

**When Love Gets Difficult. Part Eleven. Forgiving the Wrongdoer  
Romans 12:14,17-21**

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In August of 2013 members of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt burned down 37 churches, plus dozens of Christian clinics and schools, plus dozens of homes and businesses belonging to Christians, and killed three Christians.

The Egyptians whose churches and businesses were burned down painted on the walls of the shells of their destroyed churches and buildings, "We forgive you and we love you."

Our dear Egyptian mission partner Nathan told me that in the weeks that followed, Muslims began to walk into churches and say to the pastors, "Whatever it is that you have, I want. The poverty of my faith has been exposed by what we did to you and how you responded to us."

In June of 2015 Dylann Roof shot and killed nine black men and women at a Bible study at Mother Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina, killing them because of their race.

At Roof's trial, the daughter of one of the women who had been killed said to him, "You took something very precious from me. I will never talk to her ever again. I will never be able to hold her again, but I forgive you. And [may God] have mercy on your soul."

And in September of 2025, Tyler Robinson shot and killed Christian activist Charlie Kirk. He told his roommate that he did it "to end the hate."

At Charlie Kirk's memorial service, his widow, Erika, said, "My husband Charlie, he wanted to save young men, just like the one who took his life. That young man, that young man - on the cross, our savior said, 'Father, forgive them, for they [do] not know what they do.'"

That man, that young man: I forgive him. I forgive him because it was what Christ did . . . The answer to hate is not hate. The answer, we know from the gospel, is love, and always love. Love for our enemies and love for those who persecute us."

There are many things that set apart faithful Christians as they walk through life. But this morning we are exploring what is perhaps the single most baffling and beautiful distinctive of all: love for our enemies and forgiveness for those who wrong us.

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This morning we wrap up a sermon series on chapter 12 of Paul's letter to the church in Rome, in which we've listened in as Paul addressed a number of circumstances when love gets difficult for those who are followers of Christ. Among them:

The difficulty of loving God when our life circumstances get difficult

The difficulty of loving our brothers and sisters in the church family when they make things difficult or see things differently

The difficulty of loving those outside the faith when our different views on faith or morality make that difficult

And this morning, we address the circumstance when love gets *really* difficult

Loving those who hate us, or hurt us, or turn against us.

Listen to what Paul writes in Romans chapter 12 about how we are to respond to those who hurt us:

#### **Romans 12.14**

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse.

#### **Romans 12.17**

Do not repay anyone evil for evil.

#### **Romans 12.19**

Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord.

#### **Romans 12.20**

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."

#### **Romans 12.21**

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

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You're probably aware that none of what Paul says here is original to him.

In these passages Paul quotes twice from the Old Testament. First, in verse 19, he quotes from Deuteronomy 32.35. And then in verse 20 he quotes from Proverbs 25.21-22. He is building on a long tradition of God's people being called to live in a different way from the world around them.

But the heart of what Paul teaches here comes straight from the teachings of Jesus, where Jesus pushes his followers way past the requirements of the Old Testament law and into a radical life of love.

The gospels had not yet been gathered together when Paul wrote this letter, but the teaching of Jesus was known and being passed from follower to follower.

There are two primary passages in the gospels that capture that teaching. The first is Matthew 5.43-48, where Jesus challenges us with these incredible words.

#### **Matthew 5.43-45**

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 children 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.

#### **Matthew 5.46-48**

If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

It was fascinating for me to learn that this passage, Matthew 5.43-48, was the passage of Scripture that more any other was committed to memory by the early church. In the discipleship process for new believers, more emphasis was put on this passage than any other.

The other place this teaching is captured is in Luke chapter 6, a very similar passage with many of the same themes spoken by Jesus in a very similar context. He says:

#### **Luke 6.27-29**

To you who are listening I say: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. If someone slaps you on one cheek, turn to them the other also. If someone takes your coat, do not withhold your shirt from them.

### **Luke 6.32-34**

If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners do that. And if you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, expecting to be repaid in full.

### **Luke 6.35-36**

But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

Jesus teaches us that the love of God is like a full circle. All of us do the first half of the circle, which is loving those who love us. That's the easy part. That part comes naturally to us, and we do it without thinking.

