

## Message #44

## Romans 12:17-21

Back in 2021 in New Orleans, an 18-year-old young man named Caleb Johnson, and his 25-year-old step-sister, Breyiana, were gunned down by Hollis Carter, a 21-year-old man. He was caught and he confessed to the murder of both of them. His attorneys tried to get him off by saying it was a false confession. Five months after his arrest, he posted bail and got out of jail. Caleb's father and Breyiana's step-father, Bokio Johnson, decided to take justice into his own hands. He felt like the killer was going to get away through the slick tactics of defense attorneys so he tracked him down and shot him in the head and killed him. Now he is in jail awaiting his own trial for second degree murder.

So far in the United States in 2023, there have been 470 mass shootings. In those mass shootings 492 people have been killed and 1,708 people have been wounded. Many of the shooters are dead. They either committed suicide or someone shot them. A few of them have survived and are awaiting the trials. What should the attitude of the relatives of those gunned down be? How should they feel? How should they respond? Should they seek to take justice into their own hands?

We are in a practical part of the book of Romans. Paul has been developing the Grace Gospel and how to practically apply it and display it and what he teaches here is this:

**WE DEMONSTRATE THE GRACE OF GOD IN OUR LIVES WHEN WE REFUSE TO TAKE EVIL REVENGE ON OUR ENEMIES, BUT WE LEAVE THE REVENGE TO GOD.**

Now we want to be very clear on this point. **Just revenge is something God will repay.** It is also a responsibility of government to punish those who do evil (Rom. 13:3-4). So when God says "never pay back evil for evil," He is not saying we should just let killers and rapists and drug dealers walk free. He is not saying we should show up at court and tell the jury and judge just let them go because we don't pay back evil for evil.

What does God mean here? Does God mean if someone breaks into your house with the intention of doing harm to your family or if someone goes into a store and pulls out a gun and starts shooting that we should not do anything to try and stop them? What if a child is grabbed and starts screaming for help and we are there, should we just say that's too bad, but we don't want to take revenge? What about other passages where God said we are to protect ourselves and others? What about when Jesus told His own disciples to "buy a sword" because I'll no longer be here to protect you, so you need to protect and defend yourself (Luke 22:36)?

What is being discussed here is a grace mindset. In fact, this grace mindset must be implemented in the context of "what is right in the sight of all men" and "what is possible." Some things are possible and some things are not possible. So context determines what is possible.

Now the context of this is that Paul is discussing how the theology of the Grace Gospel should be lived out in our lives in the world in which we live. What he presents here is revolutionary. He presents what we could call “non-revenge or non-retaliation evangelism.”

In other words, this is a way we witness the grace of God to the world—we don’t go on some vengeful vendetta.

Now there are six revenge actions that display the grace of God, so if possible we should try to apply them.

**GRACE ACTION #1 – Refuse to take revenge. 12:17a**

If we are living our lives according to the word of God and our minds are being transformed, then there will be times we will find ourselves in warfare conflict. We will, at times, have some enemies, even if we don’t want to have them.

There will be times when people will wrong us. There will be times we aren’t treated right. In fact, we may discover in life there are times we are abused—emotionally, mentally, physically and even spiritually. The abuse may come from a family member, a mate, or someone we know. People steal, lie and cheat. They invent things not true. What should we do about this? How would God want us to react to this?

One way we reflect the grace of God is that we don’t seek to pay back an eye for eye and tooth for tooth vengeance on people, which is what the O.T. law demanded (Ex. 21:23-27). God wants us to demonstrate a grace faith by not paying back immediate evil for evil vengeance. The wrong response is to pay back the wrong with another equivalent wrong.

This point was taught by Jesus Himself when He said “turn the other cheek” (Matt. 5:38-44) and it was also taught by the Apostle Peter when he said don’t return evil for evil or insult for insult (I Pet. 3:9).

So if someone bashes into your car, you don’t start your car and bash into them. If someone yells a bunch of curse words at you, you don’t yell a bunch of curse words at them. If someone says something false about you, you don’t say something false about them.

That kind of response demonstrates God’s grace.

**GRACE ACTION #2 – Respect what is right. 12:17b**

We demonstrate God’s grace when we respect what is right in the sight of all men. There are a couple of things to point out here:

- 1) This is to be done if it is possible.
- 2) The word “respect” means to give careful thought and make mental provisions for something. (G. Abbott-Smith, *Greek Lexicon*, p. 362).
- 3) The word “right” is one that means what is good, excellent, honorable (*Ibid.*, pp. 228-229).
- 4) The words “all men” means all the character and quality of all men, not all specific men. Some men don’t respect what is right and don’t like what is right.

