

¹Make Me a Blessing: Romans 12:14-21

The aged Apostle John wrote one of the most beautiful truths about who we have become in Jesus Christ:

See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are.... And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as He is pure. (1 John 3:1-3).

Responding to God's love by *purifying ourselves, just as He is pure*, is also what the Apostle Paul has been teaching us over these last few weeks. I hope you realize that all of Roman's chapter 12 – on which this Sunday is the fourth and final sermon – is actually just one continuous thought. Paul has told us, that in view of all the love that God has shown us, our only logical response is to now live our lives sacrificially in His service, and by being transformed as we renew our minds. How and what that transformation looks like, he lists out in the verses that follow. Here's a simple chart to show you where we've been and where we are headed.

<i>In view of God's love for us, our logical response would be</i>	
To WORSHIP GOD	
by LIVING TRANSFORMED LIVES	(12: 1-2)
By BEING NURTURED within the Body of Christ	(12:3-8)
By FELLOWSHIPPING with the Family of God	(12:9-13)
By LIVING our WITNESS out in the world	(12:14-21)

In the next few weeks Paul will catch his breath and then add to this list

<i>In view of God's love for us, our logical response would be</i>	
To WORSHIP GOD	
By being a GOOD CITIZEN	(Chapter 13:1-7)
By being FINANCIALLY RESPONSIBLE	(Chapter 13:8-14)
By being RELIGIOUSLY TOLERANT	(Chapter 14:1-12)
By NOT BEING A STUMBLING BLOCK	(Chapter 14:13-23)

That will give you something to look forward to, but **LIVING your WITNESS out in the world**, is where we are today. So let's get started.

¹ a

Beginning in Chapter 12, after telling us in the previous 11 chapters why God, out of His love for us, sent His son Jesus to save us, Paul declares that our only logical response would be to now live holy, God honoring, lives by being transformed – becoming different people, God’s people – as we renew our minds. Then he says that the **only way** our transformation and renewal can occur is if we use our God given gifts to both nurture and be nurtured as we live in loving fellowship with and mutual affection for our brothers and sisters **within the body of Christ** (*All for one and one for all !*).

But we “being renewed,” godly, different people must also live within the larger fallen world that we daily come in contact with outside of the Church. So Paul next begins listing out ways that we can live as a witness to our transformed life among our neighbors.

In today’s portion of scriptures, the first of two key thoughts concerning how we can live a godly life among our perhaps not-so-godly neighbors is found in verses 18.

If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all (vs. 18).

So our task as, God’s people, is to work at being good neighbors with the whole neighborhood, even while recognizing that sometimes our neighbors may not want to be good neighbors to us. Knowing what we have been transformed and are being renewed from, this certainly will take some effort on our part – living peacefully in a less than peaceful neighborhood is not a natural human talent – and if we accomplish this it will be definite evidence that in Christ we have become “different people.”

“The German philosopher Schopenhauer compared the human race to a bunch of porcupines huddling together on a cold winter’s night. He said, “The colder it gets outside, the more we huddle together for warmth; but the closer we get to one another, the more we hurt one another with our sharp quills. And in the lonely night of earth’s winter eventually we begin to drift apart and wander out on our own and freeze to death in our loneliness.” “Christ has given us an alternative: to learn to forgive each other for the pokes we receive. To forgive as we have been forgiven. That allows us to stay together and stay warm.” (Leadership, Vol. 17, no. 2.)

A major part of our renewal in Christ is learning to get along with each other, both within and outside of our Church family; recognizing that there will still be differences, there will be always personality conflicts. But, Paul says that our God honoring, holy lives will have us living as peacemakers (as much as it is within our power). Jesus said, “*blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called children of God* (Matt. 5:9); flip that verse around and it says *the children of God, who are peacemakers, will be blessed*.

I have known very few who have mastered this peacemaking skill. Two such people, Dale & Delores Dennis, were the gracious hosts our Christian youth group meetings –

back when I was a teenager. One night a week, for two hours, some 30-40 teenagers would pile into the Dennis' beautifully decorated garage turned meeting space to sing Gospel songs, and study the Bible together. It was about as wholesome a teen event as you could imagine (like the Brady bunch doing church). Yet 30-40 even good teens in one place can cause a lot a energy, and noise, and some tight on-street parking which was not especially appreciated by the Dennis' cross street neighbor (who oddly enough was named Mr. Nabors). Several times Mr. Nabors called the police about our Christian youth group disturbing his peace ... only to be lectured by the officer who arrived on the scene for his own intolerance. This cross-street love hate relationship went on for close to 20 years with the Dennis' and even us teens doing everything in our power to placate Mr. Neighbors.

