

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, May 7, 2017**

AS FAR AS IT DEPENDS ON YOU

Romans 12:14, 17-21

If you follow major league baseball, you probably know that Baltimore Orioles center fielder Adam Jones was the recipient of repeated racial taunts during a game at Fenway Park in Boston this past week, a sad reminder that, after all these years, pockets of racial prejudice still exist in America.

It has been 70 years now since Jackie Robinson broke baseball's color line and became the first African-American player in major league baseball in 1947. Robinson, a Christian, was signed to a major league contract by Branch Rickey, also a Christian, who was the general manager of the Brooklyn Dodgers.

Both Rickey and Robinson understood that this would be a monumental challenge for Robinson and all his family, since he would be the object of unrelenting racism both on and off the field, from players as well as fans.

At their first meeting, before Robinson signed with the Dodgers, Robinson asked Rickey: "You want a player who doesn't have the guts to fight back?"

"No, no," said Rickey. "I want a player who has the guts *not* to fight back. People aren't going to like this. They're going to do anything (they can) to get you to react. Follow a curse with a curse and they'll hear only yours. Follow a blow with a blow and they'll say that the Negro" (as blacks were called back then) "lost his temper; that the Negro doesn't belong (in the Major Leagues). Your enemy will be out in force, and you cannot meet him on his own low ground. We win with hitting, running, fielding – only that. We win only if the world is convinced of two things: That you are a fine gentleman and a great ball player. Like our Savior, you've got to have the guts to turn the other cheek." Then Rickey said: "Can you do it?"

Robinson replied: "You give me a uniform, you give me a number on my back; and I'll give you the guts." Which Robinson did in a remarkable way throughout his career with the Dodgers.

Turning the other cheek (Matthew 5:39) is a way of describing the Christian principle of non-retaliation laid out by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount (see Matthew 5:38-48) and reinforced by Paul here in Romans 12. It takes guts – and grace – to turn the other cheek and not fight back when someone mistreats you.

Two Sundays ago I described Paul's instructions in verses 9-16 as "Christian Living 101." There Paul lays out the qualities that are to characterize our hearts and relationships in the fellowship of God's people. It is Paul's way of saying: "This is how to get along with one

another in a way that will bless one another and please God.” I encourage you to go back and re-read it often.

Today’s passage, verses 17-21 along with verse 14, can come under the heading: “Doing Right When You’ve Been Done Wrong” (Swindoll, *Insights on Romans*, 263). It answers the question: What are you and I to do as followers of Christ when others mistreat us or injure us in some way? How are we to respond? The answer Paul gives is definitely countercultural. Our natural reaction is to retaliate: You hit me, I’ll hit you back. You hurt me, I’ll hurt you back. You say something mean about me, I’ll say something mean about you. When we’ve been wronged, or think we’ve been wronged, our natural inclination is to want to get even. We want to do unto others as they have done unto us. It is only fair, isn’t it?

There is no question that it is the way of the world. It is an unwritten law of major league baseball. If you hit one of our batters with a pitch, we’ll retaliate and hit one of yours, especially if you did something that injured one of our players. (Which is what took place in the series between the Boston Red Sox and the Baltimore Orioles last week.)

It is also, way too often, the rule of the road. I told you the story last time about the driver whose actions behind the wheel didn’t match the “Jesus Loves You and So Do I” bumper sticker on his car. According to a study done last year by the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety, nearly 80 percent of drivers in the U.S. expressed significant anger, aggression, or road rage behind the wheel at least once in the previous year. The most alarming findings indicate that approximately 8 million U.S. drivers engaged in extreme examples of road rage, including purposely ramming another vehicle or getting out of the car to confront another driver. Among other types of angry or aggressive behavior:

- 51 percent reported purposely tailgating (we’re not talking about partying at the stadium before the game).
- 47 percent admitted yelling at another driver.
- 45 percent said they honked to show annoyance or anger.
- 33 percent made angry gestures.
- 24 percent tried to block another vehicle from changing lanes.

Is this a big deal? Not always. But sometimes it is, because sometimes it can have disastrous consequences.

As much as retaliation seems to be the way of the world, we know it is *not* the way of Jesus. It is *not* the will of God for your life or mine. It is *not* the way God wants us to live as His people. It is *not* the way you and I are to respond when someone wrongs us, whether it is another believer or someone who does not profess any faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

People can be mean. Yes, even church people, sometimes. We live in a world where opposition to the church, to the message of the Bible, and to Christian values seem to be growing by the year. We live in a culture that is increasingly predisposed to oppose and reject Christian beliefs, values, and practices in its public life. This doesn’t mean that the sky is

falling. It does mean that the Bible's message in these verses is of extreme relevance to us today.

