

Bless and Do Not Curse
February 23rd, 2014

Romans 12:9-21
Epiphany 7 A

Pastor Rob Zeratsky

<read text: Romans 12:9-21>.

You know, in this particular section of Romans, Paul throws a lot at the reader at once. And maybe it's just me, but it seems a little overwhelming at first glance. And then when you look at it more carefully...well, I think it gets even worse actually. At first glance some of it seems possible, certain parts seem difficult. But when you look close at everything God is asking here...well none of it seems particularly plausible then. In fact if you read carefully you can see that the entire section here is just Paul fleshing out some practical applications of the basic command of God: love your neighbor as yourself.

Phrased like that, it seems plausible. I mean, it just means be nice to the people around you, right? We can do that. But when you look at an expanded list like what Paul lays out. It gets a little intimidating. In fact, it can almost get to the point where we think God's got the wrong way of things here. I'm thinking particularly of a point Paul brings out three times in this section. He tells us to "bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse," and then, "Do not repay evil for evil," and lastly, "Do not take revenge."

That's a tall order for us. We may sit here and nod our heads in agreement, but that's because we're not in the thick of it right now. We want to imagine ourselves as good people who can be the bigger man or woman in whatever situation. That we'll be able to rise above the pettiness and show love to the people who want to hurt us. But it's never that easy when it happens. Think back to someone who has really hurt you in the past. Someone who perhaps literally attacked you when you were too small or weak to defend yourself. Or someone who attacked you emotionally, embarrassed you in public, made you feel small and helpless. Someone who made you cry while they laughed or even worse were completely oblivious. Don't try to tell me that at that moment you wanted what was best for them. More likely you wanted someone to put a boot through that smug face.

And maybe as you read here what God wants us to do, how he wants us to treat these people that have hurt us deeply, maybe you've thought to yourself, "why should I? They don't deserve that kindness at all!" I mean it would be understandable to want to help them if their aggression or carelessness was something they struggled with and tried to overcome, but some of these people revel in their cruelty or don't care how selfish they are and how much they hurt others with their words and actions. Why should we try to show love and compassion to that? How can we *want* to show love to that? Paul says here that this love must be sincere. It's not enough to just grit our teeth and be nice to them despite what they do to us, despite how these people make us feel, we have to genuinely care about them! Now why should we do that? And even if we should, how are we supposed to do it?

Perhaps to answer the question of why first, a little role reversal would help. I want you to think of yourself as the villain of this story. Put aside all the little objections of "I would never act like that," and let's just say you have. You've done the damage. You've hurt others with callous disregard. You've done whatever you wanted, whatever you needed to do to make yourself happy regardless of what it might cost others. You've been the selfish, arrogant one who thought the world revolved around you. People who've never done you any wrong, in fact may have been trying to help you, they are the ones you've hurt. You have not loved, you've been the opposite of love. Now why should anyone be nice to you?

If your answer is still "they shouldn't", you're probably right. But that's not the reason I brought the point up. If you didn't figure it out already, the reason I wanted you to think of yourself as the evil one in this equation wasn't to figure out what was loveable about them, but rather to realize that it's you. These are all things you have done. These are all ways you have hurt your God and others. You're the bad guy here. You're the one that doesn't deserve to have love shown to them. You deserve to be punished for what you have done. You've been mean, selfish and arrogant; thinking of yourself while others suffered because of your careless words and actions. You ought to be punished. And by all rights, you should be. That's the law of the universe that God set up. It applies to everyone. If you want the people that have been mean to you to be "taught a lesson", then you better be prepared to learn one yourself because you've earned it just as much as they have.

And now we really arrive at the "why" and the "how" of this difficult problem. How is it that we overcome evil with good when every instinct of our natural selves screams for vengeance against those that hurt us? First, as we see, we have to understand and accept that we really are just as bad as they are. And then we have to look to how our God has chosen to treat us in that light.

God is the final authority after all. He's in charge, he set the law and he set the punishments. It is up to him to carry out justice exactly as he set forth. And there is no getting around the laws and punishments he has set forth. If a law is

broken, justice *has* to be carried out. God cannot break his system of justice because he would not be God if that happened. One of God's essential characteristics is he is just. He can't just say, "Well, I don't feel like punishing that crime." It doesn't and can't work that way.

Now, the easy solution should be obvious to everyone here. We are all the criminals, we are all the villains. We have done evil. And not just one little bit, though that would be enough. We've done these things every day of our lives. We have earned the punishment a thousand times over. The easy answer for God is to punish us! All the things we've done have broken *his* law and so ultimately all our crimes are against *him*. He had absolutely every reason to just let us take our justly earned punishment.

But instead God chose mercy. He chose to show love instead of vengeance. We wronged him but instead of anger he responded in love to us. He devised a plan that would stop us from needing to be punished for what we'd done against him. And even more unbelievably his plan required that he step in our place and take the punishment from himself that we deserved. Jesus lived and died for us that we could be shown love and mercy in response to all the aggravation we've shown our God.

This is our reason for love. This is the "why" and the "how" of the love we show those who hurt us or even just annoy us. As you've heard countless times before, "We love because he first loved us." We don't love because a person is loveable. We don't love because a person deserves it. We love unconditionally, we love without getting any reason from the object of our love because that is how God loved us first. We love because he asks us to, and he has actually earned our love. Knowing what he has done for us, and knowing how the universe of his justice functions gives us understanding that helps us fight back when anger at others tries to flare in our hearts.

As we've already seen, we love all equally not because all equally deserve that love but on the contrary because we are all not worthy of it equally. Our motivation for showing love does not come from the one we're showing that love to, looking there will only give us lots of reasons not to. Instead, we love because of what God has done for us and now he asks us to show it to these who need it.

What about justice, we might be inclined to ask. It's not fair that these people get away with the hurtful things they do! Sure we maybe don't want to see them thrown into hell exactly, but, you know, humbled a little would be nice. It would be good for them to see the error of their ways and feel bad about it for a while, right? But we are not the authority. God is the authority and it is his to avenge, he says. He has earned our trust and we trust that he will handle the situation correctly.

Of course, sometimes we are called to show others the error of their ways in love. To the unbelievers so they can recognize their need for a savior and receive forgiveness, and to fellow believers so they will not be in danger of damaging their faith through sin. But never to shame them, rather to help them! Leave justice to the Lord. If we start asking for everything to be as fair as we think it should be, we have to start with ourselves, and that can only end badly for us. These people who lash out in sin, whether they are grand or subtle ways, whether they are intentional or not, these people need our help. They need our God's help as much as we do. And they deserve God's help just as much as we did.

We don't look for our motivation to love in the people we show love to. We'll never find it there. God will fill us up with love, from himself and from Christian hearts around us. And he asks us, in the same spirit of love he showed us, to pour out that love on everyone in our lives, without even stopping to consider whether they are "worthy" of it or not. God has given us love to share and if we keep our minds there, then I think we can go back and look at what he asks us here through the apostle Paul and see that it's not really that overwhelming a task.

We haven't deserved anything good from our God, but he gave it anyway. Through his sacrifice we have eternal life despite our crimes. Now, equipped with his forgiveness and his power, we can go out and share that love with those who don't deserve it any more than we did, but who need it just as badly as we do. That is not to say they will treat you the same in return. We will be persecuted for our trouble at times. But because of the love that God has shown you and continues to give you in your life, bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Amen.