

Gospel-Driven Relationships
Romans 12:14,17-19
#62 in a Series on Paul's Letter to the Romans
Faith Community Church – March 25, 2007

Introduction

1. Tell the story from Shop 'N Bag. Did I have a legitimate gripe? Yes, but I made a choice that might have brought dishonor on the Gospel.
2. Relationships with outsiders is the theme of verses 14, 17-19. By the way, are you an insider or an outsider? I'm using those terms to refer to a person's relationship with Christ. An insider is simply someone who, recognizing their sin, has turned to Christ and accepted forgiveness by faith alone. An outsider on the other hand, is someone – possibly even very religious – who has not trusted in Christ. Which one are you?
3. The primary application of this passage involves how we act toward those who mistreat us. But it also speaks the issue of how we relate to people who are difficult. Do you know anyone like that?
4. We will see that as Christians, our responsibility needs to be governed by the Gospel. Let's read the passage and see how this works out.

How Should We Act When We Face Mistreatment or Conflict?

1. We bless those who mistreat us, rather than cursing them (14).

John Calvin wrote this: "I have said that this is more difficult than to let go revenge when anyone is injured; for though some restrain their hands and are not led away by the passion of doing harm, they yet wish that some calamity or loss would in some way happen to their enemies; and even when they are so pacified that they wish no evil, there is yet hardly one in a hundred who wishes well to him from whom he has received an injury; nay, most men daringly burst forth into imprecations. But God by his word not only restrains our hands from doing evil, but also subdues the bitter feelings within; and not only so, but he would have us be solicitous for the wellbeing of those who unjustly trouble us and seek our destruction."¹

¹ Hendriksen, W., & Kistemaker, S. J. (1953-2001). *Vol. 12-13: New Testament commentary : Exposition of Paul's Epistle to the Romans*. Accompanying biblical text is author's translation. New Testament Commentary (417). Grand Rapids: Baker Book House.

What he is saying is pretty simple – many people respond to mistreatment by returning in kind. Some might refrain from saying what they think. But God wants us to not only refrain from speaking badly to or about those who mistreat us, he wants us to bless them.

The word “bless” comes from the Greek word, “Eulogia.” You hear the word “eulogy” in that. Eulogies take place at funerals when friends and loved ones tell about the life and character of the person who has died. It is intended to pay honor to them, though sometimes you want to check to make sure you’re at the right funeral.

What does Paul mean when he says that we are to bless those who mistreat us? It might refer to our need to pray for them (Jesus said this in Luke 6:27-28). But it also is possible that it refers to how we talk to or about them. See what Paul says in Colossians 4:5-6.

Is that easy? No, but God gives us the power through his Spirit to choose that.

2. We choose honorable behavior over revenge (17-18).

When someone is difficult or mistreats us, our first thoughts are often toward how we can put them in their place or get back at them. It’s kind of like when you are standing in line in a grocery store and the people in front of you are acting like toads. □

Paul is telling us that instead of thinking about retaliation, we are to “give thought” – deliberately consider how we can act honorably in the situation. Those of you with the NIV see this verse as “Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody.” That tells us that even though people may not behave in the right way, they do know that there is a right way to behave.

There are other passages that tell us this same thing:

¹⁴ Do all things without grumbling or questioning, ¹⁵ that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, Philippians 2:14-15, ESV

⁷ Show yourself in all respects to be a model of good works, and in your teaching show integrity, dignity, ⁸ and sound speech that cannot be condemned, so that an opponent may be put to shame, having nothing evil to say about us. Titus 2:7-8, ESV

¹¹ Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. ¹² Keep your conduct among the Gentiles honorable, so that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day of visitation. 1 Peter 2:11-12, ESV

These passages speak to us about our reputation, our character, and remind us that people are watching us. Choosing to act honorably over getting even may result in

some people looking at you as if you are weak, but with most people your reputation will only be enhanced, and your reputation has everything to do with your credibility as a Christian.

Verses 19-21 of Romans 12 echo the same thought, but they provide some additional perspective for us. In these verses Paul tells us that you and I – as individuals – are not to judge people for their sins. That means that you and I – as individuals – do not execute punishment. Instead we remember that is God’s job. Listen to what Peter says about Jesus in these kinds of situations:

²¹ For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. ²² He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. ²³ When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. 1 Peter 2:21-23, ESV

So then, rather than getting even, trying to get back at someone, even topping them in their mistreatment to teach them a lesson, we are supposed to consider how to respond honorably, and that involves, according to verses 19-21, showing kindness to those who cause us trouble. Making that choice does two things:

- It solidifies their judgment (if they do not repent). That is what the expression “heap burning coals on his head” refers to.
- It provides us from being overcome by evil, and allows us to overcome evil in our lives by doing good.

Note: A good illustration of this is found in the life of David, in 2 Samuel 16:5-14 where a man named Shimei curses David as David is forced to flee Jerusalem because of conflict with his son Absalom. But Absalom dies, and David returns, and when he does Shimei comes out to meet him. Read 2 Samuel 19:16-24. Would you have the grace to do that?

3. Finally, we recognize that our basic responsibility is to do our best to get along with everyone (vs. 18).

That’s easy, isn’t it!

Note that Paul says, “if possible, so far as it depends on you.” That is because there are some people with whom it is nearly impossible to get along. For most of us, this is kind of person who is simply ornery. But there are times in which we might come up against someone who is so philosophically opposed to the Gospel that their treatment of us reveals an implacable hatred. Certainly that is what our brothers and sisters around the world encounter, where they suffer beating, imprisonment, confiscation of their property, and even death for no other reason than the fact that they are Christians.

Paul's point is that every conflict has a catalyst. Don't you be that catalyst.

Putting This to Practice in Your Life

Let me suggest that we apply this to our lives by reminding ourselves of the three basic facts:

1. Who you are: If you have trusted in Christ, you are God's child and also his servant.
2. Why you are here: You are here to be God's representative, his ambassador, if you will. We function as his servants in the church and in the world. And you can find disagreeable people in both places.
3. Where this has to be at work: If our lives are what I call Gospel-driven, then we are thinking about our reputation and we are taking care to guard it. Dwight L. Moody, a preacher in the 1800's once said, "If I take care of my character, my reputation will take care of itself." He's right. The choices we make will either pave the way for or close the door to the opportunity to influence people toward Christ. So our responses need to be thoughtful and not the result of a knee-jerk reaction.

All of life should be gospel-driven. Let's let our desire to be effective representatives of Christ govern us in the way we respond when we encounter people who oppose us or just make our lives difficult.