

Sermon: Being people of Peace
Romans 12:9-21
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This week I was talking with a young woman, a Coptic Christian, who told me that she had become an agnostic. "I am not a Christian anymore, she told me. "How can you believe in a God who punishes people", she asked me. For her, heaven and hell were hard to grasp.

So she stopped going to church for this, and I am sure many other reasons. She also said that she felt that the Apostle Paul was not as kind as Jesus was.

But imagine a God who does not punish. A God who lets all people get away with the evil they do...

What to do when people do us wrong? How to respond to the evil that people do to us? The world we live in is lovely - we love life. But a reality is, that we also suffer much injustice. And we all feel that it is justice, good, that those who inflict suffering, are punished.

1. Do not avenge yourself

Paul, in his letter to the church in Rome, makes a categorical statement, in 12:19:

Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord."

Paul quotes here from the Old Testament. So both the Old Testament and the New Testament underline that God is a God of vengeance. And mind you, it was Jesus who - more than Paul - speaks of eternal punishment.

If something bad is done to you, God himself will take action.

Now our first reaction may be like that of the disciples of Jesus: When some Samaritans refused to receive Jesus Christ in their village, the disciples James and John asked, "Lord, do you want us to call fire down from heaven to destroy them?"

But Jesus invites us to gentleness. He turned to his disciples and rebuked them, and said, "You do not know what kind of spirit you are of; for the Son of Man did not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them."

By nature we may want to respond in kind to the bad things people do to us, but an eye for an eye was maybe the restraining order - never punish people beyond what they did - but it is not in accordance with the life and moral teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ. We are not asked to limit our revenge, but to love our enemies.

Never avenge yourselves, says Paul. To treat a man with kindness rather than vengeance is the way to move his heart. Vengeance may break his spirit; but kindness will break his heart. "

If we are kind to our enemies," says Paul, "it will heap coals of fire on their heads." This means, not that it will store up further punishment for them, but that it will move them to burning shame to change their behaviour.

If we respond to hatred with more hatred, nothing gets solved; but if it is met with love, an antidote for the poison is found.

Mr Booker Washington was a black african leader in the USA; he was from the last generation that was born in slavery. He became a leading political voice of those former slaves and their descendants. America did away with slavery but Booker was still confronted all the time mean and awful racist contempt and discrimination.

But Booker Washington said: "I will not allow any man to make me lower myself by hating him."

Hatred for people who do us harm eats us up inside and does not make us better people, but worse.

Does this mean our enemies will get away with the evil they do? Does this mean that terrorists who destroy churches and kill Christians and Yezidis and harmless men, women and children get away with it? No it does not.

In his sermons on the letter of Paul to the Romans, church father John Chrysostom said:

What the injured man most desires to see is revenge, and God will give it to him in full measure, provided that he does not try to avenge himself. Leave it to God to follow up the wrongs done to you. [Chrysostom, homilies on Romans 22]

The revenge of God is encouraging for us. He will one day turn the tables. In the book of Revelation, the apostle John gets a glimpse in heaven and he sees the souls of those who had been killed for their Christian faith, very close to God:

They cried out with a loud voice: "O sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?" [Rev 6:9-11]

There will be divine retribution - the injustice in this universe will be dealt with. God himself will take action. But we are not to avenge ourselves. After all, he is the judge, we are not.

Paul, by the way, in Romans 13, also says that in this world, the governments, the authorities, are God's avenging arm. If someone commits a crime to you - you are not to avenge yourselves, but go to the police. They are God's avenging arm. And if they do not do justice, leave things in the hands of God. His time will come.

2. Be a person of peace

Never avenge yourself but, Paul says in vs 18, "If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all."

This is a very high goal for our lives. Be people of peace. Live in peace with all. We drown evil in an abundance of goodness.

Revenge is mean-spirited; true victory is returning good for evil; it means making peace where others make our lives tough.

Even the philosopher Plato said that the good man will choose to suffer evil rather than to do evil. and he said, hatred is always evil.

When a Christian is insulted and maltreated, he has the example of the Master. On the cross he prayed God to forgive those who crucified him.

There has been no greater force to move men and women into Christianity than this example of forgiveness to evildoers.

