

It's Possible Jan 24 10

It is virtually impossible to pick up newspaper, turn on the radio or TV without reading or hearing of the crime of murder... or at least an attack on someone else because revenge, dislike, hatred or some similar motive. We also see families in disarray... we see workplaces where violence is exhibited. And then, of course, there is the political scene, where people attack the person, not the policies. These are the extreme cases — but all we have to do is look at personal lives — at our workplaces... at our schools... even our homes — and there are others we don't like... we see those who we are in disagreement with... we see those who we are in conflict with.

Now, for those who are not Christians, we can say that this is really the norm. The world is full of people who don't like each other — this is the way that it has been from the beginning — that is why there is so much conflict in the world — nation against nation — ethnic group against ethnic group — people against people. It all started with Adam & Eve when they rebelled against God and his authority — and then it was expressed in their two sons — where Cain killed Abel. Even a brief reading of World History will show that this conflict continues.

But even as Christians, we know that there are people that we don't care for... there are people that we don't like — for whatever reason. And yet, as we read through the Scriptures we see that the Christian is held to a higher standard. We see something in the Scriptures — something that we say every week — that being that we are to *“Love our neighbors as ourselves...”* And we have defined our neighbor as anyone that we come into contact with. Connected with this is also the fact that we are to love our enemies — and this is a bit harder.

We look today at the concluding words of Romans 12 — beginning at the 16th verse reading through the end of the chapter — 12:16-21 (READ). As we read this, we see that these are words that really should jump out and touch us — especially verse 18: *“If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men.”* Wow! But we see that the whole passage tells us how we are to act towards one another — in a real sense — how to love our enemies and how to love our neighbors.

Whenever we are wronged... whenever someone does something against us... whenever we are sinned against — the natural reaction is to get back at the person... to get even. I had a friend many years ago who said “I don't get even, I get ahead.”

But that is not what we see in the scriptures. We read here in: 12:17: *“Repay no one evil for evil...”* Other passages from the pen of the Apostle Paul express this same idea. We read in 1 Thessalonians 5:15: *“See that no one renders evil for evil to anyone, but always pursue what is good both for yourselves and for all.”*

We also read in 1 Corinthians 4:12,13: *“And we labor, working with our own hands. Being reviled, we bless; being persecuted, we endure; being defamed, we entreat.”* And in 1 Corinthians 6:7 we read: *“Now therefore, it is already an utter failure for you that you go to law against one another. Why do you not rather accept wrong? Why do you not rather let yourselves be cheated?”*

And then from 1 Peter 3:9 we read: *“not returning evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary blessing, knowing that you were called to this, that you may inherit a blessing.”* — all of this based on loving our neighbor — which has its root, not in the words of our Savior in the great commandment — but in the words that God gave his people way back in Leviticus 19:18: *“You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the children of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.”* — sounds familiar doesn't it??

But, this is what we are told to do — something that really goes against the grain... that really goes against our nature — but then again we read: *“If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men.”*

But then you might say to me — what about in the O.T. where we read, for example, in Exodus 21: 23-25: *“But if any harm follows, then you shall give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe.”*

If we look at the context we see that these verses, along with others, refer to the public administration of punishment for wrongs that had been committed against someone. These words were not intended for private retaliation and retribution — in fact they were to prevent that very thing... they were to be followed so that personal revenge might be discouraged.

The person that killed the late-term abortion doctor, George Tiller, said it was a righteous killing, because he was saving lives. This person took matters into his own hands, and did not leave room for the wrath and judgement of God. This is what we are to do.

Here in Romans 12 we really have a further exposition of our Savior’s teaching, such as that which is found in Matthew 5:38-42: *“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I tell you not to resist an evil person. But whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also. If anyone wants to sue you and take away your tunic, let him have your cloak also. And whoever compels you to go one mile, go with him two. Give to him who asks you, and from him who wants to borrow from you do not turn away.”* And in Luke 6:35: *“But love your enemies, do good, and lend, hoping for nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High. For He is kind to the unthankful and evil.”*

The reason for this is seen in the remainder of verse 12:17: *“Have regard for good things in the sight of all men.”* Another translations makes it a little clearer: *“Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody.”*

One of the things that we must realize as Christians is that — like it our not — we are on display — we are on display to the non-Christian world around us. All we need to look at is when a known Christian is caught in a sin — how it brings a bad name on all Christians. Consider what Pat Robertson said about Haiti – and the outcry that his words brought on.

And so a vindictive spirit... a vindictive attitude destroys one of the distinctives of being a Christian — one of the things that is to make us stand out from the rest of the world — that we are to love our neighbor.

We are reminded in Proverbs 3:3,4: *“Let not mercy and truth forsake you; Bind them around your neck, Write them on the tablet of your heart, And so find favor and high esteem In the sight of God and man.”* — note the concluding words — *In the sight of God and man.*

This all goes to the fact that we are to be witnesses to a world that is lost... a world that is dead in their trespasses and sins. As we go about our Christian lives, we recognize that there is a enough in our Christian faith for the non-Christian to criticize.

We think of those who hold a pro-life position, where some would have us believe, is an “extreme” position on abortion. But for us as Christians, we know that we simply hold a Biblical position. Things such as these will always be there.

But, what the Scriptures want us to do then, is to live our lives in such a way — that our actions do not bring reproach on our faith. And we are to live our lives with such genuine love for all — even our enemies — that people will not be given a legitimate opportunity to complain or accuse.

We read in 1 Peter 3:15,16: *“But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear; having a good conscience, that when they defame you as evildoers, those who revile your good conduct in Christ may be ashamed.”* — with the aim of all this, that others would be led to Christ... that others would see Christ in us.

We read these words in 1 Peter 2:11,12 – words that we studied a couple of years ago: *“Beloved, I beg you as sojourners and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul, having your conduct honorable among the Gentiles, that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may, by your good works which they observe, glorify God in the day of visitation.”* Remember, we are just visiting this world... we are pilgrims just passing through on our way to heaven — but as do this — we know that we are living in the presence of the non-Christian — and we are to be witnesses to them.

Therefore, the Apostle then says: *“If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men.”* Again — nothing new — way back in Genesis 13:8 we read: *“So Abram said to Lot, “Please let there be no strife between you and me, and between my herdsmen and your herdsmen; for we are brethren.”* There was not to be any strife between those who were brethren.

Hebrews 12:14 says: *“Pursue peace with all people, and holiness, without which no one will see the Lord:”* In James 3:17 we read: *“But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy.”*

All these — and there are others — was also said by our Savior himself — Matthew 5:9: *“Blessed are the peacemakers, For they shall be called sons of God.”* *“If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men.”* This is what we are called to do as Christians... this is something that is not an option for us.

Is it easy — no. But we have to recognize one very important thing — and that is what we see before us in the remainder of passage — 12:19: *“Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, “Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,” says the Lord.”* Whatever someone does to us or against us — as God’s children we know that He will exact full and perfect vengeance on those who have been wronged — we are to *give place to wrath* or as is implied: *“leave room for the wrath of God.”*

And not only are we to do this — we are to do something positive — 12:20: *“Therefore “If your enemy is hungry, feed him; If he is thirsty, give him a drink; For in so doing you will heap coals of fire on his head.”* — with the concluding words: 12:21: *Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*

This is what we are called to as Christians... what we are called to do... what we are called to be. We have been called to a higher standard. We have been called to exhibit the love of God in our lives each and every day — to our neighbors — even if they are our enemies. Because in the long run — we see the conclusion — 12:21: *Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*