18: "If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men." Verse 20: "But if your enemy is hungry, feed him, and if he is thirsty, give him a drink" Verse 21b: "Overcome evil with good."

Again, I would emphasize that this is not our natural reaction. Our natural reaction is: He hit me; I'll hit him back even harder! He yelled at me; I'll yell at him even louder! He cursed me out; I'll let that no good bum hear a few choice words from me! It requires submission to the indwelling Spirit of God to respond to wrongs by doing what is right.

- A. Doing what is right requires some forethought.

Verse 17b should literally be translated, "Take thought in advance for what is visibly good in the sight of all people." In New Testament Greek there are two words that convey the idea of goodness. One refers to inherent goodness. The other, the word used here, refers to external or visible goodness. It means good "in the sense of right, fair, noble, honorable" (*A Manual Lexicon of the Greek New Testament*, G. Abbott-Smith [Charles Scribner's Sons], p. 229).

When Paul says that we should take thought for what is right *in the sight of all people*, he does not mean that we should determine our behavior by public opinion. Public opinion may run contrary to God's Word. Rather, he means that we should think about our testimony to a watching world. What idea of the Christian faith will the world form when it sees or hears about how we responded to the wrong that was done to us? If we react with rage, we're not

being a good witness. If we stop to think about our witness, we can then respond in a Christlike manner.

Somewhere in his writings (I could not find the exact source) the late Chinese sufferer for Christ, Watchman Nee, tells of two Chinese terrace farmers. The farmer whose field was higher up the hill was a Christian. He would get up early and work hard to pump water by hand for his crops. But his shifty neighbor below him would cut a path through his upper neighbor's dikes and let the water flow down to his lower field. This happened more than once and the Christian farmer was quite irritated with his lazy neighbor.

But rather than going down and yelling at his neighbor, the Christian farmer started pumping water first for his neighbor's field and then for his own. As I recall the story, the lazy neighbor soon came under conviction, went to the Christian and apologized, and then listened to the Christian's witness about Christ and came to faith in Christ himself.

You may wonder, what should I do if I've already blown it? Maybe you didn't stop to think about how you should respond and so you exploded in anger at a difficult neighbor or family member. You pretty much ruined your testimony. Now what?

The answer is, humble yourself, go to the person you wronged, and ask forgiveness. Don't try to use your apology to witness to him, because he will think you're just apologizing so that you can give him the religious pitch. Just ask forgiveness and leave it with him to ask about your faith.

I've told you before about my own embarrassing failure. In California, we had a collie that was a good dog, except that whenever the neighbor drove by in his truck or the UPS truck went by, this dog would go into a frenzy of barking. It must have really bugged our neighbor, because one morning when our daughter Christa, who was about 12, went out to feed the dog, the neighbor came outside and started yelling at her, with a lot of profanity, to keep our dog quiet.

I was inside and could hear what was going on and it made me mad that he would use such foul language on my sweet daughter. So I went outside and yelled back at him to keep his filthy mouth shut around my kids. He yelled back at me and I went back inside.

This was *Sunday* morning and I had to preach God's Word in a few minutes! God was convicting me about my angry exchange with my neighbor. The church was only about a quarter mile away, so I walked to church. As I came out of the house with my tie on and briefcase in hand, the neighbor and his daughter's live-in boyfriend drove by. The dog was going crazy. I raised my hand to signal my neighbor to stop. He and the boyfriend looked like they were ready to pile out of the truck for a fight. Before they did, I said to the neighbor, "I'm really sorry that I yelled at you as I did, and I'm sorry about our dog. I ask your forgiveness. I don't know how to get him to stop barking at your truck."

His countenance changed instantly. He apologized for yelling at our daughter. And from then on, we always exchanged a friendly wave whenever we crossed paths. I never got to share the gospel with him, but I'm sure that he knew I was a pastor. At least he knew that I wasn't a religious hypocrite. Give thought to what is right in the sight of all men.

- B. Doing what is right may or may not result in peace, but peace should be your aim.

Romans 12:18: "If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men." Sometimes in spite of all that we do, the other person does not want to make peace. He's mad at God and you represent God to him. But Paul's point is, don't provoke a quarrel by your obnoxious behavior and then claim that you're being persecuted for righteousness' sake. Bend over backwards to make peace. Let the difficult person know that you want to be on friendly terms. If he rejects it, at least it's not your fault.

