

Sermons through

Romans

Bless, Rejoice, Weep

Romans 12:14-16

With Study Questions

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10/16/2016*

Bless, Rejoice, Weep

Romans 12:14-16

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. ¹⁵ Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep. ¹⁶ Be 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 (Romans 12:14-16).

Introduction

I coach a girls' volleyball team at a small Christian school. We were in the midst of a pretty good season when we came against a team we have never beaten. There came a point in the contest where we were taking a pretty good shellacking. Our defeat began showing itself in our body language (downcast faces and slouching countenances).

I have a theme as a coach that you never let the scoreboard or the opponent determine your success. Success is determined by how much potential you release during competition. And these outward wins and losses will never determine if you're allowed to remain on the team. We're a team, I'm your coach and all I'm concerned about is that you maintain your integrity.

Seeing their disheartened body language, I called a time-out. I made an effort at reminding them who they were and challenged them to ignore the score. I then asked them to accomplish one thing. That if someone were to walk in the gym and not see the scoreboard but only their body language, their countenance, the way they were interacting with one another, they would have no idea that we were getting beaten so badly. Lift our heads and play like winners, regardless of the score.

To my surprise, moments later we had tied the game. I would like to say that we won but we didn't. But the win, at least as I define winning, was ours. And it was felt by everyone. Our team didn't leave the gym that day feeling defeated-like losers.

I open with this, perhaps, corny illustration because the passage before us will appear almost impossible to obey for some in light of the trials, difficulties and defeats we all experience at various levels. Blessing

others, rejoicing with others, weeping with others, associating with the humble may not be a priority for you if you're taking a shellacking in life. You need to start winning a little then you'll be more than willing to be a great Christian! Right now you have so little to give. Of course Jesus taught that he who is **"faithful over a little (will be) set over much"** (Matthew 25:21).

But this is what we must understand: this passage is designed to be understood and obeyed by those who already know, and have hearts that ever rejoice, in the knowledge that...

God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ-by grace you have been saved-and raised us up with Him and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ (Ephesians 2:4-6).

The win, the prize, the reward, the riches are already yours if by grace through faith you've put your hope in Christ. The exhortations in this text are for those who already have a ticket to the victor's banquet. Our body language, our interactions with one another should demonstrate that we are aware of this fact.

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse (Romans 12:14).

Bless, Not Curse

We are told to bless others. It's a funny request. What does it mean to bless? To bless *eulogize* someone means to ask God to bestow divine favor on. To ask God to do something good for. To pray that the Spirit and grace of God might find their way into a person's life. Sounds easy enough.

Though years ago I was leading a Bible study where I made the comment that none of us want anyone to go to hell. A young lady whose little sister went to a local school where the children had allegedly been abused, responded that she wanted the man accused of these horrible crimes to go to hell. It was kind of startling.

But we must recognize that passage isn't talking about persecutors in

general. It is blessing those who “**persecute you**” *diokontas humas*. This is very personal. Paul isn’t writing about an isolated incident or someone who accidentally did something to offend you. To persecute *diokontas* means to systematically organize a program to oppress and harass. It can mean to chase from place to place. They’re out to get *you*.¹

I have found that people like the concept of blessing others similar to liking the concept of Jesus being a friend of sinners (Matthew 11:19). It’s all well and good providing the sin isn’t too disgusting and they don’t sit too close to me at church. And heaven forbid the Spirit convict me of extending hospitality to such a person! We like humanity, it’s people we have a problem with.

The Apostle is writing about a person who would find such disfavor in your eyes (for good reasons) that our natural inclination would be to “**curse**” *katarasthe* them. To use, as it were, our influence with God to bring supernatural disfavor upon them. Someone might argue that the Scriptures do have imprecatory Psalms. Psalms that contain curses upon those who take rank against the Lord and His people (Psalm 55:15; 58:6; 69:28, etc.)

But the imprecatory psalms are designed to halt the advancement of evil and the ungodly spread of its corruption throughout the world. But what Paul writes of here is personal. We might pray that God would break the teeth of ISIS as they behead Christians. But this should not be governed by personal vindictiveness but rather a desire to halt evil. If face to face with such evil, we are called to pray God’s grace and mercy find its way into their hearts.

