

Calm the Chaos.6.To Overcome
Romans 12:9-21
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Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. 10 Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves. 11 Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. 12 Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. 13 Share with the Lord's people who are in need. Practice hospitality.

14 Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. 15 Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. 16 Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.

17 Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. 18 If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. 19 Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. 20 On the contrary:

"If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head."

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

We're in the book of Romans, if you'd care to turn there with me. Romans chapter 12.

The Apostle Paul's letter to the Romans has been called his greatest work...his greatest hit, you might say, and one reason for that is because of its remarkable comprehensiveness. He really covers, in here, the whole spiritual story of God and humanity.

Starting with the past...in the first four chapters...he explains the nature of human rebellion against God. He even includes the life of Abraham as a preview of the idea of redemption by faith, which reminds us that the idea of salvation through faith has been around far longer than Martin Luther.

After that, Paul moves on to the present...his present, anyway, in chapters 5 through 8, explaining how Jesus (the second Adam) reversed the direction set for humanity by the first, and then how Jesus' death can break the power of sin in any willing person's life today.

And then, in chapters 9 through 11, Paul looks to the future, and how, through Jesus, God will bring the faithful to Himself – even the faithful of Israel – as the culmination of His great, redemptive work of grace.

Paul does **not**, however, leave us thinking that God's grace ends in our lives with mere positional truth today and heaven tomorrow. The thought of, you might say, "slipping sinfully into glory" is not what Paul had in mind.

Paul moves on to help us understand that, in Jesus' death and resurrection, there is hope for **greater** things for us **today**. There is even more grace available for a **change** of situation...an **improvement** of

circumstance...a **transformation** of the status quo. Jesus can make a difference, **not** just **tomorrow**, but **today**.

Paul Achtemeier points out that the very fact that the Apostle includes ethical admonitions here for believers...beginning in chapter 12...that **proves** that more grace is available to us...grace that allows us to actually accomplish these things...grace that can change us for the good.

Because here's the thing: God's grace in forgiveness does not make sin...our sin...ignorable or somehow tolerable to God.

Sinful behavior in us is just as repulsive and contrary to God's character as it was before we received forgiveness in Jesus.

Not to mention it's just as harmful to us.

So God, by grace through Christ, now offers the **power** to **reshape** and **restructure** our lives in ways that are appropriate for living life under His Lordship.

In other words, after Paul explains (in these first eleven chapters) the need for, and the provision of, forgiveness and salvation...when he **now** writes at the beginning of chapter twelve here, "**Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters...**" he's saying that there is something else...there is more grace both **available to** and **expected of** us **after** we embrace Jesus' **forgiving** grace and redemption.

Paul says that **now, we** who are **in Jesus**, we can begin to live life as God **originally created** us to live it.

God offers us more grace...grace to free us from our rebellious nature and to instead live in **harmony** with Him.

Because **that's** the **expectation**.

God **expects** us...God **wants** us...and God can now **empower** us to live in harmony with Him. He offers Christ-followers grace that will align our character and behavior with His own.

That's what Paul's getting at there in verse 2.

We who follow Jesus...we are to move **past** being **satisfied** to **look** and **act** and **think** like those around us who **don't** follow Jesus. We are to choose to be renewed...transformed. That is the grace that God now offers us.

God doesn't just take us to forgiveness and stop there.

God offers grace that takes us **past forgiveness**...and **on** to **transformation**, which, Paul then says, looks like this; and then he gives us **three**, Achtemeier calls them, **structures of grace**.

Let's look at them quickly.

The first...verses 3 through 8 there – is a **corporate structure**, in that this is the way that the body of Christ...the Church...should function together.

Being one body with many individual parts, we are to organize our life together around the gifts God has given to us individually.

Since this is Thanksgiving weekend, let's put it in terms of football. The Church is designed to work something like a football team: we, individually, contribute our greatest ability to the cause of the whole without pride or ego or trying to be like or upstage someone else...someone who has, what some might consider to be a "greater" or more popular ability.

We don't think like that though...we all pitch in our talents because they are all necessary for the sake of the win of the team.

In our broken world...where competition and jealousy and one-upmanship is normal in "corporate" settings, this approach...this structure is very different.

But this is how God designed human organizations to operate, and Paul wants us to know that there is now grace available for us to be able to do this...to function together this way.

Paul says here that there is grace in Jesus to make possible transformation to this level.

This is the **corporate** structure of grace, applied to the body of Christ...the Church, with the theme being, I'm going to say, "**team.**"

There is grace for the team.

