

“Vengeance is Mine”  
Romans 12:19-21  
(Preached at Trinity, March 13, 2011)

I’m supplying these notes for the benefit of busy pastors who may be engaged in bi-vocational work, feeling the pressure of preparing to preach twice on the Lord’s Day while trying to balance full-time secular work as well as caring for their families. While the notes of another man are no substitute for personal study, I pray that these may aid in the process of preparing to preach.

**Disclaimer:** These are the actual notes I bring with me to the pulpit, which I follow loosely. They are not designed for publication. While I try to make every effort to give proper credit to my sources from the pulpit, adequate citations will sometimes be absent from my notes. If anyone feels their intellectual material has been used without adequate citation, please contact me and I’ll make immediate correction giving credit.

1. As we’ve seen **Verses 14-21** describe the virtue of loving our enemies. How do we love those who hate us? How do we love those who have treated us unjustly? In a world that demonstrates such opposition to God’s righteous people it is important for us to understand how we are to behave.
2. Last week as we examined **Verse 17** we found a twoedged admonition.
  - A. We are to never pay back evil for evil—we are not permitted to seek vengeance.
  - B. We are to have a positive regard for them. We are to be careful of the life we live before them. The NIV states:  
“Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody.”  
Human beings have an inner sense of right and wrong. This is why it is so important for us to live rightly before all men. When believers violate the principles of right and wrong we bring a reproach upon the name of Christ.
3. Last week we focused our attention on **Verse 18**  
“If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men.”  
Still on the subject of how we live before lost humanity Paul admonishes us that as much as it is in our ability we are to seek peace with all men.  
Jesus said, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.”
4. Now as we turn to **Verse 19** our attention returns to the statement Paul made at the beginning of **Verse 17** – “Never pay back evil for evil to anyone.”  
Paul repeats this charge in **Verse 19** -  
**Romans 12:19** – “Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,” says the Lord.”
5. With this we find the positive charge –  
**Romans 12:20-21** – “But if your enemy is hungry, feed him, and if he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in so doing you will heap burning coals upon his head.” <sup>21</sup>  
Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”
6. Paul is taking this rule from the Old Testament.  
**Proverbs 25:21-22** - “If thine enemy be hungry, give him bread to eat; and if he be thirsty, give him water to drink: for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head.”
7. As we’ve seen, this flies against the very essence of human nature. In our fallen nature we naturally desire to seek revenge—personal satisfaction. God does not allow us to take revenge.  
This morning I want to examine this prohibition:
  - I. First, we’ll examine the charge – ““Never take your own revenge”
  - II. Second, we’ll look at the wrath of God, “Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,” says the Lord.”
  - III. Third, we’ll look at the positive charge in **Verses 20-21**

I. First, we'll examine the charge – “Never take your own revenge”

A. There are several presuppositions here

1. First, there is the presupposition that you have been unjustly wronged  
It is the victim that seeks retribution
2. Second, the context describes the perpetrator as your enemy—someone that hates you and desires to do you great harm.

**Verse 20** - ἐχθρός -

3. Third, there is the presupposition that you feel you deserve retribution  
You have been harmed, he is your enemy. He deserves to suffer.

B. Retribution could take many forms

1. Perhaps they've hurt your pride by spreading some vicious rumor or simply said something that hurt your feelings. You want to retaliate by returning insult for insult.  
**1 Peter 3:8-9** To sum up, let all be harmonious, sympathetic, brotherly, kindhearted, and humble in spirit; <sup>9</sup> 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.
2. Perhaps they have stolen from you. You may seek justice but you are not permitted to seek revenge
3. Perhaps they have harmed a member of your family. There was a popular movie series in the 1980's called “Death Wish” that focused on a man turned vigilante after his family was killed.  
It was popular because we naturally like seeing revenge.
4. Retribution may only be a matter of the heart. You want the person who harmed you to suffer. Perhaps you feel a sense of satisfaction when affliction strikes.  
But this is the way of the world.

C. The world teaches the heart of revenge

1. Everyone likes the story where the villain gets his just reward.  
This is why so-called superheroes have always been popular – because the beat-up the bad guy.
2. There is something satisfying when the bully finally meets his match
3. There is something within us that makes us desire to retaliate when we are harmed. It is called sin which flows forth from our pride and self-love.
4. God does not allow us to seek the harm of those who harm us. God alone is worthy of judgment and justice.

II. Second, let's consider the wrath of God, "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay," says the Lord."

A. We must understand that every offense is against God

1. When God says, “vengeance is mine” He is saying that He alone has the right to exercise vengeance because ultimately He alone has been offended
2. We need to understand, however, that God's vengeance is an act of justice.

- B. God's vengeance is the result of His righteous anger – His holy judgment
1. The Cause of God's Anger is sin. God's anger is righteous anger.  
**Isaiah 13:11** – “Thus I will punish the world for its evil And the wicked for their iniquity; I will also put an end to the arrogance of the proud And abase the haughtiness of the ruthless.”
  2. God sets the standard of righteousness – He declares sin as sin  
God's judgment will be a vindication of His holiness
  3. God's justice will be exalted as the guilty are condemned.  
His holiness will be glorified as the lawless ones are judged and sentenced.
  4. We are commanded here to give place to God's wrath. Be content to allow God to do that which is His alone.
- C. God's vengeance is being delayed as an act of His mercy.
1. The NT word for wrath in **Verse 19** is ὀργή which describes something that builds up over a period of time
  2. This is a perfect illustration of God's righteous anger upon the earth  
It is building up. This is why Paul describes God's wrath upon sinners as something being stockpiled  
**Romans 2:5** – “But because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath for yourself in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God,”
  3. God is delaying His ultimate wrath upon sin
  4. He is calling men to flee from this wrath – to flee to Christ
  5. His terrible vengeance is kindled and will be fully displayed. It belongs to Him and Him alone.
    - a. It is sinful when we pretend we are worthy of displaying our own anger and vengeance.
    - b. Regarding personal injury every Christian has the duty to unconditionally forgive.

