



Romans - Lesson 12C

Chapter 12:14-21

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- For the past two weeks we've been marching steadily outward from ring to ring on Paul's bull's-eye of sanctification
 - We've covered the first two rings, our righteousness in our personal relationship with God and in our church relationships
 - There was a lot of material in these sections
 - So to simplify our understanding (and to help us remember it), here's a simple chart:



- This summary shows the relationships between the rings
 - The first ring emphasizes thinking and acting like Christ
 - Which requires we discipline the sin nature of our flesh
- This battle between our spirit and flesh – the one Paul described in Chapters 6-7 – will determine our success in every other ring
 - We have to start by learning how to say no to ourself so we can hear from the Lord and obey Him instead
 - And we have to be practiced at maintaining a good relationship with God before we can succeed in our relationships in the body
 - And so on...
- Today we move to the third ring, our relationship with unbelievers
 - Paul starts this teaching in Chapter 12 v.14

Rom. 12:14 Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse.

Rom. 12:15 Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep.

Rom. 12:16 Be of the same mind toward one another; do not be haughty in mind, but associate with the lowly. Do not be wise in your own estimation.

Rom. 12:17 Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men.

Rom. 12:18 If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men.

Rom. 12:19 Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay," says the Lord.

Rom. 12:20 "But if your enemy is hungry, feed him, and if he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in so doing you will heap burning coals on his head."

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

- Successful relationships with unbelievers begins by understanding they are not our enemies...they are our mission
 - Every command in this list is directed at enhancing our mission of winning them for Christ
 - If we follow these commands, our relationships with unbelievers will be more likely to win souls for Christ
 - We're seeking to conduct ourselves in ways that keep avenues open for reaching people with the truth of Jesus
 - It's a strategic mindset that understands that our relationships with unbelievers have eternal consequences
 - Our goal isn't harmony or friendship with the world...our goal is making opportunity for a Gospel moment
 - And Paul begins these instructions by reminding us that unbelievers naturally oppose us and our mission
 - The natural state of an unbeliever's heart is to oppose God and His word and therefore to oppose God's people
 - As Jesus told His disciples:

John 15:20 "Remember the word that I said to you, 'A slave is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you; if they kept My word, they will keep yours also.

- The enemy has deceived the world and has set their hearts against the truth
- This is an incredibly ironic state of affairs
 - Because our desire is to bring them rescue, to offer eternal life through the message of the Gospel
 - And we do this at personal risk and self-sacrifice
 - Yet they oppose us as if we were their enemies seeking to harm them
 - It's like we have an antidote to cure their cancer, but their sickness leaves them unable to swallow the medicine
 - The enemy has lied to them so effectively that they are hardened against the truth that would set them free
- Nevertheless, the Lord has the power to reach these hearts as He did ours, and He asks us to make ourselves available to be His messenger
 - And Paul tells us we must think strategically about positioning ourselves for this possibility
 - We need to anticipate their opposition and use it as opportunity to do something they don't expect
 - When they persecute us, we bless them, loving them despite their hatred

- Bless them in this way and watch the effect it has on their receptiveness to the Gospel
- Because obviously this *isn't* the world's way of dealing with opposition
 - The world repays evil for evil, misquoting the Bible's teaching on "an eye for an eye"
 - They expect us to do the same to them
 - So when we show kindness to those who persecute us for our faith, then we challenge their assumptions
 - And perhaps we open an avenue for God to reach their heart
- We're fulfilling the very purpose Christ had in calling us into faith and leaving us here for a time to serve Him in the world
 - As Jesus told us

Matt. 5:43 "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'

Matt. 5:44 "But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,

Matt. 5:45 so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.

Matt. 5:46 "For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?

Matt. 5:47 "If you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?

Matt. 5:48 "Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

- Being Jesus' hands and feet, His ambassador, begins with having this charitable attitude toward the unbeliever
 - We must remember we're not inherently better people than the world is
 - We didn't find Christ because we were smarter, nicer or more deserving
 - God gave us grace while we were still His enemy just like everyone else
 - Of course if we forget this and return curses for curses, then as Jesus said what reward is there in that?
 - We've forfeited the opportunity to be rewarded in Heaven for serving Christ self-sacrificially
 - And we've given the world no reason to take note of our message, since our behavior contradicts our words
 - In that sense we're standing opposed to the truth of the Gospel, rather than being a witness for it
 - Practically-speaking, blessing those who persecute you means doing the kind of things you never imagined you would do
 - For example, if an unbeliever comes to your front door complaining about

