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## TRANSFORMED ATTITUDES

Romans 12:14-16

By

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Romans Lesson 86

## Transformed Attitudes Romans 12:14-16

My task is to talk to you about something that I have almost no experience with and neither do most of you. Paul tells us (Rom. 12:14), "Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse." Most of us in America have not experienced anything comparable to the persecution that our brothers and sisters in other countries are facing. In Nigeria, the extremist Muslim group, Boko Haram, has been slaughtering Christians and destroying churches. In many other countries, numerous Christians have been imprisoned, killed or forced to leave their homes and flee for their lives.

Some of you may have been ostracized at work or suffered discrimination when it came time for a promotion because of your Christian faith. Perhaps family members have been mean to you because you're a Christian. Maybe a professor at the university ridiculed you in front of the class because you believe in God as the creator or you believe that homosexuality is sin. While I'm not belittling such persecution, I think you'd readily agree that it does not compare to seeing your loved ones slaughtered or having your house burned down and being forced to flee with only the clothes on your back. But we may be facing increased persecution and difficult times in the future here in America, so we need to understand how to respond to persecution in a way that pleases God.

In addition to persecution, Paul jumps to two other topics (sympathy and humility) that seem unrelated (12:15-16): "Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep. 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."

Are these just random thoughts that Paul throws out without any connection with each other? Perhaps, but there do seem to be some connecting factors. For one thing, each of these commands reflects transformed attitudes. Back in 12:2, Paul said, "And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect." Now he is showing

what this transformed, renewed mind looks like. It blesses enemies who have persecuted them, it sympathizes with others in their joys and sorrows and it demonstrates genuine humility.

There is another connection between these three seemingly disjointed verses: they all are rooted in selflessness or self-denial. We can only bless our persecutors and not curse them if we are more concerned about their eternal welfare than we are about our suffering. We can only rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep if our focus is off ourselves and on their situation. We can only be of the same mind with one another and not be haughty or wise in our own estimation if our eyes are on the Lord and others, not on ourselves. Selflessness is the thread that ties all three verses together.

Also, there is the connection that if someone persecutes you and then something bad happens to him, you may rejoice at his suffering: "I'm glad that he got what he deserved!" Or, if your persecutor has something good happen to him, you might be angry, not rejoicing, at his good fortune. For example, if someone at work who has slandered you and turned other workers against you, gets a promotion, you wouldn't be rejoicing. But God commands you to bless your persecutor, not to rejoice at his downfall or be unhappy about his success. So verse 15 has a practical link with verse 14.

But how can we possibly rejoice at a persecutor's success or be sorrowful at his troubles? Paul isn't talking about faking it, where you smile at the news of your enemy's promotion, while in your heart you're thinking, "I hope that dirty rat gets what's coming to him!" No, Paul is talking about genuinely rejoicing with those who rejoice and weeping with those who weep. How can we do that from the heart? Verse 16 shows that the only way we can do that is to grow in genuine humility

I also add that while verse 14 may relate to persecution from those outside the church, whereas the next two qualities may apply more to relationships within the church, that isn't necessarily so. Sometimes those who are in the church can wound you much worse than those outside. You kind of expect that outsiders may give you trouble, but you don't expect that those in the church would deliberately try to hurt you. But, sadly, it happens! So these

verses are applicable both to situations in the world and in the church. Paul is saying,

The mercies of God call us to bless our enemies, sympathize with others, and practice humility.

You can tell a lot about a person by his or her attitude, especially when he is going through difficult times. The test of genuine change is when our attitudes change. This is especially true when we are treated wrongly and our attitudes reflect the character of Christ. Thus Paul's first command is not easy, but it is one that we need if we want to be like Christ:

1. The mercies of God call us to bless our enemies.

Romans 12:14: "Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse." Paul repeats the command to bless for emphasis, adding the second time, "Do not curse." This verse assumes that we will face persecution as believers. As Paul wrote (2 Tim. 3:12), "Indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted." The reason people persecute Christians is that people hate God, and we represent God to them. Even when we do what is right, they hate us for it (1 Pet. 3:13-17). So rather than wonder, "What's wrong?" when others mistreat us because of our faith, we should expect such mistreatment. If they hated our Lord, they will hate us, too (John 15:18-21).

By "blessing," Paul means genuinely praying for and seeking the well-being of the persecutor. He means asking God to save the one who has mistreated us, which is the greatest blessing of all. By not cursing, he doesn't mean not swearing at him, but rather, not calling down a curse from God on him. We should not wish that the persecutor rot in hell for what he did. It's not enough just to refrain from retaliating or to get rid of our desire for vengeance. Rather, we are to ask God to bless him. As we have opportunity, we are to seek ways of helping the one who wronged us. We should not speak evil about him or get delight in thinking of evil things that could happen to him. We should bless him. Needless to say, this is not a natural or easy thing to do!

