

The Gospel According to Paul: Romans

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Concerning One's Attitude Toward Others (12:9-21)

Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil. Cling to what is good. ¹⁰Be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love, in honor giving preference to one another; ¹¹not lagging in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord; ¹²rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation, continuing steadfastly in prayer; ¹³distributing to the needs of the saints, given to hospitality. ¹⁴Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. ¹⁵Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep. ¹⁶Be of the same mind toward one another. Do not set your mind on high things, but associate with the humble. Do not be wise in your own opinion. ¹⁷Repay no one evil for evil. Have regard for good things in the sight of all men. ¹⁸If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men. ¹⁹Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay," [Deut 32:35] says the Lord. ²⁰Therefore "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; If he is thirsty, give him a drink; For in so doing you will heap coals of fire on his head." [Proverbs 25:21-21] ²¹Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Agape - the Key to Relationships

“Let love be without hypocrisy,” says Paul, “abhor what is evil, cling to what is good,” (12:9). Here Paul addresses the issue of our attitude toward others, and the key word with which he communicates this is *agape*, “love” which, he says, is be without hypocrisy. The word “hypocrisy”

comes from the Greek word “*hupokrites*,” a thespian term meaning “under the mask.” To be a *hupokrites* is to be an actor, one whose behavior is pretended. The word for love here is *agape*, one of the most powerful terms of the New Testament vocabulary. It is significant for this discussion because, of all the words of the Greek language, this word is the most appropriate to communicate the idea of unselfishness.

There are four different terms in the Greek language used to express the concept of love. The most popular in Classical Greek literature is *eros*, the word for physical attraction or sexual love. In fact, in Greek mythology *Eros* was a personification of erotic passion, believed to be the offspring of Aphrodite, the goddess of sexual passion. *Eros* supposedly had the power to cause people to be attracted to one another (as *Cupid* of Roman mythology). The word *eros* does not occur in the New Testament.

A second word, often translated as “love,” is *storge*, which means “kindred love,” i.e., the love of family. This word appears in the New Testament only in compound form. A third term for love is *philos*. This is the word for affection toward a person as a friend or brother. *Philos* is found in the New Testament in twenty-nine occurrences, all are translated as “friend.” The verb *phileo*, found twenty-five times, is translated “love” in twenty-two occurrences and as a “kiss [of friendship]” in three.

The fourth word is *agape*, which occurs 116 times in the NT, the verb *agapao* occurs 142 times. Both terms appear 258 times in the New Testament, making it a major concept of Christianity. *Agape* is both a human emotion and an attitude. As a concept of love, it is love in its highest sense. It is *agape* which characterized the life of Jesus of Nazareth. It is a love that centers in the character of the one loving more than in that which is loved.

Agape is loving someone because of who we are rather than who they are. It is loving someone even though that love has no prospect of being returned; it is loving that which is not even lovable. *Agape* is, very literally, having “good will” toward someone, an attitude toward others, which is characterized by acts of loving-kindness. In John 13:31-35, Jesus taught his disciples that they must become a people whose lives were characterized by this kind of love; so much so that by the presence of this characteristic, all men would know that they were disciples of Jesus.

Verse 10 translates literally, “with brotherly love (*philadelphia*) have kindred affectionate (*philostorgos*) toward one another, in honor giving preference to one another.” *Philadelphia* is a compound of *philos* (the affection of brotherly love or friendship) and *adelphos* (a friend and/or brother); *philostorgos* is also a compound of two words: *philos* (friend/brother) and *storge* (kindred love). Here in verses 9-10, Paul uses three of the four Greek words for love: *agape*, *philos*, and *storge*. It is apparent that he is saying something here about relationships, and relationships are always rooted in the attitudes and emotions people have toward one another. Those of new creation existence are to love one another as brothers and friends, to love one another with kindred love, the love of a family. To this he adds the expression, "in honor giving first preference or consideration to one another;" i.e., not thinking of themselves first, but thinking, first, of others. This is a constant theme in Paul's letters, in Phil 2:3-4 he wrote,

Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. ⁴Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others.

