
Living among Unbelievers

Romans 12:14-21

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The challenge: illustrations of conflict with unbelievers:

In the neighborhood – challenge in some cities to church meetings in homes...

At work – interacting with people who are sinful, hateful, irresponsible...

In families –

The struggle sometimes with immediate families who are unbelievers...

The struggle sometimes when a spouse is an unbeliever...

We have talked about pleasing God in working to resolve conflict with brothers and sisters. Those principles have wide application to home, school and church. The context to our passage helps us in our Christian relationships.

⁹ Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. ¹⁰ Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. ¹¹ Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. ¹² Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. ¹³ Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality.

Genuine love and brotherly affection for one another. Rejecting evil and clinging to what is good in our relationships. Honoring one another. Enthusiastically serving one another. Being glad for what will come about in the future so that we are patient when it is hard now. Filling our relationships with prayer. Taking care of one another with open wallets and open homes. This is what it means to live together as Christians.

Most of you have situations in your life where you are engaged much with unbelievers. You may face that in your neighborhoods, in your work and at your school. Young people, do not think that just because you are in a Christian school you are primarily among believers. In fact, some of you young people have not yet been converted and are yourself unbeliever attending a Christian school.

Some of you live in a home with unbelieving spouses. Last year, while preparing to teach on the family in the Far East, I developed the core of this talk to help them think through what it meant to live as a Christian with an unbelieving spouse. My prayer this morning is that these truths and exhortations will enable and encourage your pleasing God in your home.

Once again, I want to call for fierce attention from our children and young people. If you are a Christian, these principles are core and key to how you will respond to unsaved people both now and as you grow older. For many of you adults, you are in situations where pleasing God is very difficult because of people who regularly and skillfully sin against you. May God through His Word grant great help and hope to you all.

When it comes to living with and around unbelievers, what is one of the most important truths for us? Among many is this core idea that we are aliens and pilgrims here. So, as we did when we approached this text in our series on Romans, let me remind you what informs and shapes my thinking about this:

I am a citizen of heaven (Philippians 3:20), having sworn my allegiance to King Jesus for whom I wait His coming from heaven. I am a pilgrim, a sojourner, a stranger in a foreign land along with all of God's people (Ephesians 2:19; 1 Peter 2:11). We have an unshakeable Kingdom (Hebrews 12:28) not of this world (John 18:36) that demands our delighted submission, service and unquestioning allegiance. We are ambassadors of our King here (2 Corinthians 5) to represent His authority and agenda – to call rebels to lay down the weapons of their warfare, to join in their allegiance to this King and to serve and follow this King with all their lives. This allegiance means that I will not be shaped by the culture and customs of this world, nor will I be enslaved to its fashions, fads, fantasies and fears. I will encourage you, my fellow pilgrims, to an unswerving allegiance to our King, even when that allegiance calls us to unpopular and possibly, persecution bringing decisions.¹

So here we are, citizens of a Kingdom that is distant, not of this age and a yet coming King who must live here, now, in this age in this world among people who are rebels against our King under governments largely run by them. So here is our struggle and the clarity of this text: what are our responsibilities in the midst of this already and not yet?

¹ For a parallel call, see John Piper's sermon *The Limits of Submission to Man* preached at Bethlehem Baptist in 1981.

A Symmetrical Structure

Originally, the Bible was primarily written in two languages, the Old Testament in Hebrew and the New Testament in Koine Greek. Hebrew language and thought was built in several kinds of symmetrical structures. In the same way that most westerners can follow indented outlines and would recognize the structure, a Hebrew speaking person would recognize these great structures. They were designed to help remember long narrative story lines or large prophetic passages. In the same way that we often recognize poetry both by cadence and by rhyme, Hebrew poetry is vivid in its parallelism.

Sometimes, New Testament writers employed these same Hebrew techniques in writing in Greek. The text we are looking at has this indented structure.

The Symmetrical structure points us to the key principles that are paired. The amazing thing about this text is that it has both this parallel structure and a Greek style logic in it. First, we will focus on the goals as they are paired together.

A (v.14) With blessing

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

B (v.15-16) With humility and empathy

Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be conceited.