Paul is reflecting the words of our Lord Jesus. He said (Matt. 5:44), "But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." In Luke 6:27-28 Jesus put it this way: "But I say to

you who hear, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you." A few verses later, He added (Luke 6:35-36), "But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High; for He Himself is kind to ungrateful and evil *men*. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful." In Matthew 5:11-12, He said, "Blessed are you when *people* insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

Regarding his own ministry, Paul said (1 Cor. 4:12b-13), "When we are reviled, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure; when we are slandered, we try to conciliate; we have become as the scum of the world, the dregs of all things, *even* until now." Peter also held up the example of Jesus to his readers who were suffering unjustly as slaves (1 Pet. 2:19-23):

For this *finds* favor, if for the sake of conscience toward God a person bears up under sorrows when suffering unjustly. For what credit is there if, when you sin and are harshly treated, you endure it with patience? But if when you do what is right and suffer *for it* you patiently endure it, this *finds* favor with God. For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps, who committed no sin, nor was any deceit found in His mouth; and while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting *Himself* to Him who judges righteously.

Peter also said that our response to evil should be (1 Pet. 3:9), "not returning evil for evil or insult for insult, but giving a blessing instead; for you were called for the very purpose that you might inherit a blessing." These verses show that the uniform teaching of the New Testament runs contrary to our natural reaction when we're mistreated. We are to respond not only by *not* retaliating, but positively by blessing those who persecute us.

The reason we should seek to respond to persecution by blessing our persecutors is that we are seeking to reflect the character of Christ to them. We want God to be glorified as we reflect

His grace and love to sinners. As Jesus said (Luke 6:35), "He Himself is kind to ungrateful and evil *men*."

A great help in obeying this command is to keep in mind that God was gracious to me when I was a sinner. He continues to be gracious to me when I sin, even as His child. And so I should be gracious to those in Satan's domain of darkness, who are slaves to sin. My blessing those who persecute me may be the startling behavior that opens them up to the Savior.

This is a story that I've shared with you before, but I've never forgotten it since I read it over 30 years ago. And the author, Josephine Ligon, had not forgotten it, although it had happened to her as a young girl. There was a family named Parsons in her hometown that preached and practiced forgiveness. On one occasion, Josephine and some of her third-grade friends put a handful of pencil shavings into the Parsons girl's sandwich, just to be mean and to make her mad. But she didn't get mad. Instead, the next day, without any sign of repentance from her persecutors, the Parsons girl brought everyone in the class a large, beautiful, hand-decorated cookie that said, "Jesus loves you." With her mother's help, that little girl blessed her persecutors, and those third graders remembered it for the rest of their lives! ("Your Daffodils are Pretty," *Christianity Today* [3/2/1979], p. 18)

You may wonder whether the New Testament is commanding total pacifism in the face of aggressors. Is it wrong to defend yourself against a bully or an intruder or robber? Is there a place for praying the imprecatory psalms against our persecutors, calling down the judgment of God on them? I can only comment briefly. My understanding is that there is a rightful place for defending your family or your own person from a violent aggressor. If possible, call the police and let them defend you. But if there is not time, it is not wrong to protect yourself or your family against a lawbreaker. But you should use the least amount of force necessary to restrain him and you should not seek to retaliate later.

Regarding the imprecatory psalms, it is important to realize that they were judicial and national, rather than personal cries for vengeance. On a personal level, David often refrained from taking vengeance on his enemies. But as the king over God's people, David was crying out for God to bring justice on evildoers. Also,

they reflect the fact that one day Christ will bring judgment on all who do not repent. When we pray for God's kingdom to come, we are praying that He will either save or judge the wicked. So an appropriate prayer for those who have persecuted us may be, "Lord, would You please save him, but if not, I know that You will judge him righteously." The transformed attitude that we are to reflect is: because God was merciful to me while I was His enemy, I need to bless those who have treated me wrongfully.

## 2. The mercies of God call us to sympathize with others.

Romans 12:15, "Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep." This command is not as difficult as verse 14, but still it isn't necessarily easy, because it requires self-denial. To enter sincerely into others' joys and sorrows, you have to take the focus off yourself. You have to tune in and really listen to what they are saying, both verbally and non-verbally. You have to take the time to understand what they are going through.

To rejoice with those who rejoice sounds easy, but it's often difficult. Chrysostom thought that Paul put it first because it is the more difficult of the two commands. We naturally weep with those who weep, but envy, pride, and a spirit of competition can keep us from rejoicing with those who rejoice. If you think that you deserved the success or blessings that they are enjoying, it takes selflessness and grace to truly rejoice with them. Self is always the major problem that we must battle.

But it's not easy, either, to weep with those who weep. We feel the need to say something wise or appropriate, but we often end up saying something that we shouldn't say. Job's three friends did well when they sat silently with him for a week. They got into trouble when they tried to explain to him why he was suffering. Fewer words are usually better and wiser. Paul doesn't say, "Counsel those who weep," but "*Weep* with those who weep."