So, what are we to do when someone wrongs us, especially when it is done intentionally? How are we to respond to those who oppose us and seek to injure us in some way?

BLESS THOSE WHO PERSECUTE YOU

Notice first what Paul says in verse 14: "Bless those who persecute you. Bless and do not curse." Here, of course, Paul is echoing the words of Jesus in Luke 6:27-28, where the Savior says: "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you."

Now, Jesus can't be serious, can He? O yes, He can. He doesn't really mean what He says, does He? Yes, He does. And so does Paul.

The word *bless* in verse 14 comes from the Greek *eulogeo*, from which we get our word *eulogy*. The verb *eulogeo* means "to speak well of." We are to ask God to do good, to work for good, in the lives of people who want to do us harm, who are out to persecute us because we are followers of Jesus. We are to seek God's blessing in their lives. That is a tall order, isn't it? That is totally contrary to our nature. It is something that requires the work of God's Spirit in us and with our willingness to let Him do His work in us.

Persecution can take many different forms. It can range from verbal abuse to discrimination and social ostracism to incarceration, forced labor, violence, and even death. To bless persecutors is not to give approval to either their actions or the attitudes behind them, but to pray for their repentance and forgiveness, for their hearts to be changed and for a change in their attitude regarding the God of the Bible and the Christian faith. It is to pray for God's good, for God's grace in their lives, so that those who are now God's enemies might become members of His family through faith.

DO NOT RETALIATE

In verse 17 Paul states the Christian principle of non-retaliation: "Do not repay anyone evil for evil." He says it again in verse 19, using different words: "Do not take revenge, my friends." And again in verse 21: "Do not be overcome by evil."

Think about verse 17 for a moment: "Do not repay anyone evil for evil." "Evil" is a rather broad category. So let's break it down a bit. Here are some examples of what "Do not repay evil for evil" means:

- Do not repay gossip with gossip. If someone gossips about you, don't respond by gossiping about him or her.
- Do not repay slander with slander (or lies with lies).
- Do not repay insult with insult.
- Do not repay rudeness with rudeness.

- Do not repay anger with anger.
- Do not repay hate with hate.
- Do not repay betrayal with betrayal.
- Do not repay infidelity with infidelity.
- Do not repay violence with violence.
- Do not repay injustice with injustice.

The list could go on, I'm sure. But you get the idea.

In each verse of this passage where there is a prohibition (vv. 14, 17, 19, 21), it is accompanied by a positive step (or steps) to be taken. Retaliation or revenge is simply not an option for a Christian. We are not to return evil for evil. Period. Jesus didn't do it. And we are called to be like Him.

If we rule out retaliation, what are we supposed to do? We have already looked at the instruction in verse 14 to bless those who are against us. Paul gives us two more positive directives in verses 17 and 18:

DO WHAT IS RIGHT

First, he says, "be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody" (12:17). The idea, as J. B. Phillips says, is: "See that your public behavior is above criticism." When somebody does wrong to you, make sure that your response doesn't compromise or damage your witness as a follower of the Lord Jesus. Avoid even the appearance of impropriety or inappropriate, ungodly behavior, because you never know who may be watching. Even if nobody's watching.

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So, "be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody" is Paul's first directive here. The second, in verse 18, is this: "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone."

Living at peace with everyone is the ideal. Wouldn't the world be a wonderful place if everybody could just get along with each other? But Paul is a realist. He recognizes that it is not always possible to live at peace with everyone. Not everybody gets along. Not everybody wants to get along. Which is why he prefaces this directive with two qualifiers: 1) "If it is possible;" and 2) "As far as it depends on you."

"If it is possible." Sometimes it is not possible. The Bible says: "Seek peace and pursue it" (Psalm 34:14; 1 Peter 3:11). To seek peace with others is a noble and godly pursuit. But peace is not always possible. It is impossible to live at peace with someone who is hell-bent on being at war with you. There may be someone in your life who is just not willing to live at peace with you. Or maybe there is someone who will agree to a peace treaty with you only if you agree to a condition(s) that involve violating the teaching of God's Word. Which is something you can't do. Something you must not do.

It takes two to tangle. As far as it depends on you, refuse to tangle. As far as it depends on you make every effort to live at peace with everyone. But don't be surprised when you experience conflict or hostility. As far as it depends on you, do what you can to de-escalate the conflict and work toward reconciliation in the relationship. But never at the cost of turning away from the Lord Jesus.

LEAVE ROOM FOR GOD'S WRATH

Paul repeats the prohibition against retaliation in verse 19: "Do not take revenge, my friends." Which is followed by the directive to "leave room for God's wrath" and then the instruction to do good and show kindness to your enemies by giving them food and drink. Paul says something similar in 1 Thessalonians 5:15: "Make sure nobody pays back wrong for wrong" – no revenge – "but always try to be kind to each other and to everyone else." Peter says much the same in 1 Peter 3:9: "Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult, but with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing."