your front yard Christmas display he finds offensive

- You don't respond the way he would expect or perhaps even in the way you might like to respond
- Instead of engaging in an argument or defending your "rights", you agree to remove it...
 - But first you invite him in for some eggnog
 - And maybe later you bring them a gift and card...and eventually you invite them to church
 - In other words, you show no regard for that Christmas nativity scene – which probably had zero potential to bring souls into the Kingdom
- Instead, you put aside the conflict altogether so you can attend to the eternal needs of the soul standing at your front door
 - You do so hoping that the Lord orchestrated this encounter to allow you opportunity to witness to His love
 - More than a few believers have come into the Kingdom because of a thoughtful approach to an encounter like this
- Besides showing kindness to unbelievers who would intrude into our lives, Paul says we must also take an interest in their lives
 - We must be ready to rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep
 - Before we look at these commands, remember the context of this passage
 - Paul is speaking about unbelievers here
 - Which is not to say we don't rejoice or weep with our brothers and sisters in the body
 - Of course we do, and Paul reminds us of this requirement as well at the beginning of v.16
 - But our true challenge is rejoicing and weeping with unbelievers over the circumstances they face in life
 - Unbelievers rejoice at weddings and for new births and when they get promotions or a new car or a boyfriend, etc.
 - If we're thinking strategically about our relationships with unbelievers, we'll join them in these moments
 - We'll identify with their circumstances and become part of their moments
- But sometimes the unbeliever's lifestyle choices will run contrary to our thinking, and these differences may cause us to restrain our empathy
 - So that as a result of their choices, we may respond to their ups and downs in a tempered, insincere manner
 - For example, your next-door neighbors invites you to celebrate the birth of their child, but the parents aren't married
 - Do you feel conflicted over congratulating them on having a child born out of wedlock?
 - Or your workmate weeps over the death of a homosexual family member who

died of AIDS

- Do you struggle to show sympathy knowing the person's immoral lifestyle contributed their death?
- These reactions are misplaced moralism and self-righteousness
 - We withhold our rejoicing or sympathy because we're passing judgment on their lives
 - And even if your judgments are accurate based on scripture, don't forget these people don't know scripture
 - Because they don't know Christ
- Our purpose in being a sincere part of these moments is so we may introduce them to Christ
 - But if we're too busy judging them for not knowing Christ, then how will we ever get close enough to introduce them to Christ?
 - And what do we expect anyway? That they should receive our testimony of Christ only after they've adopted a Christian lifestyle?
 - Is that how we received Christ?
- Paul says set aside your prejudices against unbelievers and live among them, showing a true appreciation for their life's circumstances
 - This is exactly what Jesus did
 - He attended the house parties of tax collectors and associated with prostitutes, yet He did so without joining in their sin
 - He lived this way so that He might reach the lost with the love of God and bring them into righteousness
 - As Jesus said, He did not come to call the righteous but the sinner
 - So we must be careful about becoming haughty, holier-than-thou and unwilling to associate with those whose lives we don't approve
 - Notice in v.16 as I mentioned earlier, Paul also asks that we be of the same mind toward one another in the body
 - I think Paul placed this comment in the midst of his teaching on relationships with unbelievers because there is a natural connection between how we live in the two worlds
 - A Christian who judges the sin of unbelievers and practices haughtiness toward them is likely to display that same attitude toward believers eventually
 - It's a small step from judging the unbeliever to judging the believer
 - Paul gives us the antidote to thinking this way in the second half of v.16
 - First, he says we need to associate with the lowly
 - Spend time with the very people you're looking down your nose at so you can get to know them
 - And the more you know them, the more you'll find that the so-called lowly are a lot like you

- Nothing does away with haughtiness faster than learning you have things in common with the person you previously despised
 - In time we'll develop a compassionate concern for people
- Secondly, Paul says do not be wise in your own estimation
 - This is the corollary of associating with the lowly
 - When we judge another person, we inevitably place ourselves above them in our own minds
 - You can't judge someone without assuming a position of superiority over them
 - You find some way to see yourself as better, nicer, wiser than they are
 - And from that position of superiority you pass judgment on their inferiority
 - To guard against this haughtiness, Paul says practice humility
 - Don't place yourself in a position of superiority over others
 - Being wise in our own estimation is not being wise at all
 - It's only assuming we're wiser when in reality we're the fool
 - The best way to avoid thinking too well of yourself is to keep a healthy memory of your own weaknesses
 - No one knows our own failings as well as we do
 - Bring them back to mind when you're tempted to look down on the unbelieving world or your brothers and sisters
 - And then remember that Christ forgave you of all those failings
 - And He's ready to forgive them too
- Next Paul says in v.17, we can't pay back evil for evil
 - This instruction runs hand-in-hand with his earlier command to bless and not curse those who persecute you
 - The difference here is that we don't take revenge for acts already done against us
 - In the earlier instructions, Paul was asking us to take no offense when others attack us for our faith
 - Here Paul's asking us not to be offensive to others by forgetting our faith
 - In the first case, it was our love for the unbeliever that caused the conflict
 - In this case, it's our lack of love for the unbeliever that causes the conflict
 - Remember my example of the neighbor who wanted your nativity display taken down...
 - What if instead of asking you to take it down, that neighbor destroyed your decorations with a bat
 - At that point, you might feel tempted to repay his evil act by taking a bat to something on *his* property
 - Or by taking pictures of what he did and posting them to Facebook with a nasty comment