"He drew a circle that shut me out -
Heretic , rebel, a thing to flout.
But love and I had the wit to win:
We drew a circle and took him In !
(From " Outwitted" by Edwin Markham)

To this day, I am astounded by the number Christian leaders, pastors, Doctors, and teachers that grew up in that youth group; graciously hosted by Dale and Delores Dennis, yet I don't think we ever brought Mr. Nabors within our circle – not for lack of trying. That's just the way some neighbors will be.

Then, in two places, Paul lists out how we might go about getting along with our neighbors.

Live in harmony with one another
do not be haughty,
but associate with the lowly;
do not claim to be wiser than you are
(vs. 16)

Rejoice with those who rejoice,
weep with those who weep. (Vs. 15)

A Jewish Proverb states: "*Among those who stand, do not sit; Among those who sit, do not stand; Among those who laugh, do not weep; Among those who weep, do not laugh.*" One of the way's we live in harmony with each other and our neighbors is by knowing who we are and what gifts for service we have been given as we grow up within the Body of Christ. Paul has already warned us to not think more highly of ourselves than we ought but, with sober judgment, to know our abilities and use them to serve both within and outside the body of Christ.

Another way we live in harmony is by looking around to see who is hurting and how we might help. One of my favorite verses on this theme comes from Paul's letter to a young disciple named Titus.

[Jesus] gave himself for us
that he might redeem us from all iniquity
and purify for himself **a people of his own
who are zealous for good deeds.**

Titus 2.14

“Zealous for good deeds,” that means we go looking for ways to be helpful to our neighbors; what a great way to go through life. John Wesley said:

Do all the good you can,
By all the means you can,
In all the ways you can,
In all the places you can,
At all the times you can,
To all the people you can,
As long as ever you can.”

A woman tells a story about her grandson Patrick. He was with his mother as they stopped at the grocery store. She was in a hurry, but Patrick saw a woman in need.

This woman was riding around the store in a motorized wheelchair with a small basket on the front. The basket was loaded with groceries and the woman was also piling her lap with groceries. Patrick wanted to help. His mother said “Patrick we don’t have time”.

Patrick decided to help anyways. He went to the front and got a basket and then helped load all the groceries in the basket. He then followed the woman throughout the store. Stayed with her at the checkout and helped push her basket to her car.

“When he got to the car the woman’s son who is in his thirties from the look of it was sitting in the front seat playing a video game! Patrick tapped on the window and said, “*Hey, buddy, are you gonna help unload these groceries?*” The stunned man got out and asked his mother where she found this kid. She said, *I didn’t find him – he found me.* He helped to unload the groceries and put them into the car all the while getting an earful from his mother.

When Patrick was finished she offered him money for what he did. Patrick refused the money because, as he told her, “*We’re supposed to do all the good we can do.*” Here is a child who gets very little allowance saying, “I don’t want the money because the Lord wants me to do all the good I can do.” Patrick listened in Church.

We too are called to do all the good we can possibly do. Not just a little good. Not just a few things good. Not just an occasional good for our close circle of friends, but to do all the good we possibly can do.

In the movie “**Pay it Forward**” a young student was challenged by his social studies teacher to think of a way to change the world. He devised a plan to do something good

for three different people; someone that they couldn't do for themselves, and then to ask them instead of paying it back, to pay it forward. In the movie while things never worked out as he expected – which is also true in real life – this did set off an unstoppable chain reaction of doing good. Of course that young student wasn't the first one to think up "paying it forward," which is exactly what Jesus did for us when he gave his life for ours on the cross; *he gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are **zealous for good deeds***

But as Paul already pointed out, sometimes it is not possible for us to live in harmony and peaceably with some others. What do we do then?

This must be a very important lesson and a difficult one to put into practice, because Paul actually gives us the same instruction four times; just saying it four different ways

- Bless those who persecute you (vs.14)
- Do not repay anyone evil for evil (vs. 17)
- never avenge yourselves (vs. 19)
- if your enemies are hungry, feed them (vs.20)

The similarities between these instructions and the portion that we earlier read from the Sermon on Mount (Luke 6:27-36) indicate that Paul was quoting Jesus here. **Jesus concluded his sermon with the "Golden Rule" *Do to others as you would have them do to you*; which holds especially true when they already are not doing nice things to you** (Luke 6:31).