To "leave room for God's wrath" is to acknowledge that avenging evil is ultimately God's prerogative, not yours or mine. We are not to take matters into our own hands and pursue some sort of vigilante justice. At one level, the wrath of God is expressed, however imperfectly, through the state's administration of justice, since, as we will see in Romans 13, the governing authorities are God's servants – servants for good, when they carry out their duties justly, fairly, and honorably.

At a higher level, in an ultimate sense, the wrath of God is carried out in His just judgment of unrepentant sinners, who will receive from God the punishment they deserve. For all who trust in Christ and His saving work, the wrath of God for our sin has been poured out on Jesus, who bore our sins in His body on the cross, taking upon Himself the punishment we deserve. For those who refuse the Redeemer and His love, the wrath of God is their just dessert.

For those who trust in Christ, the wrath of God has been replaced by His grace that comes free of charge to people who don't deserve it and never will. Do you see that?

SHOW KINDNESS TO YOUR ENEMIES

"Leave room for God's wrath." Let God do His thing as Judge. But when you have the opportunity, treat your enemies and adversaries with kindness. How? Paul quotes from Proverbs 25:21-22, with its counsel to give them something to eat if they are hungry or something to drink if they are thirsty. In other words, commit intentional acts of kindness – show hospitality – in the hopes of defusing their anger or hostility and softening their hearts toward both God and you.

Understand that Paul's instruction in these verses is not intended as a foreign policy recommendation for a nation. He is not talking about international affairs or the responsibilities of duly elected or appointed public servants. He is talking to us as individuals. As private citizens. As individual members of society. And as members of

God's church. Though there are certainly occasions in which God would have us apply these principles in our relationships with other nations and governments.

There are different ways of interpreting the statement about "heap(ing) burning coals on his head." It may refer to an ancient Egyptian practice in which a man would testify publicly to his penitence by carrying a pan of burning coals on his head. Or it may refer to the embarrassing situation of having the fire in one's house go out (long before matches had been invented), having to ask a neighbor for some coals from his fire, and then carrying the coals back home. Whatever the precise meaning of the burning coals, I think the main point Paul is making is that showing kindness to your enemy may cause him to feel ashamed of his actions, bring about a change of heart, and lead to his repentance. There is no guarantee. But it might.

By the way, the Greek word for "coal" or "charcoal" that appears only here in verse 20 and nowhere else in the New Testament is the word *anthrax*. I just thought that was interesting.

OVERCOME EVIL WITH GOOD

Paul makes his summary statement in verse 21, with one final contrast between the negative and the positive: "Do not be overcome by evil," he says, "but overcome evil with good."

If you curse those who persecute you, if you allow anger or hate or bitterness to fester in your heart toward those who mistreat you in any way, you will be overcome by evil.

If you give in to evil and do evil to those who do evil to you, you will be overcome by it.

If you insist on executing revenge against anyone who injures or mistreats you, you will be overcome by evil.

If, however, you refuse to retaliate when someone does you wrong, you will, with God's help, overcome evil with good.

If you choose to bless your persecutors and pray for them, you will, with God's help, overcome evil with good.

If you determine to do what is right in every situation, you will, with God's help, overcome evil with good.

If you do all you can to get along and live at peace with everyone, you will, with God's help, overcome evil with good.

If you refuse to take matters into your own hands but leave vengeance in the hands of God, you will, with God's help, overcome evil with good.

If you choose to forgive those who hurt you rather than getting even, you will, with God's help, overcome evil with good.

If you choose to show kindness to your enemy, you may win your enemy over, and you will, with God's help, overcome evil with good.

I may or may not know exactly how or where this Scripture passage intersects with your life. But as long as you are in this world, I know it does. And will.

I also know that refusing to fight back, refusing to retaliate or seek revenge, is not easy. Nor is it a sign of weakness. The Bible says that when men hurled insults at Jesus, He did not retaliate. When He suffered, He made no threats. Instead, He entrusted Himself to the Father who judges justly (1 Peter 2:23). Jesus was not weak. It took guts and grace for Him to refuse retaliation. It took guts – and grace – for Martin Luther King, Jr. and thousands of others in the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 60s to not fight back when attacked. It took guts and grace for Jackie Robinson to endure the vitriol that came his way as the first African-American to play major league baseball. And it takes guts and grace – and the power of the Holy Spirit – for us to live out the teaching of this Scripture today.

Do not return evil for evil. Do not seek revenge against those who hurt you. Do not let evil overcome you. As far as it depends on you, seek peace and pursue it.

Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.