In verses 11-13 he gives specific application to this instruction: in their zeal, in their burning spirit, in their service to the Lord, in their hope, in their tribulation, in prayer, in the needs of the saints, in hospitality; in all these matters show *agape*, *philadelphia*, and *philostorgos*; showing honor to one another, giving first consideration to one another, rather than thinking first of self. Here is the key to making relationships work, showing consideration for others rather than being only concerned with one's own wants and sense of well-being.

Resistance of Evil and Retaliation against Evil

Then in vv 14-21, Paul enters into a discussion of the issue of (1) the resistance of evil and (2) what one's attitude should be toward those who have ill-will toward him. Much controversy has existed around this issue and this passage has occupied a central position in the discussion. Is Paul here forbidding the resistance of evil? If he is, then what we know of his own activity in this regard is inconsistent with his advice. When continually hounded by the Jews and the Christian Judaizers, Paul did resist their evil; i.e. he did defend himself against them and tried to prevent them from

succeeding in their evil course of action; cf. Acts 23:1-5, 12-24.

He did what he had to do to prevent them from carrying out their evil course of action; he did not, however, retaliate against them (i.e., seek to take vengeance on them or avenge himself). Here in Romans 12:17-19, his teaching is definitely consistent with his behavior.

Repay no one evil for evil. Have regard for good things in the sight of all men. ¹⁸If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men. ¹⁹Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay," [Deut 32:35] says the Lord. (Rom 12:17-19)

These words are filled with significant, but difficult, meaning. What Paul is speaking against in verse 17 is personal retaliation or avenging oneself and what he means by verse 17 is clarified by verses 18-19. There is a difference between resistance and retaliation, and it is oftentimes difficult to be honest with ourselves in this distinction. There is a point at which resistance can become retaliation.

In verse 18, Paul says, "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone." Why is this clarification, "if it be possible," stated here? Because sometimes it is not possible to be at peace with another, and it is sometimes it doesn't depend on us, we are left with little choice.

Neither Paul nor Jesus instructs the Christian to place his family, his fellowman, or himself at the mercy of evil men. In the case of a rape or murder of someone, no man is asked to simply stand by and watch while the victim cries out for help (whether a loved one or a stranger). However, preventing the evil person from carrying out his desired actions does not mean that we have the right to punish him (i.e., repay evil for evil) in the process of resisting his evil. This Paul addresses in verse 19. God will avenge the wrong, and in 13:1-7, Paul identifies civil authorities as the avengers (i.e., those whom he has appointed to punish the evildoer).

Therefore "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; If he is thirsty, give him a drink; For in so doing you will heap coals of fire on his head." [Proverbs 25:21-21] ²¹Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. (Rom 12:20-21).

Rather than retaliating against the one who does us wrong Paul says, to 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. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” Paul is teaching, essentially, what Jesus taught in Matt 5:38-48.

Jesus’ Teaching on the Resistance of Evil

You have heard that it was said, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth (Exodus 21:24; Leviticus 24:20; Deuteronomy 19:21).³⁹ But I tell you not to resist an evil person. But whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also.⁴⁰ If anyone wants to sue you and take away your tunic, let him have your cloak also.⁴¹ And whoever compels you to go one mile, go with him two.⁴² Give to him who asks you, and from him who wants to borrow from you do not turn away.⁴³ "You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbor (Leviticus 19:18) and hate your enemy.'⁴⁴ But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you,⁴⁵ that you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.⁴⁶ For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?⁴⁷ And if you greet your brethren only, what do you do more than others? Do not even the tax collectors do so?⁴⁸ Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect.

Critical to understanding Jesus’ teaching on resistance of evil is a proper understanding of Jesus’ words, whether in Aramaic, Hebrew, or in Greek, they must be consistent with whatever else he has said on this subject. Matthew 5:38-41 is a passage that has given scholars a great deal of difficulty. Jesus says,

You have heard that it was said, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. [Exodus 21:24; Leviticus 24:20; Deuteronomy 19:21]³⁹ But I tell you not to resist an evil person. But whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also.⁴⁰ If anyone wants to sue you and take away your tunic let him have your cloak also.⁴¹ And whoever compels you to go one mile, go with him two.