Non-retaliation is perhaps one of the hardest lessons for us to learn as we are being renewed in our thinking. It is truly against our own twisted instincts for self-defense, self-preservation. I said "twisted instincts" because notice these verses don't talk about defending yourself or your family from immediate physical harm but rather how you as an individual will respond after being wronged.

in our B.C. days (before Christ) we often felt it was our duty, our privilege, to avenge ourselves on those who have wronged us. This is known as *Lex Talionis* (the law of the claw) which still defines life in many parts of our world. You kill my cow, I kill two of yours; and so it escalates until everybody loses everything they love.

The infamous 19th-century feud between the Hatfields and the McCoys started with the accusation of a stolen pig and grew into a bloody vendetta that continued unabated for several decades. Members of both clans committed brutal murders, "*and their fighting brought heartache to every family in the valley of the Tug Fork River, along the border of Kentucky and West Virginia.*" William Hatfield and Randolph McCoy, the two men who leading this bitter and destructive revenge war had once been friends, comrades in arms in the Confederate Army. You would have thought they had seen enough bloodshed on the battlefield not to want to bring it home to their family and loved ones.

Our desire for vengeance - no matter how right our cause may seem to us - always goes wrong. Only God has the wisdom and patience needed to punish evildoers properly. He has promised to do so and He doesn't need any help from us. We can endure life's wrongs because we know God will make things right.

In fact, in Jesus, God has already made it right for us. To repay evil for evil is to be overcome by evil. To repay good for evil is to overcome evil with good. This is what Jesus did on the cross for us.

Jesus forgave us all our trespasses,
erasing the record that stood against us ...
nailing it to the cross...
triumphing over them by it.
Colossians 2:14-15

Some people see in these verses in Romans a call for total Christian pacifism, non-resistance to all evil. But I think they are mistaken, because the Old Testament does include laws for both warfare and self-defense, Solomon said there was even an appropriate time to kill, John the Baptist advised soldiers to be good soldiers, and in his next Chapter 13, Paul writes about the God ordained purpose of those serving in government to punish evil doers. **So in this section, Paul was not talking about self-defense but rather non-retaliation and revenge; only as we grow more like Christ will we better know the difference** between these. Which calls into question this very strange, seemingly vengeful, quote that Paul lifted from Proverbs 25:21

"if your enemies are hungry, feed them;
if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for
by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads
Romans 12:20

To our modern hearing, this sounds like Paul just reversed himself. No longer are we leaving revenge to God, but we are now using our good deeds as a way to seek a psychological revenge on our enemies (i.e. I'm too religious to hurt you, so I'll do good to you as a way to make you feel even more guilty – heaping coals of guilt on your head).

Actually commentators don't even know what Solomon originally meant when he wrote it, much less what Paul meant when he quoted it. There are a lot of speculative theories about this idea of heaping burning coals, from it being an act of kindness for a neighbor whose fire has gone out, to a public display of penance, to a possible cure for Rabies. So I will just side with Douglas Moo's conclusion that it means, *even if one's enemy hates this show of love, takes it as judgment, or finds his head burning with shame, at least, God knows and approves of what you are doing and will reward you accordingly* (NIV Application Commentary, Romans. Pg 580).

Which brings us to our second and most important truth.

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

Abraham Lincoln was once being criticized for his attitude towards his opponents. "Why do you try to make friends with them?" a colleague asked. "You should try to destroy them." Am I not destroying my enemies," the President asked gently, "when I make them my friends?"

So here's today's take home

One of my favorite movies from 1980's was "Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure", in which two space-headed teenage California duuuudes travel through time to complete a report for school. Through a strange series of events, they are placed in a position to deliver some good advice to the entire future world, and one of the two lines they cough up is "**Be Excellent to each other**" (the other is "**Party on, dudes!**"). Which in fact did change the future – much for the better – except that the people from the future now all talked like California dudes.

That's a lot of work just to get a Bill and Ted's line into a sermon, but what I'm getting at is that when we are "excellent" to each other, or better said "*Live in harmony with one another ... and peaceably with all*", we take away the room evil has to work. *We overcome evil with good.*

We squeeze evil out when we live out God's goodness with one another, even our neighbors. That means encouraging each other, listening to each other, forgiving each other, resolving conflicts, building each other up (both family and neighbors). Learning how to give as few "pokes" as possible and to forgive the pokes we receive. These are the primary way we both worship God and witness to our faith in this world: being excellent to one another.

All that's left to say is...
Party on dudes, party on!