Paul then moves, in verses 9 through 13, to a **personal** structure of grace, as it applies to Christ followers' relationships with each other on an **individual** level; and he leads off there in verse 9 with the Greek term for self-giving love: agape.

There is grace in Jesus, Paul says, to allow Christ-followers to selflessly love one another.

Now, it's important to remember that **love**, to Paul, is an **act** and not just an **emotion**, which is very different than how we think about love today.

Today, we consider **love** to be an **advanced** state of **like**.

If you **like** something or someone **enough**, then you **love** them.

That is not love to Paul.

In God's economy, those in Christ can love someone...we can choose to act in loving ways toward someone...whom we may not even particularly like.

But what's that mean, act in loving ways?

Paul's best definition of that is probably 1 Corinthians 13, where he says love is patient, kind, protective, trusting, hopeful, not envious, not boastful, not rude, not self-seeking and on and on.

Paul is saying that there is grace available in Christ to empower believers to love each other by treating one another in these ways.

But you know, even beyond that, Paul says that in Jesus, there is grace to make love for other believers our actual, automatic, internal response.

In spite of what another believer may do to us, whether or not **they** love **us**, there is grace available to empower **us** to **love them**...to act lovingly **toward** them.

And this, of course, is God's sort of love. This is how God loves, which He's proven.

As rotten as humanity has been to God...as rotten as humanity treated Jesus, still...He **loved** and **loves** us.

And Paul says that in Christ...there is grace for us to be able to love like that; there is grace to empower, in a believer's heart and life, the ability to...Paul gives us a list of things there beginning in verse 9...to hate the wrong, cling to the good, delight in honoring the other, to work hard, serve enthusiastically, and be hospitable to others' needs.

Now, this isn't a complete list. This is just an example of the life structure that God's grace makes possible in Christ-followers' lives as we relate together individually.

So this is the structure of grace as it's applied to Christian relationships...with it's theme being agape love.

But there is still more.

In verses 14 through 21, Paul then shows us the grace available to structure the Christ-followers' relationship to the non-Christian world. The key verse there is verse 18, "**As far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone,**" which gives us the theme of "peace."

Now, of course, we can't prescribe how the world responds to us.

The fact is, we can fully expect the world to despise us at times. Jesus said that would happen, no matter how gracefully we engage with the world.

We can't control the world's response to us.

But, as far as it depends on **us**, we can engage with the world in peace. In Jesus, there is grace available to us for doing that.

What does that look like? Again, Paul gives us examples:

Verse 14: Paul says we're to bless, and not curse, those who persecute us. In other words, we're to ask God to **help** them, **not harm** them.

Verse 15 – We're to engage winsomely in the lives of unbelievers around us.

Verse 16 – We're to live in harmony with them...not thinking ourselves better than them, or preferring one group of people over another.

Verse 17 – We’re not to retaliate rashly, but instead we’re to be gracious such that all would agree that what we do is honorable.

Verse 19 – We’re not to be vengeful people. Instead, we leave any unfairness committed against us to God.

Now, with verse 19 there...two things.

Remember first that Paul’s talking about person to person stuff, not about nations. We’ll get to that in a minute.

Second, this doesn’t mean that we go soft on evil, or that we pretend evil doesn’t exist and doesn’t hurt. Of course it exists and of course it hurts.

But...Paul says we’re to leave it to God when it’s committed against us.

And in leaving it to God, we have to ask, “What has God done about it?”

Well, what He’s done is...He’s offered redemption.

He doesn’t ignore it or bless it, certainly. But God, in dealing with evil, took the weight of it upon Himself, so the power and cycles of evil...the perpetuation of evil...could be broken.

God responded to evil by initiating forgiveness...and Paul is telling us here that God will give us the grace to do the same, since that’s really the only way evil will ever be defeated.

You see, someone has to choose to stop ongoing evils. The cycles of revenge and response...the eye for eye and tooth for tooth and “you hurt me so I’ll hurt you back” and all that...the only real way past the culture of revenge between persons is for one of those involved to choose to stop seeking payback.

The only way to peace is for someone to lay down their sword and say, “This is not worth fighting about anymore.”

Now, again, note that Paul is talking about persons here and not nations. In the beginning of the very next chapter, Paul addresses the place of governments in keeping peace and doing right and punishing wrong...that is the work of good government.

But here, in the context of individuals, Paul says there is grace available to enable Christ-followers to take the initiative of, not only **forgiving** the one who’s done us wrong, but even more...there in verse 20...there is grace to **deal generously** with those who’ve hurt us...to express love to even those who are actively standing against us.