It appears that what Jesus is saying here is a reference to Proverbs 20:22 and 25:21-22

Do not say, "I will recompense evil;" wait for the LORD, and He will save you, (Proverbs 20:22).

If your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat; And if he is thirsty, give him water to drink ²²For so you will heap coals of fire on his head, And the LORD will reward you. (Proverbs 25:21-22).

This is also what Paul said in 1 Thess 5:15 (“See that no one renders evil for evil to anyone, but always pursue what is good both for yourselves and for all”), and Romans 12:14, “Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse;” and 17-19,

Repay no one evil for evil. Have regard for good things in the sight of all men. ¹⁸If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men. ¹⁹Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,"[Deut 32:35] says the Lord.

In the context of Proverbs as well as the context of Jesus’ words, the instruction is addressed to those living in community one with another; i.e., those having a relationship as part of a community – family, friends, neighbors. Understanding the context of such instruction as this is essential to properly interpreting it. Within the Jewish community, instruction such as is found in a book of wisdom literature, understood to be Hebrew poetry addressing the behavior of the people to whom the literature is addressed would clearly fall under the Torah principle “love you neighbor as yourself.” The instruction of Proverbs 20:22 and 25:21-22 would be understood in this sense; i.e., instruction in how to handle conflict within the context of family or friends - people in relationships. The importance of the contextual setting of these sayings is addressed those familiar with the Hebraic background of Jesus’ words:

Jesus is expressing an important principle, which applies to our relationships with friends and neighbors. It does not apply when we are confronted with a murderer, rapist, or a person of violence; nor when we are facing the enemy on the field of battle. Jesus is not talking about how to deal with violence. He is talking about the

fundamentals of brotherly relationships, about how to relate to our neighbor . . . We are to respond to our neighbor in a way that will disarm and shame him for his actions. (David Bivin, Roy Blizzard, Jr., *Understanding the Difficult Words of Jesus – New Insights from a Hebraic Perspective*, pp 70-71).

Jesus' words here are all the more significant if one understands the historical setting in which he spoke them. Some Jews believed in the "eye for and eye" philosophy of justice and personally carried it out. Jesus was not changing the Law of Moses here (Exodus 21:21-26; Deut 19:21), rather, he was giving a proper exegesis of it. When he refers to Scripture he says, "it is written;" here he says, "you have heard that it was said." He is responding to the oral traditions of the scribes or to the rabbinic interpretations of the *Torah* scholars.

Some Jews believed that it was God's will that they retaliate against evil with hatred and vengeance, Jesus taught that they were not to hate nor personally mete out justice to those who abused them. Rather than live by "an eye for an eye" philosophy, they may accomplish much more in their dealings if they forgave those who did them evil, and this must be understood in the light of Paul's qualification, "if it be possible." One must know his "enemy" well enough, to determine that turning the other cheek or going the extra mile would likely prevent them from their evil course of action.

Conclusion

The Talmudic tradition on the acceptable response to someone attempting to do you harm is summed up in the tractate, *Sanhedrin* 72, "If someone comes to kill you, anticipate him and kill him first." We know that some of Jesus' disciples were armed (Luke 22:38; 22:50), and on one occasion he told his disciples to purchase swords (Luke 22:35-37). It also appears that one of his disciples was a Zealot (Luke 6:15).

The problem of properly understanding Jesus' teaching on this issue is that of confusing "resistance" with "retaliation." As we see in modern day Palestine today. The Palestinian terrorist blow up a building or vehicle filled with civilians. Israel then retaliates with an attack on some part of Palestinian where terrorist are supposed to be hiding and, in their retaliation, kill Palestinian civilians; and on and on it goes. To properly understand the

teaching of Jesus, and Paul's instruction here, one but determine whether our recourse to a given behavior should be resistance and when the action should be retaliation. We are fully justified in resisting evil; retaliation for the violation of another person's rights or freedom is the responsibility of the civil authorities. This is the issue Paul address in the following instruction of 13:1-7.

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