- Paul says we can't act this way before unbelievers and still expect to win many for Christ
 - We need to think strategically about the moment
 - We should act charitably
 - But that doesn't mean we have to embrace the role of victim in every circumstance
- Notice at the end of v.17 Paul says we should do what's right in the sight of all men
 - We should act in appropriate ways, according to the customs and expectations of the culture we live in
 - So doing what's right in the eyes of all men means living with proper consideration for others, being a good friend, a good neighbor
 - But it can also mean taking appropriate action to defend yourself
 - In the case of the rampaging neighbor with the bat, you could choose to call the police and prosecute his behavior
 - Perhaps the situation has escalated to the point where police action is what's right in the eyes of all men
 - You're not required to press charges, but neither would you be wrong for doing so
 - The key is maintaining an understanding that you're always an ambassador for Christ
 - Make sure you're being a good neighbor without giving cause for offense
 - Sometimes that means overlooking the evil of others and not taking offense
 - Other times it means earning the appreciation of other neighbors by having the courage to prosecute the neighborhood menace
 - Every such example will be a judgment call
 - So I can't give you a hard-and-fast rule for how to respond
 - Just consider every situation in light of eternity and the opportunity to win someone for Christ
- Finally, doing what's right in the sight of all men cannot become excuse for participating in the world's sin
 - The world will say many things are "right" yet we know they are not right at all
 - So we cannot use Paul's instructions here as excuse for following after the world's desires, in the spirit of maintaining relationships with them
 - Paul's bull's-eye gives us the rule for knowing when following the world is off limits
 - The inner rings of the Bull's eye take priority over the outer rings
 - When doing what is right in the sight of all men comes into conflict with our pursuit of personal holiness before God, holiness wins
 - Or if our unbelieving friends ask us to do something that might stumble a Christian brother, we must decline
 - Paul gets more into this issue in later chapters

- Paul sums up the balancing of these priorities between the world and our witness in v.18
 - So far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men
 - Being at peace with all men is our goal because it furthers our mission in bringing the Gospel to the world
 - Obviously, we can't witness to the world for Christ if we are embroiled in conflicts with the world
 - But at the same time, we can't be effective witnesses if we don't stand for something different than the world stands for
 - And preserving our witness for Christ will sometimes lead to unavoidable conflicts that are outside our control
 - You may face times you're expected to do or say something that violates your conscience
 - Or friendship with unbelievers may cause you to violate the word of God
 - In those situations, we don't have a choice on how to proceed
 - We are bound by scripture and by our conscience to do what's right before God
 - And as we hold to our witness, we may spark a conflict with the unbelieving world
 - Friendships may suffer, family relationships may become strained or distant, working relationships may be put at risk
- Often these conflicts arise because the unbelievers who see us holding to our beliefs feel judged or even convicted by our stance
 - We didn't necessarily point out the difference much less said anything about their choices
 - Nevertheless, they take note and may react in anger or resentment
 - I remember times in my professional life when I ran into these circumstances (e.g., Halloween parties, use of foul language, etc.)
 - These are the situations Paul is talking about when he says "so far as it depends on us"
 - We don't invited the conflict but we couldn't avoid it and we couldn't militate against it
 - The other party choose to create it, and when it happens, then revert to rule #1
 - Bless those who persecute you
 - An example of our day might be the dilemma of a Christian receiving an invitation to attend a family member's homosexual "wedding"
 - Normally, we should want to rejoice with them in their rejoicing
 - And we know we should associate with the lowly
 - And we want to respect what is right in the sight of all men
 - And as far as it depends on us, we don't want to incite conflict over the