C (v.17) With honor, not retaliation

Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all.

D (v.18) With a goal to live in peace

If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

C' (v.19) With trust in God, not revenge

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."

B' (v.20) With doing more than expected

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."

A' (v.21) With doing good

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

The structure helps us understand the relationship between the parts and how Paul brings us to the core idea. In all our relationships with people in the world around us, as heaven's citizens, as much as it depends on us, we are to live peaceably with all.

A Shepherding Strategy

What the Apostle Paul lays out for us is a wise shepherding strategy. Those who have learned to live together in loving peace as believers (Romans 12:9-13) have cultivated habits of response in relationships that will be so helpful in difficult relationships with unbelievers.

Our Guiding Principles

(v.14,21)

¹⁴ Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.

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

These two texts define our responses in the face of difficult relationships and opposition. We are to respond with blessing rather than cursing because we are aiming to overcome evil with good. When we face pressure, opposition and persecution, we want to respond with grace, charity and goodness. We do not want our words or our ways to be primarily about defending ourselves, but about representing God.

This primarily is focused on our verbal response to those who sin against us and particularly those who persecute us. The contrast is between cursing and blessing. Our response is not to speak an immediate or permanent calling down of judgment upon them. We should instead be invoking God's grace and mercy for them so that they will be restrained in their or may turn from the sin and be saved.

Now this is not to say that evil cannot be opposed. It is to face evil with truth, to resist evil. But we must do so ever mindful that we are foreign citizens and the manner and customs of this world are alien. We are to speak for God and to oppose evil – but we must never become or practice evil in doing so. I find so often here in America that the words we use and the way we go about opposing abortion and homosexuality – both great, God denying, life destroying evils – our opposing of them becomes evil itself.

One other note – one thing that strikes me in the New Testament is the almost total absence of activism against national, cultural evils. Believe me, Rome had them – abortion, pedophiles, homosexuality, you name it. The New Testament writers acknowledge that those evils are there – but their concern is that Christians be pure of those evils. It frankly, in my own mind, calls into question much of American Christian activism.

The best response to evil being done against us is to do good for them. We don't retreat into compounds. We don't hide from the realities of living as citizens of heaven in a foreign country called the world. We do not do what is wrong and then seek protection in our ambassadorial credentials. We do not function as agent saboteurs. We live holy lives and speak clearly and confidently about the grace and mercy in Christ because of God's love for His people and His cross and resurrection. We oppose evil primarily with calling evil people to repent of sin and embrace the gospel. The best good we can do for an evil person is to be an instrument of conversion in our Redeemer's hands.

Our Loving Practices

(v.15-16,20)

¹⁵ Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. ¹⁶ Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight.

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."

These sets of verses describe for us how we move towards the world to engage it with Christ's love. We empathize with those who rejoice and weep. We may do so in the same conversation. We try to live in harmony with others – trying to establish relational bridges across which to send the gospel. We love and live with a spreading the gospel of God agenda and intentionality. In humility, we cross cultural and economic and ethnic divides to move towards those who are lost without the gospel. As citizens of heaven we must not be arrogant and aloof and distant. We ought rather to demonstrate the humbly joyous self-forgetfulness of our King.

Verses 15-16 point us toward having genuine and harmonious relationships with unbelievers. We resonate with their joys and sorrows. We do not seek to be different or difficult just because we are Christians and they are not. We uproot every bit of pride including the kind of Christian pride that won't associate with unbelievers. We humble ourselves so that we will not just passively live at peace with the lowly and poor of the world, but take opportunity to move towards them in God's love. Brothers and sisters, you cannot minister to people you look down on.

In the context of a true enemy (v.20), love moves to meet their basic need for food and drink. According to Proverbs 25:21-22 from which this is cited, the effect is to "pour coals of fire on his head and to be rewarded by the Lord." There is much discussion over what is meant by the enigmatic statement. It seems to me that our deeds of good to personal enemies have the effect of making them more aware of their guilt. It is not personal pain but an afflicted conscience and God's verdict that is aroused. Now we do not do these things in order to cause this – the Bible is describing its effect – but rather out of an authentic and persistent love.