This is very similar to making that distinction we will see later in this chapter as compared to the Sermon on the Mount. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus will teach that we are to turn the other cheek and allow the oppressor to take our cloak and go the extra mile (Matthew 5:38-42). But we will see later in this chapter (and chapter 13) that the civil magistrate is still called to prosecute those who assault and steal. This is a contextual observation that I’ve heard more than one politician entirely ignore.

The point is that we are to disallow personal vindictiveness to have its way into our hearts. There are view biblical doctrines that hit the heart

¹ Of interest to note that it is the same verb *dioko* from the previous verse where we are called to pursue hospitality. In one context it means to pursue in the other to persecute.

of our hearts more than the call to...

...love our enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who have you and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven;" (Matthew 5:44, 45a).

We may comfort ourselves that we have not sought revenge or even that we have managed to overcome our natural inclination to take joy when harm befalls those who have hurt us. But that is not enough. We are to exercise the energies of our heart to promote their well-being. Jesus, in the passage above, adds the disquieting words, **"that you may be sons of your Father in heaven."**

Of course, being saved by grace, we know that we cannot somehow earn that status of son-ship by our successes in wisdom or morality. But it is this imitation of the grace and mercy of God which demonstrates that we are just beginning to understand what it means to live in a field of grace over justice.

For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment (James 2:13).

I am not in any sense promoting a works righteousness (that we are somehow saved by the merits of our feeble performance to approve ourselves before God), yet if we are devoid of certain convictions, a hearty self-examination of the veracity of our faith may be in order. Of this passage Calvin commented:

And though you can hardly find one who has made such advances in the law of the Lord that he fulfills this precept, yet no one can claim to be the child of God or glory in the name of a Christian, who has not in part attained this mind, and who does not daily resist the opposite disposition.²

The Apostle continues.

² Calvin, J. (1998). *Romans* (electronic ed., Ro 12:14). Albany, OR: Ages Software.

Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep (Romans 14:15)

Rejoice and Weep

Years ago I lost a loved one, unexpectedly in an automobile accident . It was so painful that it was difficult to breath. I remember thinking I'd never laugh again. I was crushed. People were sympathetic. I received cards and phone calls. I was not without some support. I never doubted my faith but nothing seemed to alleviate the hurt.

I remember going for a walk and ending up near a friend's house who I had been in a college ministry with. He was a very sweet guy named Dave Champness. I figured I'd stop and say hi. Dave wasn't there but his wife answered the door and invited me in. I didn't really know her that well but she could tell I was pretty beat up. I managed to cough out what had happened and what I was going through. She didn't say anything but her eyes began to tear up and there was sense that someone was helping shoulder my sorrow. It was a tremendous comfort.

Interestingly the second most comforting reaction came from a waiter at a restaurant I once worked at. He has since past. His name was Tom Frobisher. I sat in the restaurant and similarly Tom could see I was not myself. He asked what was up. After I told him he responded by shouting some expletives that I'd rather not repeat. Not that I condone foul language, but this was his way of being mad for me. I wasn't even that mad but I was comforted that someone was mad for me.

We are talking about empathy here. The ability to grasp and share the feelings of another. The Israelite was to recall their own status as strangers and sojourners in order to empathize with others in a similar condition.

You shall not oppress a sojourner. You know the heart of a sojourner, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt (Exodus 23:9).

It is also said of Christ that He **"has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows" (Isaiah 53:4)**. We have a High Priest who can **"sympathize with our weaknesses...who in every respect has been tempted as we are"**

(Hebrews 4:15).

Empathy can be a very difficult attribute to acquire and often a painful one to exercise. But it is something at which we are to be skilled. And we are to view our own difficulties (which seem to be the very uncomfortable way we improve in this) as training to aid others. As we read elsewhere:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, ⁴who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God (2 Corinthians 1:3, 4).

