



May 19 & 20, 2018
Pastor Megan Hackman
Chapel Hill Presbyterian Church

*The Good Life:
Getting Along*
Romans 12:14, 17-21

We are in Romans 12 right now, and we are talking about genuine love. Pastor Mark taught us last week that Paul's painting a picture for us of God's love for us, of his agape—that is, his unconditional, biggest love possible—love that is genuine, non-hypocritical, true as true can be. Because God went through all the trouble of Romans 1-11 to save us from ourselves and fill us with His Spirit, he wants us, all those who follow Jesus, to be full of his non-hypocritical, agape love, for everyone. And just in case we had hoped that that love was only for people we liked, we get loads of verses here in Romans 12 about loving our enemies.

Enemy is not a word we use a lot. I've rarely heard an adult tell me that another person is their enemy. Even friends with ugly divorce situations or extreme sport rivalries typically stop just short of calling someone their enemy. But here's how I've been thinking about who God is calling us to love— how about people who don't like you? people who make it clear they don't want to be your neighbor? someone who avoids or is passive aggressive with you? Got anyone like that in your life?

Okay, so I want to talk about that person. Let's have that person in mind. Do you have a name yet? I want you to have a name because I'm going to get all up in your mental business about how to live with this person, so I want you to be picturing them. Got it? Does Jesus really want you to love that person? Let's read. We're in Romans 12.

Let's just remember verse 14 last week—

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.

Then jump down to verse 17,

Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. 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." To the contrary, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

This is the word of the Lord.
Thanks be to God.

Who's been to the movies recently? We love going to the movies. We saw "Ready Player One" recently. Anybody seen it? I know it's not the headliner others have been and honestly, this isn't the— you must see this! The Gospel comes alive in that movie!" kind of plug. So I'm going to spoil one of the opening a-ha scenes for you with a clear conscience, okay?

This is a sci-fi movie laced with late 1980's and early 1990's Easter eggs that are super fun for us who were aware of pop culture in that era. They live in a world which has a completely virtual alter-reality. One of the opening scenes is in that virtual reality world with an epic car race that they've been having for something like 17 years. Every day, the same car race. And no one has won. The race ends with an epic final show down with who else but King Kong who finally stops any would be car.

Then the main character finds this hint that makes him think that rather than doing that race the exact same way as every other time. Maybe when he's at the starting line, he should — throw the car into reverse with everything he's got and go backwards. He thinks it's crazy!!! There's a giant building behind him he's sure to crash into, but one day, he just tries it. Throws the car into reverse, goes pedal to the metal, gets right up at that big building and then... a trap door opens up, takes his car down a level, and suddenly he's able to go forward on this low road.

This low road is transparent, so everything that's happening above him, he can see! He can see the exact race he's raced every day unfolding before him. He sees the same cars, the same explosions, and even the same King Kong. But this time, he's underneath it all, untouched, free to go as fast as he wants to, all the way to the finish line and he takes the prize.

We haven't gotten as far away from Romans as you think. Stick with me.

He found a new way to do the same old, same dog-eat-dog race— by finding a hidden key that unlocked a way to a low road. That low road didn't change the race at all, but it completely changed his perspective on it.

Walking with God is an invitation to a transparent, free life — a life where you can see with a different perspective all the same daily struggles. When you live life with Jesus, it's like you can see through it! You can see challenges and anticipate them and by the power of the Spirit, make it to the other side of each one of them and overcome all life's struggles!

What's the key? What unlocks that perspective? It's God's love. And it's actively giving God's love even to our enemies. God's love opens up for us the low road. When we take that road road, we find out that verse 21 is true! We win! We overcome evil with good. We like the idea of taking the high road, being good followers of Jesus by not reacting badly to our enemies. But Jesus asks more of us— he asks us to take the low road, as he did.

How do we love our enemies with genuine love? Paul gives us four practical ways.

First — let's go back to Romans 12:14. We're going to pray for God to bless them. We're going to pray— that is, we're going to talk to God about them and ask for God to bless them.

What does that mean? We love the word, "blessing" as a culture. Even those who don't know God have a conception of blessing. It usually includes a measure of material comfort, friendship, "the good life," right? And God's blessing is that, and it is so much more.

The Old Testament is loaded with lists of the blessings of God, and they're usually right alongside a list of curses. When we are in formal relationship with people, we have legally binding documents — MOU's, business agreements, marriage licenses, etc. The Old Testament day and age had formal relationship agreements, too; they were called covenants. And when the relationship was going well, blessings were promised; when it wasn't, curses were sure. So it would be normal in Paul's day and age to expect that you could curse the people you weren't getting along with and bless the people you

were. But it's so like Jesus to take what people expect and turn it upside down. Jesus says, bless those who persecute you, bless and do not curse.