But Jesus says that's only half of what God's love is like. God also pours out his patient love and generous provision on those who spite his love. He is kind to the ungrateful and merciful to the wicked, and we are called to be the same, loving those who hurt us and neglect us and overlook us and offend us and are unkind to us.

Only then do we show that we are children of our Father in heaven – when we live out the other half of what love requires: loving those who are difficult to love.

And I mean difficult. We aren't just talking about people who inconvenience us a bit or who are just a tad challenging to get along with. Listen to how Paul describes the sort of people that, echoing Jesus' call, he is calling us here to love and bless.

In verse 14 he says these are people who are persecuting you. That means they are coming after you, hunting you down like an animal.

In verses 17 and 21 he says they are evil: that means their hearts are driven by what is dark, bad, wrong, and their actions are hurtful, harmful, even destructive.

And in verse 20 he refers to them as enemies. Enemies are not just people we have a hard time getting along with. They are people who are hostile toward us, even hate us.

He's not just talking about those who are a bit rude or annoying to us. He's calling us to bless and love those who have deeply wronged us.

And Paul doesn't give us any exceptions. He doesn't draw a line and say, "Of course, this only applies as long as a person doesn't cross this line, at which point you're off the hook."

I think most of us, especially those who have been shaped by American Christianity, have the idea that we are called to follow this teaching of Jesus as long as what is being asked of us is reasonable.

But asking me to love and forgive and bless the person who has deeply hurt me? No way. Surely there comes a point when this no longer applies, and we are free to just hate those who are unkind to us.

This call of Paul, like the call of Jesus that lies behind it, is *radical*.

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As we read through these passages, you may have noticed that there are two parts to the love we are called to have for those who wrong us.

The first one is hard. The second one is even harder.

First, Paul tells us we are to *refrain from making life difficult* for the person who has hurt us.

That comes through in three passages.

12.14 do not curse

12.17 do not repay

12.19 do not take revenge

In verse 21 Paul acknowledges how hard this is, this radical call of Jesus that he is putting before us. When we've been hurt, when we've been wronged, there is something deep inside of us that wants to return that wrong on the person who has wronged us.

"You did that to me? Well then, I want you to know how that feels. I'm going to do the same thing to you! I want you to feel it the way you've made me feel it." It just grips us, and sometimes we can feel incapable of responding in any other way.

That's what Paul means when he says in verse 21 that we can be overcome by evil.

The Greek phrase means conquering someone, defeating them, winning a victory over them. Paul says, When you are wronged, don't let evil win a victory over you. How exactly does evil do that?



You remember the showdown between Luke Skywalker and Darth Vader.

How are we defeated by evil? How do we let it overcome us? By letting it turn us to the dark side, by persuading us to give in to the dark part of our own heart and the desire to get even. Paul says, "Don't. Don't give in."

But there's more.

Paul says loving our enemies isn't just about refraining from hurting them. It's about *actively seeking their good*. We are called to go out of our way to seek God's best for the person who wrongs us.

In verse 14, we're told to bless and not to curse the person who has wronged us.

This is a pretty incredible invitation, because this is asking us to involve God in the way we are looking at the person who has hurt us.

When I curse someone, I am asking God to withdraw his hand of blessing from them and to make life miserable for them. And when I bless them, I am asking God to pour out his best on their lives.

If we pray at all for someone who has hurt us, at best we are likely to pray that God would show them the error of their ways, and at worst, that God would make them pay.

But Paul calls us to pray a very different prayer. When we bless someone, we ask God to pour out his best on them. And I can tell you from experience, it's tough to remain upset with someone when are asking God to pour out his goodness on them.

But it even goes beyond that. Paul doesn't just direct us to ask God's blessing on our enemy. He urges to become part of the way God blesses that person, and for us to take the initiative to respond to the needs of those who have wronged us.

### **Romans 12.20**

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.”

When we love our enemies we don't just refrain from getting even, we seek good for them. We ask God's blessing on them and we become part of that blessing.

I'm guessing some of you are making the connection with Matthew 5, where Jesus teaches us that our Father in heaven "causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous." By doing this, he too is feeding his enemy's hunger and satisfying his enemy's thirst.