When Stephen was stoned, in Acts 7, he prayed that God would forgive those who killed him. Among those who stood there rejoicing in his death, was Saul, a fanatic extremist Pharisee. The church owes St Paul to this prayer of forgiveness by Stephen.

Our goodness is the answer of the meanness of others; our love is the answer to their hatred. We are to live at peace with all men.

But Paul adds two qualifications. He says, firstly, that we have to do this "if it be possible". There may come a time when the claims of courtesy have to submit to the claims of principle.

Christianity is not an easy-going tolerance which will accept anything and shut its eyes to everything. There may come a time when some battles have to be fought, and when it does, the Christian will not shirk it.

Paul, secondly says, have peace with all people "as far as you can". Paul knew very well that it is easier for some to live at peace than for others. He knew that one man can be compelled to control as much temper in an hour as another man in a lifetime.

We would do well to remember that goodness is a great deal easier for some than for others; that will keep us criticising others, and from discouragement when we see that we fail.

But our goal is: Repay no evil for evil. (vs 17) Yes, even more: Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. (vs 14)

Sometimes people suggest that the apostle Paul had a very different message than Jesus. Well, we hear the clear echoes of Jesus' Sermon on the Mountain in these words of Paul.

The standards of the early Church were the standards of Jesus. God lets his sun go up over good and evil people. We follow God by showing love and goodness to good and evil people.

It is important to remind ourselves that to love and to forgive and to do good is not weakness - it is courageous and often it is very tough. Our reflexes are to avenge ourselves and to kick those down who kick us.

To love and to forgive and to do good, even to those who hurt us, takes much inner strength, sometimes even physical restraint. But the person who is able to restrain himself is stronger than someone who just follows his impulses. People who love and do good in the midst of evil are powerful people.

3. A peace-person is active

The lifestyle that Jesus and the apostle Paul are painting for us is not weak. Often people who speak of love and peace are seen as soft and sweet, but to aim for peace in the midst of evil is very hard. It requires strong commitment.

Not avenging yourself and being a person of peace is also not a passive role - it means action. The whole passage that we have read breathes a very committed, active Christian lifestyle.

It begins with saying, 'Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil. Hold fast to what is good.' Some bible translations say, 'hate what is evil', or 'detest what is evil.' Hatred of evil is seen as an important part of the Christian lifestyle.

St Origen, one of our church fathers, commented on this:

Perhaps it seems odd to find hatred listed among the virtues, but it is put here of necessity by the apostle. Nobody doubts that the soul has feelings of hatred in it; however it is praiseworthy to hate evil and to hate sin. For unless a person hates evil he cannot love.

Love for what is good is the other side of the coin. Love for what is good needs hatred for what is evil. He who does not hate much, also cannot love much.

We are also told, in verse 11, to "not be slothful in zeal" but to be "fervent in spirit" or "aglow in spirit". This is the description not of a laid-back sort of Christianity, or of a passive person. This is not the lifestyle of a Christian who just let things happen to him; this is not the image of a weak person who just lets people walk over him.

We are called to be zealous in hating evil and in doing good.

When someone does evil to you, you have the full right to hate the evil done to you.

Being a peacemaker does not mean you deny the truth of what is right and wrong. Sometimes things are truly evil.

But we must be so careful. Firstly, we are often rather ignorant and unable to judge well. A good reason to leave the final judgment to God and not to avenge oneself.

And also, we are not told to hate the evil person, but evil as such. This is a major distinction that we all know, but we often overlook this in the heat of the moment when we feel trampled on.

If we hate people back, if we treat them in kind, we do wrong, we do evil. We should not lower ourselves to this.

Conclusion

Instead, Paul says, 'Outdo one another in showing honour'. Half of the problems in churches is because I am more worried about my rights, my privileges, my prestige, than about honouring other people. And if we do not get the honour we think we deserve, we try to dishonour the other.

That is not peacemaking. That is sowing hatred and discord.

But to honour all people, to love all people - even those who do not treat us kindly, is the way of Christ. An incredibly hard way. But it is His way, and if we walk on that way, we will be walking beside our Lord there, Jesus Christ who prayed for his enemies and who loved them to the very end.

Amen