III. Third, we'll look at the positive charge in **Verses 20-21**

- A. First, we must demonstrate love  
**Matthew 5:43-44** – “You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor, and hate your enemy.'<sup>44</sup> "But I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you”
1. This is the heart of this passage  
**Romans 12:9** – “Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil; cling to what is good.”
  2. We must not seek vengeance either in heart or deed. We must avoid harboring resentment. We must resist any desires for hurt to come upon our enemies. We must demonstrate a heart of pity and grace
  3. We demonstrate love towards our enemies through forgiveness
    - a. What does it mean to forgive?  
Does it mean we pretend it didn't happen?  
Does it mean we forget?
    - b. Forgiveness means we don't hold their crimes against them
    - c. It means we show them mercy – not giving them what they deserve

4. This is precisely what God is doing to His enemies – All deserve to suffer. All deserve terrible torment.
  5. This is what Jesus is saying in **Matthew 5** – that we might imitate our Father.  
**Matthew 5:44-45** – “But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, <sup>45</sup> so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on *the* evil and *the* good, and sends rain on *the* righteous and *the* unrighteous.”
  6. As God’s elect we have received mercy in Christ. God does not hold our sins against us because we are forgiven in Christ. We must show mercy to others because of the magnitude of the debt we have been forgiven.
  7. Love demands that we bless our enemies  
**Romans 12:14** – “Bless those who persecute you; bless and curse not.”  
**Romans 12:20** – “But if your enemy is hungry, feed him, and if he is thirsty, give him a drink;”
    - a. Not only are we charged with the duty not to retaliate. We are charged with the duty to respond with the positive disposition of blessing. In other words we are to seek their good
    - b. This demands patience, forbearance.
- B. Second, it demands faith
1. Enduring the attacks of wicked people is a great test of faith. It demands that we leave all retribution to God. It means that we trust Him to execute perfect justice
  2. It demands seeing all things from an eternal perspective. In the end God will set all things right.
  3. Rather than taking things in our own hands we are to recognize God as the Judge and leave all retribution to God.
  4. God says, "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay"
    - a. Paul is quoting from **Deut. 32:35** - 'Vengeance is Mine, and retribution, In due time their foot will slip; For the day of their calamity is near, And the impending things are hastening upon them.'
    - b. Not only does vengeance belong to God, it is a certainty and it is impending.
- C. What is meant by the last line of **Verse 20**  
“for in so doing you will heap burning coals upon his head.”
1. Does this seem out of step with the heart of the passage? We are being told to love our enemies. We are being told to bless them and do good to them. With these things in mind, why would we even be interested in such a dreadful thing as piling burning coals upon the heads of our enemies?
  2. There are a couple ways we can interpret this passage:
    - A. Through our acts of kindness we are increasing the guilt of our enemies and thus increasing their eventual punishment. This is agreeable to the context in giving our enemies over to the justice of God. “Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God”

- B. Doing good to your enemy is the best way to subdue him and win him over.  
 Pouring hot coals upon someone is a punishment no one can bear; they must yield.  
 Kindness is no less effectual – even the most hardened enemy will often overcome by kindness.  
 Hodge – “Nothing is so powerful as goodness.”  
**Romans 2:4** – “Or do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance?”
3. And so with this in mind Paul says,  
**Romans 12:21** – “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”

#### Conclusion:

1. Paul is in no way commanding us to disregard justice. He isn't telling us to deny their sin. He is telling us to forgive our enemies and leave the retribution to God.
2. David said in **Psalm 58** the righteous rejoice when God executes His justice  
**Psalm 58:10** – “The righteous shall rejoice when he seeth the vengeance”
  - a. We can pray for God's judgment against our enemies  
 William GT Shedd – “The apostolic dictum in this passage does not set aside, but confirms the prayers against enemies, in the so-called imprecatory psalms.”
  - b. But we are not allowed to execute vengeance ourselves  
 “Vengeance *is* mine; I will repay, saith the Lord.”
  - c. The righteous rejoice at the righteous vindication of God's glory.
3. Our rejoicing is for God's vindication, not our own  
**Proverbs 24:17-18** – “Do not rejoice when your enemy falls, And do not let your heart be glad when he stumbles; <sup>18</sup> Lest the LORD see *it* and be displeased, And He turn away His anger from him.”
4. We can be merciful and at the same time despise the wickedness upon the earth. We must always have a holy hatred of sin. There is a difference between moral repugnance and personal vengeance.
  - a. We can have a holy hatred of the sinner while at the same time be filled with pity and a desire for his salvation.
  - b. We can be angry over sin without being sinful in anger  
**Ephesians 4:26-27** – “Be ye angry, and sin not: let not the sun go down upon your wrath: <sup>27</sup> Neither give place to the devil.”
5. This is God's way – He is both merciful and a fearful judge. This is the balance maintained in the Gospel.  
**Romans 2:4-6** – “Or do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance? <sup>5</sup> But because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath for yourself in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God, <sup>6</sup> who will render to every man according to his deeds:”