Like Father, like son and daughter. This is that other half of the love that is so radical and so incomprehensible and so beautiful because it puts on display what the radical and incomprehensible and beautiful love of God looks like.

Before we go on from this verse . . .

Some of you may be wrestling with what seems like a contradiction in what Paul is teaching. He just got done telling us not to seek revenge, but then when he quotes this passage from Proverbs, the last line sounds like Paul is saying that doing good is actually a great way get even with your enemies. By doing good to them you are rubbing their wrongdoing in their faces and making it even worse for them.

But that's not what this passage is getting at. Think about how the burning coals in Isaiah 6 functioned. They bring conviction and healing for sin. I believe this business about heaping burning coals on someone's head is a cultural reference that means that when we do good to our enemies, we hold up before them a picture of the love of God, which has the potential to soften their hearts, and turn them back to God with a sense of conviction about their wrongdoing. It is an act of kindness and hope, not hurt and revenge.

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Let me pause here and address two things that surface from this passage.

First, I want to point out an important distinction that I think Paul is making in this passage between justice and revenge.

You see this in verse 19..

### **Romans 12.19**

Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord.

The essence of justice is someone receiving what they deserve. It is a wrongdoer paying a penalty for their wrongdoing.

People love the idea of God being a God of love but they aren't so excited to learn that God is also a God of justice. But they should be. It means that we don't live in a random moral universe in which right and wrong are empty categories. In a just world, doing right is rewarded and doing wrong is punished.

Remember the wrath of God of which Paul speaks isn't God losing his temper and lashing out in anger. *Wrath* means God distributing just and proportionate consequences for wrongdoing.

When Paul urges us to leave room for God's wrath, he is reminding us that we live in a moral universe, and God is just, and our actions have consequences.

Paul never tells us that our desire for justice is wrong. Our desire for justice reflects part of the heart of God. It is part of the image of God in us.

He *does* tell us the desire for *revenge* is wrong. Revenge is the desire to hurt someone so they can feel the pain they've caused us to feel. Driven by hurt and anger, we seek to make life miserable for those who've made life miserable for us.

Unlike the desire for justice, the desire for revenge is *not* consistent with the heart of God. The heart of God toward wrongdoers, as we saw in the teaching of Jesus, is to pour out kindness on them, even in the times when they are rightly called upon to pay the cost of their wrongdoing.

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Here's a second thing this passage forces us to wrestle with. Is Paul saying that if someone is hurting me I need to stay in a situation where I'm unsafe and just endure it?

Paul isn't addressing that question at all here. In these verses Paul is addressing the posture of our hearts toward to person who wrongs us. We need to look to other passages, such as Proverbs 22.3 and Matthew 10.14, to discern when we need to step out of a relationship

Proverbs 22.3 says, "The prudent see danger and take refuge." And in Matthew 10.14 Jesus tells his followers to leave a town and shake the dust off of their feet when they are rejected or mistreated.

The challenge, of course, is discerning when I'm to stay in, and when I'm to introduce a safe distance.

Because for some of us, left to ourselves, we'll want to step out of the pain or discomfort of a relationship way too soon. Disciplined by the loud voices on social media, we have become quick to cancel anyone we find difficult. We wrongly label our discomfort "danger," we look for refuge in changed circumstances instead of in the Lord, and we don't give God ample opportunity to work in us and in the other person for good.

And for others of us, we'll let ourselves stay in the pain of a destructive relationship way too long. We fail to recognize the danger, and we dismiss the legitimacy of protecting ourselves, thinking it is our Christian duty to allow ourselves to be subject to abuse or destructive behavior.

That's what makes it so important to include someone else in our discerning how we should respond. If you are in a relationship with someone who is causing you pain or making your life difficult, I want to encourage you seek the wisdom of a spiritually mature sister or brother in Christ, or a counselor or pastor, who can give you wise counsel and help you discern the best course of action.

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So, back to Paul's main idea. Bless those who curse you. Love those who persecute you. Seek God's best for those who want the worst for you.

Now how in the world can I love someone that way when that person has wronged me so deeply? What makes it possible for us to do this impossible thing?