Why do we do this? Not just because it is commanded here – but because this is what Christ did in His life here and what God does in His common grace every day. Sinners are God's enemies, hostile to Him, His Kingdom and will. Yet God provides them food and shelter and all sorts of good things in life. Yet, at the end of the day, their very ungratefulness for God's goodness is called in as a witness against them (Romans 2:4-5).

Our Self-denying Prohibitions

(v.17,19)

¹⁷ Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all.

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."

What we must do is contrasted with and replaces what we must not do. This is wrapped in two clear statements that we need to pay very careful attention to.

We must not repay evil in kind, giving attention to what is honorable in the culture. This is so important. We have an enormous capacity to justify the evil we do to someone else because of the evil they have done to us. We should be paying attention to how we respond to people whose culture is different from our own. It is so easy to take and offense and give an offenses when the customs are different.

In verse 19, we are brought to a very hard text for many people. We must never exact our own vengeance against others. Revenge for a Christian is simply not allowed. This is certainly true in the larger sin arenas – but it is also true in the little, day-by-day irritations and aggravations of living with sinners. Husbands and wives, brothers and sisters, neighbors, work – in all these relationships we strike back in small and sometimes larger ways. God calls us to be patient until the day He makes all things right. And He warns us that when we seek revenge we are taking the place of God, usurping His long patient, high and holy justice with our own petty demands for immediate resolution.

Our Shaping Purpose

(v.18)

¹⁸ If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

Why can we live and love like this? Because Christians are to be people of peace, not strife. Since this is not our true homeland, since we are here as ambassadors, we are here to pray, proclaim and plead for reconciliation. While we fight sin, we aim to see sinners converted.

In the midst of difficult relationships, we are to be constantly examining our own hearts. Pain at the hands of others becomes a red tinted window through which we see them. Sadly, we rarely turn the window into a mirror. Yet, the Bible regularly calls us to look to our own hearts. What is it that we want so badly we will not pursue peace with this unbeliever? How have we contributed to the on-going conflict? What small squirts of fuel have we injected into the flames? What poking and prodding have we done only to withdraw in shocked surprise at eruptions? Can we walk away from an unbeliever who is continuing to attack us and truly say, "I have done all I can"?

But, this verse also recognizes that sometimes living peaceably is not possible. It will not depend on us. It will depend on others. They will bring the war to us in spite of (and sometimes, because of) our best efforts. Others may cause strife and bring personal war – but we must still respond with grace and love.

A Shaping Summary

Not only does this text pair concepts in a parallel structure, but there is a clear flow through the text as we would outline it.

As much as you can, live peaceably with unbelievers

So we *move towards unbelievers* with:

blessing (v.14),

We speak so as to bring them good through the gospel;

empathy (v.15),

We seek to try to understand the struggles and difficulties of their lives so that they will see the mercies and compassion of Christ;

harmony and humility (v.16)

Humbling ourselves, we do all we can to avoid conflict and trouble with unbelievers;

and a public willingness to be wronged for Christ's sake.

In meekness, we are poised to respond well when we are sinned against particularly when we are suffering for the sake of Christ and the gospel.

And when *unbelievers move against us* we respond with:

peaceableness (v.18),

We strive to be peacemakers and to work things out;

no revenge (v.19),

We do not get back at people, seeking to get even with them for their sins and wrongs against us;

goodness (v.20)

By grace we respond to evil done against with practical deeds of good and help showing how God does good even to His enemies seeking to bring them to repentance.

and with victory defined by God's terms and agenda (v.21).

We will not define our relationship by winning the conflict but rather by overwhelming goodness, love and kindness.

Reflect and Respond

What does this look like? In God's love, grace and mercy, with unbelievers in you life:

Take the initiative:

To be a blessing to them (v.14),

To understand their hardships, suffering and difficulties (v.15),

To do all you can, in humility, to live in harmony with them (v.16),

To be willing to be wronged for Christ's sake.

And respond to them even when they sin against you:

By seeking to be a peacemaker (v.18),

By never striking back against them (v.19),

By finding good and helpful things to do for them (v.20),

By overwhelming their acts of evil with deeds of good. (v.21).