



Chaplain's Office
University Passage Resource

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No One is a Stranger
Romans 12:18-21

Video:
Discussion with Bonnie Huiskes
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Paul urgently appeals to the believers in Rome to show genuine love in all their interactions, within and beyond the fellowship of the Church. When it comes to a loving response, no one is a stranger, not even someone from outside the Church. Paul seems especially concerned with their interactions beyond the Church when he instructs them to live peaceably with all, if it is possible, so far as it depends upon them. Despite their status and influence as the church of Rome, they still had an uneasy relationship to the seat of imperial power. There were flare-ups along the way. The church in Rome shared negative experiences common to all the churches of Jesus Christ. It was critically important that members of the church not respond in kind to the bad treatment they received.

"Beloved, never avenge yourselves," Paul said, "but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay,' says the Lord." Paul does not espouse a theology of defeat in the face of evil. God's patience and mercy should not be taken for weakness. Evil and evildoers will not be allowed to run rampant with impunity. They will be held accountable. There will be payback. Believers only need to patiently wait and endure, and in the meantime refrain from retaliation of any kind.

Neither should believers take advantage of their enemies' need or vulnerability. On the contrary, their time of need and vulnerability is an opportunity to win them over. Paul therefore says, "No, 'if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.'" Paul is here quoting Scripture from Proverbs 25:21-22. These have been troubling verses throughout the years, primarily because they reflect a custom we are not familiar with.

Scholar Bruce K. Waltke provides helpful background. In ancient Egypt, when guilty persons wished to show remorse and repentance for a wrong they committed, they participated in a ritual in which they were required to carry a tray of burning coals on top of their heads. Their heads, of course, would have been protected from the heat of the coals by the tray and other covering, but the coals symbolized sorrow and penitence for wrongdoing. I would add that the saying was probably a cliché by the time of Paul, but his hearers would have understood that by treating their enemies with kindness, they would move their enemies to a change of heart. This was a graphic illustration drawn from ancient custom to support Paul's message, "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." This remains the most powerful strategy for defeating evil ever expressed.

1. What historic examples of good overcoming evil can you recall?
2. Is this principle of good overcoming evil meant only for the Church, or for governments as well?
3. Is Paul's teaching similar to Jesus' instruction to "turn the other cheek" (Matt 5:39)?