

Sermon Notes: Ralph G. Bowles

WHEN FORGIVENESS IS HARD: Forgiving Our Enemies

Romans 12:9-21

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil by good Rom. 12:21

The call to forgive those who sin against us (Mt.6:12) is very hard when they are our enemies, people who are working for our harm: "he that hateth you, and seeketh or desireth your destruction or your hurt as such designedly". (Richard Baxter)

The only way to deal with this evil is to overcome it with the power of love-inspired forgiveness: Forgiveness is an expression of love. How does forgiving love deal with enemies?

Won't forgiving our enemies only encourage them to hurt us further?

Let's look at love and forgiveness, working through this passage of St Paul in Romans 12, with an eye of how Christian love empowers forgiveness.

I. FORGIVENESS GROWS FROM A LIFE OF LOVE. 12:9-13

1. Forgiveness does not come from dry ground; it springs from the soil of relationship with God – a transforming experience of the mercy of God: Rom. 12:1-3.

- We will be discovering in our lives the blessings of doing God's will: 12:2
- We will be growing in the faith as members of God's church: 12:3-8
- The ability to forgive others is a gift from God, part of his transforming work in us.

2. The little pithy portrait of the godly person who is living the life of God's love shows where the power to forgive comes from: 12:9-13

- Spiritual passion, loving actions, generosity of heart, prayerful orientation to God.

3. Forgiveness is not leniency towards evil or sin: Rom. 12:9

- We are to hate what is evil, and to cling to the good.
- We can hate the sin and love the sinner.

II. FORGIVENESS REPLACES HATRED WITH LOVE. 12:14-16

The natural reaction to harm from enemies is to hate them and reject them, to seek their harm. The Christian way is to return good for evil.

1. Forgiving love blesses those who hurt us: 12:14.

- To curse is to pray or wish harm and evil on the enemy, to bless is to pray for their good.
- Mt. 7:12; Mt.5:3-49; 1 Pet. 3:9.
- We will desire that God will grant the enemy repentance and forgiveness – we will pray for his/her salvation or repentance.
- "We must love him with a love of benevolence, desiring him all that happiness which we desire to ourselves, and endeavouring it according to our opportunities." (R. Baxter).
- The golden rule: Mt. 7:12

2. We will identify with the condition of others (12:15).

- Cultivate understanding of the situation of other people; Love and forgiveness are closely linked – when we love people and understand them, we will be more likely able to forgive them.

- “The truest way not to be afraid of the worst part of a man is to value and try to serve his better part.” (Phillips Brooks)

3. We will have a heart to pursue harmony with other people; we will be peacemakers by tendency: 12:16.

- It is not always possible to live in peace with people, but it should be our aim and our efforts to do so.

4. We will seek to have a true and humble estimate of ourselves: 12:16b. Mt. 7:1-5.

But what about the injustice you have suffered? Does forgiving mean ignoring the injury? Will this only encourage more bad behaviour?

III. FORGIVENESS CHOOSES NON-RETALIATION. 12:17-19

We are not to replay evil for evil, we are not to retaliate (Rom. 12:17). Why not?

1. Because we should have a concern for doing what is right in the sight of all people: 12:17b

- We cannot commend the grace and love of God in Christ if we behave in a cruel and merciless way, even in response to injury. 2 Cor. 8:21.

2. Because non-retaliation promotes peace: 12:18; Pet. 3:9; Ps. 34:12-16.

3. Because we should leave room for the justice and wrath of God: 12:19

- We never know the whole situation from the person’s perspective: 1 Cor. 4:3-5.
- It is impossible for anyone to be impartial in responses: Mt. 7:2
- We cannot judge others: Mt. 7:3-5.
- We are not the judge, God is the Judge: Rom. 14:4.

4. Not seeking revenge does not mean we abandon our need for self-defence:

- We can defend ourselves with the intention of doing as little hurt to our enemy as possible.
- Sometimes defending ourselves will be necessary for protecting the welfare of others, and to stop evil continuing. Forgiving enemies is not an excuse of tolerating evil to continue.
- Some sins against us are also crimes that should be dealt with, and the harm done to us affects others – public justice applies, not private revenge or forgiveness.
- In some situations of serious, criminal harm, an attitude of forgiveness in the heart should not stop proper action taken to deal with the evil – for the good of all concerned. Richard Baxter listed 7 cases where Christian forgiveness do not cancel the need for public justice.¹
- “You may show your enemy kindness, without putting a sword into his hand.” (Baxter) “We are not bound to trust an enemy, but we are bound to forgive him.” (Thomas Watson)

IV. FORGIVENESS SEEKS TO OVERCOME THE EVIL IN THE ENEMY. 12:20-21

1. We are challenged to move towards our enemy in kindness, as we have opportunity, in the hope that this kindness will melt and move our opponent.

2. This shame can be evoked when the perpetrator finds kindness and forgiveness coming back to him or her. The red face caused by heat (hot coals) is a picture of the red face of shame as recognition of the sin comes to the heart.

Conclusion: We are to overcome evil with good, first in ourselves by having the strong love of God in us inspiring our mercy and forgiveness, and then to move in strength and love towards our enemies to help them confront the evil that has them in thrall.

¹ R. Baxter, *A Christian Directory*, Pt. IV, Ch. 9.