A little girl lost a playmate in death. One day she told her parents that she had gone to comfort the grieving mother. "What did you say?" her parents asked. "Nothing," she replied. "I just climbed up on her lap and cried with her." She was a wise comforter!

Joseph Bayly and his wife lost three of their seven children in death. He wrote (*The Last Thing We Talk About* [David C. Cook],

pp. 55-56), "I was sitting, torn by grief. Someone came and talked to me of God's dealings, of why it happened, of hope beyond the grave. He talked constantly. He said things I knew were true.

"I was unmoved, except to wish he'd go away. He finally did.

"Another came and sat beside me. He didn't talk. He didn't ask me leading questions. He just sat beside me for an hour and more, listened when I said something, answered briefly, prayed simply, left.

"I was moved. I was comforted. I hated to see him go."

The mercies of God call us to sympathize with others in both their joys and their sorrows.

### 3. The mercies of God call us to practice humility.

Romans 12:16: "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." Paul keeps hammering this theme. In 11:20 he warned the Gentile believers, "Do not be conceited, but fear." In 11:25, he explained, "For I do not want you, brethren, to be uninformed of this mystery—so that you will not be wise in your own estimation—that a partial hardening has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in." In 12:3, he hits it again: "For through the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think; but to think so as to have sound judgment, as God has allotted to each a measure of faith."

The command, "Be of the same mind toward one another" is one that Paul often repeated. He will repeat it in Romans 15:5, "Now may the God who gives perseverance and encouragement grant you to be of the same mind with one another according to Christ Jesus." He repeats the idea three times in the short letter to the Philippians. In 1:27, he writes, "Only conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or remain absent, I will hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel." In 2:2, he repeats, "Make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose." And again in 4:2 he says, "I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to live in harmony in the Lord." "Live in harmony"

is literally, in the Greek text, “to think the same thing.” (See, also, 1 Cor. 1:10; 2 Cor. 13:11.)

Paul is not insisting that we all think alike or agree on every issue, which isn't going to happen in this life. Rather, he is calling us to unity based on our common salvation, our shared purpose in the gospel, and our shared hope in Christ. His command does not suggest that we set aside essential doctrinal truth for the sake of unity, which would be to compromise the gospel. Rather, as in Ephesians 4:2-3, he is saying, “With all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love, being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”

When he says (Rom. 12:16b), “Do not be haughty in mind, but associate with the lowly,” he could mean either lowly things or lowly people, or both. The verb, “associate with,” is literally, “to be carried away by,” as a flood that sweeps someone away (it is used in Gal. 2:13; 2 Pet. 3:17). So the idea is not to resist doing lowly tasks, but to be carried away with doing them. If you see trash on the floor at church, pick it up and throw it away. If you see that the trash bags are full at a church function, carry them out. Or, as applied to people who may be beneath your economic or educational level, reach out in love and make them feel accepted. Put yourself on the same level and relate graciously to them as you would want to be related to if you were in their shoes.

“Do not be wise in your own estimation” comes from Proverbs 3:7, “Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD and turn away from evil.” Leon Morris (*The Epistle to the Romans* [Eerdmans/Apollos], p. 451) observes, “The person who is wise in his own eyes is rarely so in the eyes of other people.” Even some unbelievers get this. Jay Leno was asked what the secret was to his long marriage. He said (*Parade*, 5/20/12), “If you don't fool around, it's not that hard. I think the key to life is low self-esteem—believing you're not the smartest or most handsome person in the room. All the people who have high self-esteem are criminals and actors.”

Paul is warning us of the danger of intellectual pride. This was the sin that Adam and Eve fell to in the garden, when they thought that by eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, they could be like God (Gen. 3:5-6). It is the sin that Paul re-

ferred to in Romans 1, of those who “suppress the truth in unrighteousness.” “Professing to be wise, they became fools” (1:22). Through Jeremiah (9:23-24), the Lord warns, “Let not a wise man boast of his wisdom, and let not the mighty man boast of his might, let not a rich man boast of his riches; but let him who boasts boast of this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the LORD who exercises lovingkindness, justice and righteousness on earth; for I delight in these things,” declares the LORD.”

### Conclusion

How transformed are your attitudes? Are you blessing those who have wronged you? Are you sympathizing with others in their joys and sorrows? Are you practicing humility through true Christian unity, through being quick to take on lowly jobs or to befriend people of no earthly status, and through not being impressed with your own wisdom? If you need to grow in any of these, go often to the foot of the cross, where Christ humbled Himself for your sake (Phil. 2:5-11).

### Application Questions

1. How can we know whether to confront or resist an aggressor versus blessing him?
2. What Scriptures would you use to argue that pacifism (whether individual or national) is not mandated in the Bible?
3. How can an insensitive person grow in genuine sympathy?
4. Where should we draw the lines of Christian unity? How much doctrinal error (if any) should we tolerate to promote unity?

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