situation

- Nevertheless, we must consider our witness and conscience, and in doing so we will likely conclude that we shouldn't attend the wedding event
 - On the other hand, we might choose to attend the reception
 - Or instead of attending the wedding events, we might invite the new couple over to our house for a meal
 - What we do will depend on our conscience, but we're seeking ways to maintain a working relationship so we can win them for Christ
 - This is a strategic attitude that places the needs of the unbeliever's potential salvation above any personal concern
 - Without compromising our holiness or witness
- Paul's next-to-last command is to never take our own revenge, so we can leave room for the wrath of God
 - This is a complex consideration, but it's a powerful way to understand our service to Christ in the cause of salvation
 - First, let's understand the situation Paul's addressing
 - He's talking about a believer suffering loss at the hands of unbelievers who are not responding to our witnessing
 - Things have reached the point where we might feel tempted to act in revenge against them
 - I'm sure many of us have been in this situation
 - Someone harmed us too severely or so often that we became preoccupied with thoughts of retribution
 - Often this happens in a school or work setting, or with family
 - Paul says when you face these situations, don't succumb to the desire to take revenge
 - Because if we do, we're not leaving room for God's vengeance
 - We don't know God's plan for this person's life
 - Perhaps God plans to save this person in a future day
 - And when that day comes they will receive forgiveness for all their wrongs against you
 - If God is willing to forgive them, how can we take revenge against them as if we presumed to know the Lord's will?
 - How will we feel in eternity if we act against them while they are unbelieving and then see they received the same mercy we did?
 - We need to leave room for God to act one way or another
 - And should God decide to leave them in their sin, God will take into account their sin against believers
 - When they receive their ultimate judgment, it will reflect just punishment for their offenses
 - Paul says when we do kind things for those who hurt us, it's like heaping coals

on their head

- That's a picture of placing judgment on someone's head
- Once again, we must leave room for God to act
- Now at this point some hear Paul's words and think he sounds very uncharitable, as if he's encouraging us to wish for unbelievers to be judged by God
 - That's not how we should hear Paul's words
 - He's not necessarily asking us to have a desire to see unbelievers suffering at God's hand
 - Rather, Paul's acknowledging our natural desire for revenge so he can ensure we consider the effect of our actions
 - For that Christian who can't find it in their heart to forgive a person and may be seriously considering taking revenge, Paul says think again
 - He says that if revenge is all you can see for that person, then the best course you can take is to let God punish them for you
 - Refrain from taking revenge and you'll ensure they get an even worse punishment than you can give
 - But if you take justice into our own hands, you sin and you limit God's justice
 - In a sense, their judgment in Hell will be lessened in some way because you took matters into your own hands
 - Luke 16 teaches that there is a reciprocal relationship between what we receive here and what we receive in eternity
 - The more a believer suffers for Christ here, the greater our reward in eternity
 - Jesus sums up this principle saying

Matt. 5:11 “Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me.

Matt. 5:12 “Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

- Our reward increases as we willingly accept persecution for the sake of our faith
- So being willing to forgo taking revenge now, holds promise for greater benefits in the future
- Secondly, there is some suggestion that the more sin an unbeliever commits now, the more suffering they must experience in eternity
 - Peter suggests that the punishment for those who sin greatly here is proportionally greater

2Pet. 2:20 For if, after they have escaped the defilements of the world by the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and are overcome, the last state has become worse for them than the first.

2Pet. 2:21 For it would be better for them not to have known the way of

righteousness, than having known it, to turn away from the holy commandment handed on to them.

- While we don't fully understand this economy, we know God is perfectly just in all His judgments
 - Therefore, we know He will consider all these puts-and-takes in arriving at the right course for each unbeliever
 - But if we step in and enforce our own version of justice, we sin by interfering in God's justice
 - And the person we are against will see even greater judgment should we leave them in God's hands
 - But should God choose to forgive them by His grace in the end, you will be glad you didn't act against a future brother and sister
 - You are leaving room for God to make the final determination concerning someone's future
 - And that is a win-win for you no matter what course God may take in that person's life
- Finally, Paul sums up the chapter saying do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good
 - This has a specific meaning but it could also be a summary statement for the entire third ring
 - As we engage in the unbelieving world hoping to win some for Christ, be careful they don't pull you down
 - We would better to stay away from the world altogether than to be corrupted by it
 - Here again, this statement takes us back to our bull's-eye
 - We can only operate effectively in the third ring as an ambassador for Christ living among unbelievers if we are exercising reasonable control over our flesh
 - And if we are already practiced at showing love with humility and living with eyes for eternity among believers
 - But if we are weak in either of these two inner rings, then we will get eaten alive by our relationship with the unbelieving world
 - We may enter into those relationships hoping to win some for Christ
 - But soon we'll find ourselves sharing their bad habits and sinful attitudes
 - Paul says above all else, we must overcome these evils by representing the good for Christ and His word
 - We cannot allow the enemy to get the upper hand in our life
 - We cannot be overcome by the evil we seek to influence for Christ
- Let's take a look at our chart once more with the third ring filled in