I should add that seeking peace does not include compromising key biblical truth for the sake of peace. Paul would not make peace with the Judaizers, who insisted on circumcision in addition to faith for salvation. He confronted Peter over his hypocrisy in trying to stay on their good side. Sometimes it is sin to make peace. We need wisdom and discernment to know when to stand firm.

- C. Doing what is right includes kind, loving deeds to meet the needs of your enemy.

Romans 12:20: "But if your enemy is hungry, feed him, and if he is thirsty, give him a drink" Feeding your enemy or giving

him a drink represents all kind deeds that you can do to meet your enemy's needs. Deeds often speak louder than words.

During a time of terrible atrocities in Armenia, a Turkish soldier pursued a young woman and her brother down a street. He cornered them and then mercilessly shot the brother and let the sister go free, but only after she saw her brother's brutal murder.

Later, the woman was working as a nurse in a military hospital when the Turkish soldier who had shot her brother was brought into her ward. He was critically wounded and if she had left him alone, he would have died. At first, she wrestled with the desire for vengeance. But she realized that the Lord wanted her to treat this man with kindness, so she gently nursed him back to health.

One day the Turk, who recognized her, said, "Why didn't you let me die?" She replied, "I am a follower of Jesus and He said, 'Love your enemies.'" The man was silent for a long time, but finally said, "I never knew that anyone could have such a faith. If that's what it does, tell me more about it. I want it." ("Our Daily Bread," 11/81)

So the wrong response to being wronged is to pay it back with wrong. The right response when you are wronged is to do what is right toward your enemy. Finally,

3. After you have responded to wrong with right, you can leave all vengeance to God.

Paul's command (12:19) not to take vengeance relates to personal revenge, not to utilizing proper authorities for protection or redress. If someone is breaking the law, it is right to report him to the authorities (as Paul discusses in the very next section). In the local church, the elders sometimes must discipline members who sin against others and refuse to repent. And Paul's point is that God is the final judge who will repay all that do not repent. So you can leave your case in His hands, knowing that He will be righteous and just in punishing those who have sinned against you. So your aim should be to bless your persecutors (12:14) and do right towards them (12:17). But if they refuse to repent, you don't have to seek revenge, because God will right all wrongs at the judgment.

What does Paul mean, though, when he cites Proverbs 25:21-22 about your good deeds heaping burning coals on your enemy's

head? Most commentators say that the burning coals are burning pangs of shame that may bring the wrongdoer to repentance. In light of the context, which urges us to overcome evil with good, they argue that it could not mean that our good deeds will result in greater judgment for our enemy.

But John Piper (“Christ Overcame Evil with Good—Do the Same” on DesiringGod.org) and Thomas Schreiner (*Romans* [Baker], pp. 674-676) argue that all of the Old Testament references to burning coals refer to God’s judgment on His enemies, not to bringing the shame of guilt or repentance on them. For example, in Psalm 140:10, David cries out with regard to his enemies, “May burning coals fall upon them” So the meaning of Romans 12:20 would be that if you do good toward your enemy and he doesn’t repent, you can rest assured that God will one day redress your wrong by bringing severe judgment on your enemy.

Your motive in doing the good deeds is not to increase your enemy’s judgment, but prayerfully to bring him to repentance. But if he doesn’t repent, you can know that God will ultimately bring him to justice. In that sense, the righteous will rejoice when God brings judgment on the wicked (Deut. 32:43; Ps. 58:10-11; Rev. 6:10; 18:20). But our job is to bear witness to Christ by doing good towards our enemies and leaving all vengeance with God.

Conclusion

So the hard question that this Scripture leaves us with is, have I paid back evil with evil to anyone? Is this my pattern with my spouse? Is this the way I deal with my kids? How are my relationships with my extended family? Is this how I deal with difficult people at work or in my neighborhood? If so, first ask God’s forgiveness. Then figure out a way to ask forgiveness of those you have wronged. Even if they don’t repent, think about ways that you can bless them with kindness. That’s how to do right when you’ve been wronged.

Application Questions

1. How can we determine when it is right to fight for our rights and when we should just accept being wronged?
2. Why does reporting an abusive spouse or parent to civil authorities not violate the commands of our text?
3. Does Scripture require us to try to carry on a relationship with a difficult person? Can we keep our distance?
4. Is there a situation where you need to apply the principles of our text? How will you go about doing it?

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