Twice in this chapter Paul reminds us that, before we were ever called upon to love our enemies, you and I were on the receiving end of God's love and mercy

In the first verse in this chapter, in Romans 12.1, Paul urges us to consider our own experience of the love of God. He says,

I urge you, brothers and sisters, *in view of God's mercy . . .* to love others in this way.

As Paul reminded us in Romans 5.8, it was while you were still enemies of God and living lives that dishonored and offended him that Christ died for us to reconcile us to himself, to change us from an enemy into a friend of God.

The same reminder comes through in Romans 12.19, where Paul refers to his readers as

Do not take revenge, my *dearly beloved ones* . . . *Agapeto!*

Remember that this word for love always carries with it the idea of seeking God's best for someone even when it costs. That is how God loved us, seeking our best even when it cost him his son's life.

We have been on the receiving end of this same forgiving love ourselves. As Jesus says in Matthew 10.8, "Freely you have received. Freely give."

You may remember that a little earlier in Romans Paul assures us that this same forgiving love that has been poured *into* us is being poured *through* us by the Holy Spirit into the lives of those God has placed around us.

### **Romans 5.5**

God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.

God's call us for us to be conduits of his forgiving love. We don't have to muster it up from somewhere within ourselves. We can't. We just need to let it pour through us.

Think of the parable of the unforgiving servant. It's perhaps the most poignant and probing of all the parables that Jesus taught when it comes to how we deal with others.

You remember it.

### **Matthew 18.21-35**

<sup>21</sup> Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?"

<sup>22</sup> Jesus answered, "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.

<sup>23</sup> "Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. <sup>24</sup> As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand bags of gold was brought to him. <sup>25</sup> Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.

<sup>26</sup> "At this the servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.' <sup>27</sup> The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.

<sup>28</sup> “But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred silver coins.<sup>[c]</sup> He grabbed him and began to choke him. ‘Pay back what you owe me!’ he demanded.

<sup>29</sup> “His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, ‘Be patient with me, and I will pay it back.’

<sup>30</sup> “But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. <sup>31</sup> When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that had happened.

<sup>32</sup> “Then the master called the servant in. ‘You wicked servant,’ he said, ‘I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. <sup>33</sup> Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?’ <sup>34</sup> In anger his master handed him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed.

<sup>35</sup> “This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

It is striking, as you look through the New Testament, to discover that Jesus considers unforgiveness as grave a sin as whatever wrong was done to us in the first place.

If we are committed to living the life of love to which Jesus calls us, which we are, forgiving those who wrong us should be one of the most distinctive and consistent and obvious qualities of the church.

**In I Corinthians 1.10 NLT** Paul writes

I appeal to you, dear brothers and sisters, by the authority of our Lord Jesus Christ, to live in harmony with each other. Let there be no divisions in the church. Rather, be of one mind, united in thought and purpose.

The early church took that very seriously. So seriously that every week when they gathered for worship a leader from the church stood up during worship and called out, "Is there anyone who maintains anger with his neighbor?"

If so, if there were members of the church who were struggling to get along, they were invited right then to come forward and meet with the bishop so he could learn about their conflict and help them be reconciled so they could take communion together. If it was more complicated, he had them come meet him again on Tuesday, and he would stay with them as long as it took so the next Sunday when they gathered there would be nothing between them.

Church historian Alan Kreider says, "In this way they conserved the peace that is the church's beauty."

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## Communion

So we're going to do that now. . . . Just kidding. I'm not going to ask you to come up front this morning if you're not getting along with someone.

But if you are aware of something between you and someone else, whether from your side or theirs, I encourage you, take communion, participate in this meal of mercy, but then go and be reconciled to them. Don't let the day end without working it out. And if we can help, you know we'd be glad to.

So as we receive communion this morning, let's focus on our being *recipients* of the grace of God, and our being *conduits* of the grace of God.

As we receive the bread, I want to invite us to focus on the grace and mercy that we ourselves have received. Jesus gave his life for undeserving us. Let yourself be in awe of the kindness of God all over again.

And then as we take the cup, I want you ask you to consider whether there is anyone in the church family with whom you need to be reconciled.

And if you're not a follower of Jesus, we're so glad you're here. You don't need to take part in this sacrament. I'd just encourage you to reflect on what it might mean to be on the receiving end of this sort of gracious and forgiving love.