One of the classic lists of blessings and curses is Deuteronomy 28. The curses are really dramatic. There are 53 verses of curses called down upon those who have broken covenant relationship. All these curses in Deuteronomy 28 are serious. And what makes this epic curse saga in Deuteronomy especially hard to read is that these curses are spoken over those who have broken relationship with God.

BUT then Jesus. Galatians 3:13 says, "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us." Jesus took all 53 verses of those curses upon himself so that he could call you a son, so that he could call you, a daughter. Until we had Jesus, we were God's enemies. Remember Romans 5? While we were still sinners— while our relationship with God was broken— did God curse us? No, Christ died for us. While we were his enemies, we were restored to perfect relationship with Jesus through Jesus' death. Now we receive his blessing. What incredible love is this!!! Jesus died for us, his enemies! And so Jesus instructs us to take the low road by actively loving our enemies by praying blessing for them.

We discover that list of blessings back up at the beginning of Deuteronomy 28 where God speaks blessing over those in relationship with him like this: "The LORD your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth. And these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you, if you obey the voice of the LORD your God. Blessed shall you be in the city, and blessed shall you be in the field. Blessed shall be the fruit of your womb and the fruit of your ground..." and on and on the blessings go for 13 verses.

Remember that name of your enemy? Have you ever prayed for them this way? Prayed for their children by name? for their businesses to flourish? Can you believe that God loves them and sees them and died for them, too? Can you fathom the love that God has for you and for them to take all those curses upon himself so only blessing would be spoken over you?

You want to stop fighting the same fight with someone? Open up a new perspective, God's perspective, by praying that God would bless them.

It's going to get harder, here we go. We take the low road of God's love when we pray for our enemies and when we don't repay them the evil they've done to us. Pray, and don't repay. Look at Romans 12:17. Overcome evil by loving in such a way that you repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all.

How much of your thought life has been taken up thinking about how many times that person has hurt you? How many times have you had a conversation with them in your mind? Instead, God invites you to love them by taking up your thought life with thinking about how to do what is honorable in the sight of all. Think about your response, not what they've done. And when you think about that response, think about how to do what is honorable.

What should that response be to evil done to you? I don't know in your circumstance. But I do know it's the opposite of repaying them one for one for what they've done to you.

This example may be petty, but I bet it'll resonate. I overheard a conversation between preschool moms this week about who's been invited to what birthday party. To be fair, I think they were eye-rolling about it themselves. It makes sense— if your kid doesn't get invited, don't invite their kid. One for one. Even Steven. Right? Well— actually, let's think for a second about what would be honorable in

the sight of all? Are you inviting the whole class? Then what's honorable is not to leave out a few. Make sense? Don't repay evil for evil, but give thought to what is honorable in the sight of all.

Pray, don't repay and third, live at peace. Look at verse 18, "If possible, as far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all." This is Paul at his best, super practical. What else is there to say? I love the two caveats — if possible (sometimes it's not) and as far as it depends on you. Your spouse wants a divorce and you don't. You know it takes two to tango, so you're going to counseling. You're working on your stuff. You've owned where you've gone wrong. You've owned 100% before Jesus as much as it depends on you. But they're still moving in with someone else. So, if it's possible. Only you know if it is or not. If possible, as far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. With who? With all. ALL. That's all I've got there.

Pray, don't repay; Live at peace, and fourth, take care. We'll take some time with this last one. Start at the beginning of verse 19 — "Beloved." I love this opener. We're getting close to the end here, and it's as if Paul is like — I know it's getting hard. So okay, Beloved, people I love. People I treasure. I know you by name. This is going to be hard. You ever heard someone start talking to you with, "Bless your heart..." or "So, friend..." it comes with that look, and you know you're not going to like the message, right?

"Beloved, never avenge yourselves." Jesus doesn't give you permission to avenge yourself. Remember IronMan telling Loki, "If we can't protect the Earth, you can be ___ sure we'll avenge it." Well, sorry to burst your bubble, but you're not the hero in this story, and you don't get to be the one to avenge the wrongs done to you.

"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." Just to be sure you really hear this, Paul gives a double book-end to "Vengeance is mine, I will repay." The bookends are "for it is written" (that's the holy parent saying, Did you hear what I just said?) "for it is written" and "says the Lord." That's your King James Version, "Thus saith the Lord" (or the holy parent's, "And I mean it!") Verse 19: Did you hear what I said? Vengeance is mine, I will repay. And I mean it!

Verse 20, "To the contrary, if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head."

Now if you think the way I do, we're glad to hear that our enemy is going to get what's coming to them— between the wrath of God, vengeance, and then this "heap burning coals on his head." But unfortunately/fortunately, that's not what's going on here. Verse 20 is not the passive/aggressive heap coals to kill them with kindness. Mwahhahahaha. Forcing a life of peace that's aggressively waiting for the wrath and vengeance of God isn't good either. That's totally incongruent with everything Jesus is about! Kill the with kindness is completely out of context with genuine love. God as wrathful and vengeful is also completely out of accord with the God who is the God of agape, unconditional love! So what do these verses mean?