Of course it is not merely to weep with those who weep but rejoice with those who rejoice. Years ago I had a particularly good day in a sporting event which yielded a photo in a local newspaper. A few days later I received a letter from my college youth leader and his wife with a copy of the photo from the paper along with a little note congratulating me. It was over forty years ago yet I recall to this day that they took the time to rejoice with me.

It's worth noting that rejoicing with those who rejoice (according to many who wrote on this passage) can be more difficult than weeping with those who weep. T.R. Schreiner put it this way:

We are all inclined to shed a sympathizing tear with those who are suffering, but envy and a sense of competition often hinder us from truly rejoicing with those who rejoice.³

It is easy to view those who are outwardly very strong and successful as having no need of someone coming along side and offering an encouraging word or some token of happiness at their success. But I have found that when I have offered someone words of joy or encouragement at something they have done well--even someone who might be famous or accomplished a great feat, it is rare and highly appreciated.

But even something that may not make the headlines--something that

³ Schreiner, T. R. (1998). *Romans* (Vol. 6, p. 668). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.

is a source of joy. A new child (I recall someone making me a delicious meal at the birth of my first child), a new job, a new car. If something makes someone else happy (assuming it's not something bad), jump in on that happiness.

The current thought is somewhat completed here with the Apostle addressing a disposition which, if not addressed, will continually war against any success in seeking to bless and empathize with others.

Be 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 (Romans 12:16).

High-Mindedness

I noticed a post this week from (apparently) a popular contemporary pastor, writer which read:

One day I decided to stop making myself smaller than I actually am. That was the day that I came back to life. I will never again shrink for someone who thinks the real me is too much.

This seems to be at such odds with the words of Paul we read above. Yet it is not uncommon to read this, and so many other "Christian" ministries, sloganizing the Christian faith into some ungodly form of self-inflating, personal empowerment. In contradistinction to this we read from Calvin:

...for the chief virtue of the faithful is moderation, or rather lowliness of mind, which ever prefers to give honor to others, rather than to take it away from them.

Or from Jesus:

Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 18:4).

The problem Paul is addressing here is high-mindedness. The ESV translates the first portion of this verse **“Live in harmony.”** When we read that we aren’t to set our minds on **“high things”** we should not interpret that as not setting our minds on heavenly things. It is an argument against haughtiness.

Years ago I knew a girl whose mother told her little the youngest daughter to quit spending time with a friend she had made because her new friend was overweight and unattractive. The mother feared it would negatively affect her reputation. This may seem extreme, yet it is not too difficult to notice that even within Christian circles people gravitate toward those who they find most attractive; those who they think will serve best to elevate their social rank or status. I would say this is epidemic in teenagers but it extends well past that age group.

I’m not even sure what translation they used, but William Hendriksen and Simon Kistemaker render the verse:

Live in harmony with one another. Do not be snobbish, but readily associate with humble folk. Do not be conceited.⁴

Of course Mary, the mother of Jesus, was likely a teenager when she sang these words in the Magnificat:

...he has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate (Luke 1:52).

In all these things we imitate Christ who blessed us while we were enemies, bears our griefs and humbled Himself to the point of death, even death on a cross that we might have that perfect peace that He promise to all who trust in Him.

⁴ Hendriksen, W., & Kistemaker, S. J. (1953–2001). *Exposition of Paul’s Epistle to the Romans* (Vol. 12–13, p. 418). Grand Rapids: Baker Book House.

Questions for Study

1. What should be our mindset as we seek to bless, rejoice and weep with others (pages 2, 3)?
2. What does it mean to bless someone (page 3)?
3. What is an imprecatory Psalm and how does it square with Paul's call for us to bless those who persecute us (page 4)?
4. Who are we called to bless and why is that so difficult? What must our thinking be in order to counter that difficulty (pages 4, 5)?
5. Can you think of some examples where you can demonstrate empathy for others? How did Christ show empathy/sympathy for you (pages 6, 7)?
6. Do you find it difficult to rejoice with others? Why (page 7)?
7. What is the underlying disposition/sin which wars against our ability to bless, rejoice and weep with others (pages 8, 9)?