While we leave it to **God** to sort out the issues of **justice** between us – which He is thoroughly capable of doing – **we**...Christ-followers...we’re to err on the side of **blessing**. We’re to meet the needs of those who’ve abused us...we’re to help them in every way we can, and in so doing, Paul says we’ll, verse 20 there, **“heap burning coals in their heads,”** an image he gets from Proverbs 25.

What’s that mean? Well, contrary to what it may sound like, this is **not** about setting their head on fire and so getting them back for hurting us.

This is about doing loving things for them...things that will, hopefully, move them toward reconciliation.

Literally, it's doing such good to them that they'll be ashamed of how they've treated us, and that shame will burn away the anger or hatred within them, and move them toward peace.

This is the way of Jesus: responding with grace even when we're persecuted, intimidated and abused, which itself becomes a powerful expression of love.

Responding this way also reflects a sure trust in God's care for us.
We trust God to defend us.

We trust that if we'll love as Christ did, God will care for the justice part in His way and time.

This is not just theory. Paul says there is grace in Jesus for believers to do this.

Of course, this idea...this sort of response is very out of place in our modern world, and in American culture in particular, where Christians are encouraged to stand up for our rights and defend ourselves and our convictions.

Of course it's true that our society is very different than that of Paul's original readers, and so there may well be times when an active and well-reasoned defense is appropriate and necessary.

Even still, in our culture, it's so easy to forget the great value the early Church placed on responding to opponents in a gentle, Christ-like way. The demanding, entitled attitude that has sometimes replaced it reflects today's self-centeredness far more than it does the other-centered code of the New Testament, and while it may win the occasional court case, the fact is, it will rarely, if ever, win the soul of an opponent to Jesus...which is Jesus' ultimate commission to His own: to live in such a way among unbelievers so as to draw them to Him.

Which is what Paul means there...to, ***“overcome evil with good.”***

We are to love people into submission...not to us, but to Jesus.

That is the consistent message of the New Testament. It transcends culture, and it's beauty is attractive and appealing...this way of life that loves others first.

And there is grace available to live it...to accomplish it. That's the great message of Paul, here.

This sort of existence is not reserved for Heaven. This sort of life can be lived here and now...it's the life Christ-followers are made to live...the life we are saved to live.

Team, love, peace.

There is grace to empower it all in Jesus.

So what does this have to do with calming chaos in our lives?

It has everything to do with it.

As followers of Jesus, there is no greater peace and order that we can know than to submit ourselves to all the grace God has for us, and in so doing, to live what, to Paul, is a normal, Christian life.

These statements...this whole chapter, is Paul telling us what's normal...the normal human response to God's tremendous grace, and that it's all possible...the power to live it is available for all in Christ, not in our own strength, but through the power of God's Spirit.

Choosing to receive this grace is what gives order to our lives. So, if we're not choosing this, we are fighting against normal, Christian life.

To receive the grace of God to live in a team relationship with the church, in a self-giving love relationship with other believers, and in a relationship of peace with the world...that's what God's grace can do for every willing Christ-follower.

But it's not automatic. We have to want that grace in our lives...and we have to receive it in the presence of God's Spirit.

I mean, think about it – if it wasn't a possibility...or if it was simply automatic in the Christian life, why would Paul waste all this time announcing it, offering it, trying to move us...convince us to pursue it as He does here?

You know, chaos, at it's core, is evil made manifest.

Chaos is upended relationships;
It's scrambled schedules due to scrambled priorities;
It's being motivated by conquering others;
It's pursuing success by causing others' failures;
It's demanding our way and our rights.

To play into all that is to repay evil for evil, which just perpetuates evil and the chaos it produces.

In order to overcome chaos, we have to choose to live differently. We have to choose to live as God created us to live.

And Paul says, "there's power to do that," if we'll embrace it.

This is the work of God's Spirit...to build into every believer this structure of grace – to live as a team with the Church, in self-giving love with other believers, and in peace with our world.

This is how we overcome evil with good in our lives and in the lives of those around us.

Will we take Paul at his word?

Will we embrace this extra measure of grace God has for us?

Closing Prayer:

Father, we simply pray that if there are any who know that they're not living in all of Your grace that is possible...available to them, but who want to...who need Your Spirit to empower them today to live...

Maybe as a team, instead of in competition with the Church,
Maybe in selfless agape love with other believers around them,
Or maybe in new level of peace with the world...

If there are any who want this grace that Paul speaks of, then Lord let them simply ask...so your structures of grace might reign in our lives, calm the chaos in and around us, and overcome evil with good.