Do you see in your Bible that the vengeance bit in verse 19 and most of verse 20 are in quotes? That's because Paul is quoting the Old Testament here. We think about these words about feeding and clothing our enemy as Jesus' words, and they were that, too! But the vengeance bit is from where we've already been in Deuteronomy 32 and the feeding and burning coals is from Proverbs, the book that's full of ways to live an abundant life with God. And while burning coals can be an exacting punishment language, the way it's used here and in Proverbs is to surprise your enemy, shock them, make them look up and see where the coals came from, kind of language. It's surprising your enemy

into repentance. Rather than “kill your enemy with kindness” it’s, “give life to your enemy with kindness.”

The aim of taking care of your enemy is not to see them get what’s coming to them. It’s — gosh, I hope you believe me here— the aim of your life with your enemy is that they recognize that what they had coming to them was taken by Jesus when he hung on the cross. All that pay back, that vengeance that God promises, the promise to repay for all the ways you’ve been abused, offended, stolen from, mistreated, misunderstood, all your pain inflicted by another person was paid for there, then, in Jesus. And it’s done. It’s worth saying that all you’ve done to abuse, offend, steal, disrespect and mistreat was paid for there and then. While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. So your enemy can experience right, peaceful relationship with you because they and we have access to right, peaceful relationship with God.

I wonder if that is hard for you to hear. Forgiveness was hard for me to extend in the past because I wanted people to feel my pain. I wanted them to hear all my words until they hurt as badly as I did. I wanted to repay my pain! Until I realized that my pain was, indeed, very expensive to buy back. Jesus died to buy back that ugly moment of sin. It cost him his life. The vengeance of our holy God who was right and holy in writing both the blessings and the curses in Deuteronomy 28 and 32 of life with him or life apart from him— he poured out that righteous, holy vengeance on himself. On his own son. He’s already made payment for what you are holding so bitterly against someone. He’s made payment for what you’re so painfully holding against yourself. Do you believe Jesus’ death is enough for you? “I will repay, says the Lord,” and he has repaid.

God thought it was worth restored relationship with you and restored relationship with your enemy to come and to take on all the curses deserved of life lived against God and against one another. God wants a life of love with you, and he wants us to have a life of love with one another. Because that’s what GOD wants for everyone, you as God’s witnesses in the world, are to lead them to life in your care of them, heaping those burning coals of love upon their heads, so that they will look up and see that God has given them life through his love!

So pray, don’t repay, live at peace and take care of your enemy. Finally, verse 21, Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

There is an epic battle being waged here. A battle for everyone on earth to experience life and life abundantly. Do you want to win? Do you want to be able to see your life with a different set of eyes, so that you can transparently see how to get through whatever you’re struggling through? There’s a way. There’s a person who has made the way. Jesus is the way. His way, his way of life. His payment. His blessing. It’s available to all who will slam on the brakes and go a new way— the way of love, of prayer, of peace, of service. It’s available to all those who will give up the high road and take the low road of bending down, of service, of humility. Recognize that the cost for your restored life with God is the same cost as the life of your enemy.

Jesus died that expensive death on the cross, but he didn’t stay dead. Because Jesus is God, the power of God raised him from the dead. And he sent the very Spirit of God to dwell in us. God could never dwell in people before Jesus because all that evil in us prevented a very holy God from being in the presence of those who were full of evil. But Jesus took the low road and made the payment that bought us life with him, life full of His Spirit forever.

The first time the Spirit of God was poured out on people was called Pentecost. It was 40 days after Jesus was seen by many witnesses ascending into heaven. Thousands of people were there that day when the Holy Spirit came, appearing something like a flame on people’s heads, filling them with the

ability to speak in every language the Good News that Jesus has won the epic battle of Good and Evil. People from many nations heard that message in their own language that day, were baptized, and went home talking about Jesus.

That message went from nation to nation and generation to generation until it came here to you, today. And now you, as they did on the day of Pentecost, have the invitation to respond and to believe. Do you believe this epic battle is our present reality? That there is good and evil and God has won? Do you believe that you don't have wrath coming to you but the very love of God who died for you? Do you believe you are the witness to bring this Good News now to your neighborhood, your family, your people?

We're going to spend time in worship, and I invite you to respond. Take time in prayer to tell Jesus you believe in him. Pray blessing for your enemy. Ask the Spirit to fill you, to make you his witness. Let's physically practice taking the low road right now. As our band begins to lead us in worship, if you're able, would you kneel? We're going to be in song for a while, so you can sit or stand as we continue in song when you're ready.