

Romans 12:17-21

Fallen sinners seem bent on raising the bar for retribution for the slightest infractions. In the eyes of many in the world, might makes right (**Gen. 4:23-24**).

Ruthless men lead and rule with might, retribution, and fear but Christ, the King of kings, taught His disciples the very opposite of Lamech's song of retribution (**Matt. 18:21-22**). Sons of the living God demonstrate love in the face of evil.

Summary

In Romans 12:17-21, Paul explains to the church what it means to be a living sacrifice before our enemies, and arms the church with the weapons of love, patience, and the gospel of Christ rather than the clenched fist, power, and fear.

1. Right Repayment vv. 17

For Christians, vengeance and retribution are completely off the table (**Rom 12:17**). This is not a new command in the New Testament (**Pro 20:22; Lev. 19:18**).

What has changed with the advent of Christ, however, is that the love for one's enemy, formerly referring only to a fellow Israelite, is now to extend to the nations, those who were once Israel's pagan enemies.

Paul's exhortation, therefore, is that Christians must not resort to vengeance but must seek good things in the sight of all men.

2. Peaceable Living vv. 18-19

Paul goes on to explain why Christians, as living sacrifices, must never resort to vengeance (**Rom. 12:18**). There are certainly those things that a Christian must never do, such as carry out revenge. That is the negative aspect of the revealed will of God—the "do not." There are also positive aspects to God's commands, however.

WLC 99.4 "That as, where a duty is commanded, the contrary sin is forbidden; and, where a sin is forbidden, the contrary duty is commanded

We should not seek revenge BUT positively, we must live at peace with all men as much as possible. That means that even if we receive evil from someone, if possible, we should return good.

This does not mean that Christians should compromise the truth or the gospel for the sake of peace. Paul says "If it is possible," not "at all costs."

Why must the Christian, negatively, not seek revenge and, positively, live in peace with all men? Because it is God's prerogative (**Rom 12:19**).

Paul here does not address the legitimate wrath of the state, something with which he deals in the following section (**Rom. 13:1-7**). Rather, Paul speaks of God's wrath (**Deut 32:35**). Why must the believer never give in to vengeance?

Because the believer knows that God will rectify all wrongs at the final judgment.

Only a perfectly holy and righteous God has the ability to wield the sword of vengeance in such a way that sin never enters the picture.

Even as redeemed sinners indwelt by the presence of the Holy Spirit, we still have the ability to fall into sin, to let righteous judgment slip into unrighteous vengeance.

Under such circumstances, give all your suffered wrongs to the Lord.

We therefore do not wield the sword of vengeance but rather the sword of the Spirit, one that dispenses mercy to sinners, and if they refuse to repent, then God will bring His just judgment. We must therefore pray that God would save those who dispense evil to us, knowing that if they do not repent He will judge them for their evil.

3. Loved Enemies vv. 20-21

Paul then gives his recipients particular instructions in this regard (**Rom. 12:20**).

This is not simply an exhortation to give our enemies food and drink but rather to assist our enemy in whatever way we can.

How does kindness to our enemies translate into heaping coals of fire on their heads? When we are loving and kind, either our enemy will see the love of Christ in our action and it will be instrumental in his conversion, or it will be further grounds for God's judgment against him. Hence Paul concludes "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good (**Rom 12:21**).

4. Manifested Love of Christ

We must remember the overall context of Paul's exhortation. He does not give moralistic optimistic commands" "Be nice to others and they'll be nice to you." Rather, the context is conformity to the image of Christ-believers as living sacrifices. The context flows from the basis of an acute awareness of the inaugurated final age (eschaton) and the imminent consummation of the age.

When Paul instructs us to bless our enemies or lavish them with acts of love and kindness, we ultimately manifest the love of God we have received cf **Matt 5:43-48**).

We demonstrate the love of God not only by the proclamation of the Gospel but also by living our lives to the glory of God. It is indeed sacrificial to love in the face of evil, but we must do this because we are sons of the living God (cf **1 Peter 2:23**).

Being a living sacrifice in the face of our enemies means that we must love our enemies rather than exercise vengeance. Retribution and final justice belong to God Almighty. Who knows, God may use our love as an instrument in His hands for the conversion of our enemies. Or He may use our love as further grounds for their condemnation: No matter what, we should pray and bless our enemies, not curse or repay their evil with evil. We love because we have been loved. "Therefore overcome evil with good.