The fact is our laws prohibit vigilante justice. Most all people think this is right.

What Paul is saying is that when we have the possibility of having a right attitude about good things that are good to almost all people, we display the grace of God.

**GRACE ACTION #3 – Pursue what is peaceful. 12:18**

Again notice the point and that is we are to pursue what is peaceful “**if it is possible.**” It may not always be possible.

We are to be a peace loving people. It is qualified by “so far as it depends on you.” This is not some peace at any cost philosophy. We cannot compromise God’s word to be at peace with people.

We must do our best to promote peaceful harmony. If there is to be hostility and warfare, let it come from the other side and not us. From our perspective, we need to try to stay out of fights and wars with people.

Frankly, we will never be at total harmony and peace with unbelievers. This is a theological impossibility. In fact, Jesus made that point clear when He said, “Think not that I am come to send peace on earth, I came not to send peace but a sword” (Matt. 10:34).

Jesus said I did not come to earth the first time to bring world peace to this earth. In fact, those who believe in Me will find they are in war. In fact, sometimes a commitment to Me will end up with war between family members.

What Paul is saying here is that when we do our best to be at peace with the character and quality of “all men,” we display the grace of God.

We are not called to stamp out sin in this world. We are called to deal with it in our own lives. We are to do our best to reach out to people and display for them the grace of God.

When Jesus was here the first time, one of the things the Jews did not like is that He did not lead a major revolutionary war and topple Rome. The Jews wanted Him to take over, which He ultimately will do.

But when He came to offer them personal forgiveness of sins so they could have a relationship with God, they wanted Him gone.

There are those in Christianity who think their job is to lead some political revolution to take over the world. Our responsibility is to be at peace, as much as possible with all men, not to try to dominate them.

**GRACE ACTION #4 – Leave vengeance to God. 12:19**

Grace is displayed when we leave vengeance payback to God. God will pay it back and He does have a vengeance side. God does have a wrath side and He will take revenge on those who have wronged us. Moses said concerning God, “To Me belongs vengeance and recompense; their foot shall slide in due time” (Deut. 32:35).

I am paraphrasing Donald Barnhouse on this point, but basically he said he so truly believed this promise, that he would just sit back and watch as people did wrath things, knowing God would track them down with His vengeance.

J. Vernon McGee said there was a man on his board at a church who did him great harm. He said at first he wanted to clobber the guy, but then he thought of this verse. He said he went to the Lord and said, “Lord I’d like to hit back and I can, but I don’t think I will. I’ll turn him over to You and I expect You to handle him.” A while after he prayed that, Dr. McGee said he ran into the man and here is what he wrote: “I have never looked at a person who is as unhappy as that man is. He has troubles, friend. The Lord has taken him to the woodshed and whopped him within an inch of his life. When I looked into that man’s face, I couldn’t help but feel sorry for him.”

He left the vengeance to God and God paid him back.

**GRACE ACTION #5 – Meet the needs of an enemy. 12:20**

If one has done us wrong needs food or drink and we are in a situation to supply it, Paul says do it.

The principle is that an enemy has some need that we know about and we are in a position to meet the need, Paul says demonstrate grace and do it.

It will “heap burning coals on his head.”

- 1) It may mean God will use this gracious act to intensify the justice in the revenge.
- 2) It may mean by doing this we will diffuse the hostility that exists with the enemy.
- 3) It may mean by doing this God will use it to bring conviction and salvation to the enemy.

In other words, as we do something nice for an enemy, it may bring that enemy under a burning inner conviction that says, “I did wrong.”

When we do this kind of thing, it does make some type of difference in what God will do.

**GRACE ACTION #6 – Be overcome with good, not evil. 12:21**

We have two “overcome” options in this verse.

- 1) It is possible to be overcome with good.
- 2) It is possible to be overcome with evil.

The actual word “overcome” means to encounter something and victoriously conquer it or prevail over it (G. Abbott-Smith, *Greek Lexicon*, p. 308).

Now the first use of the verb “overcome” is passive and the second use of the verb “overcome” is active.

So the point is this: Don’t allow evil to passively overcome you in moments when you think about vengeance, but take active action to overcome this evil surge by doing good.

In situations in which we find ourselves in conflict, we are to actively seek to do that which is good and not that which is evil. Don’t let evil overtake us, let good overtake us in a vengeance situation.