

Loving People for God's Glory, Not Using Their Approval for Mine Romans 12:14-21

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14 Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. 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 conceited. 17 Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. 18 If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with 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." 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." 21 Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good (Rom 12:14-21)

During my senior year of college I had a wonderful internship at a church in the area. For an entire year I was going to sit under an incredible pastor, learn from him, and love on teenagers as a youth ministry intern. The leadership team was awesome, the church was doing great things, but there was one huge problem (which I learned after I was hired): the elder in charge of youth ministry did not want an intern, at all. He and his wife were not only opposed to the internship, it seemed like they tried subtle ways to sabotage our ministry. It felt like we were in competition, and this was supposed to be ministry. I just couldn't figure out what we had done. I began to wake-up on Sundays and think about how they were going to respond to us. What would they think of the Sunday School lesson, my Leadership Team meeting, what I was wearing, and who I was talking to?

Much to my surprise, I started to feel the same thing toward them that I felt toward the student body two years earlier. I remember one youth activity where the kids were dividing up into cars and youth leaders. A few kids starting running our direction ("See they like me better!") when he called them to come and ride with them. Soon all the cars were full, except mine. In fact, Sarah and I drove all alone to the youth activity. And I am supposed to be the youth pastor! I remember being so hurt, so angry, and so frustrated. Ever felt like that? So what do you do?

But the problem was that I had nine months to go. We tried talking things out, but that didn't solve things. The bottom-line was that he didn't want me there, I had to figure out how to work with some who doesn't like me, and not let it control me.

Over the next nine months, I tried to find ways to be kind and loving to elder and his wife. I tried to understand where they were coming from, I tried to minimize things that frustrated him, and I chose to love them.

Now, you are probably expecting some spiritualized solution to this. Something like, "I did this, and now they are my best friends." However, I'm telling you this story because that is exactly what **didn't** happen. For an entire year, things were tense, awkward,

and hard. Every Sunday I would have to fight wrong thoughts. Some days I'd win. Other days, I'd lose. I learned that dealing with the problem of approval is often a rugged fight – a daily battle – to cling to the promises of God's word.

And I also learned a very important lesson: **Living on gospel-promises frees me to love people even if they don't love me back.**

Free to Love

For the last four weeks we've been exploring this arena of approval junkie in an effort to find out what God's Word says so that our relationships can be more in line with what God intends. So far we've looked at the following:

Week #1 – Identifying the trap of approval

Week #2 – Exposing the idol of the heart in approval

Week #3 – Learning how to live on promise not performance

This is where our series comes to a close. We move from unmasking our idolatry and learning how to place our faith in His ability to give us grace. But for what?

My answer is that fearing and loving God while treasuring his promises to us must lead to love. Do you have any situations or people in your life where it just seems as though you cannot get them to like you or approve of you? What do you do with people like this? Answer: Love them.

I do not believe that you have fully conquered the fear of man until you turn your fear of man into fear of God and love for others. And when we do this, God is glorified. Instead of using people to get what we want, we love people and give God what He deserves.

Promise-rooted Love

Romans 12 is one of the most important chapters in the Bible because it is the Apostle Paul's application of eleven chapters of doctrine. If you were to study the book of Romans you would find some stunning passages loaded with rich, deep, and powerful doctrine. Throughout the book Paul celebrates the beauty of God's redemptive plan – to save helpless sinners by granting them forgiveness through the sacrifice of his Son.

We hear passages like:

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus (Rom 8:1)

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us (Rom 8:37).

Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! 34 "For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?" 35 "Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?" 36 For

from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen. (Rom 11:33-36)

And from there Paul begins Romans 12 which is an appeal to live out the reality of this amazing doctrine: "by the mercies of God, present your bodies a living sacrifice..." (Rom 12:1). Then he encourages a right view of ourselves: "...not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think..." (v 3), and to "let love be genuine" (v 9).

However, it is in verses 14-21 that Paul drives home his point with a new level of poignancy, depth and sacrifice. He calls us to apply the promise of the gospel in the following ways:

1. By having a different mind-set toward others and ourselves

"Using people to get what **I** want..." Love runs contrary to the self-centeredness that is often at the heart of the fear of man. Love calls us to embrace a very different view of life.

Paul applies the heart of Christianity to the way that we view ourselves, and how we treat others. He calls us to put on love in following ways:

- Rejoicing with those who rejoice (v 15)
- Weeping with those who weep (v 15)
- Being unified with others (v 16)
- Guarding ourselves from prideful thoughts or grabbing for honor and position (v 16)
- Pursuing, to the best of our ability, peace with all men (v 18)

Love demands that we are able to rejoice with people when something good has happened to them versus being jealous and thinking of how it relates to us. Love demands that we feel compassion for those who are filled with sorrow versus being glad at the problems in the lives of others. Love demands that we are considerate of others versus thinking only of our agenda. Love demands that we fight against pride and selfish ambition versus seeing people through a lens of manipulation. And love demands that, to the best of our ability, we pursue peace versus settling a score.

This is where the heart of Christianity – real Christianity – comes out. This is where the fear and love of God eclipses our love for ourselves.

2. By showing grace in pain

This is where following Jesus becomes very costly, radical, and powerful. If you want to know how to unmask the fear of man, you must deal carefully and thoughtfully with verses 14, 17, 19, 20, and 21.

This is where fear, trust, and faith converge to make you respond in way that says something to those around you. Listen carefully to me here: most Christians do not live consistently in this truth. If you do, God can use you in ways you cannot even imagine. Hard circumstances and hard people are a gospel-promise opportunity. People who are

hard to love or from whom you can never seem to measure up present a golden opportunity to live on the promises of God.

The message of these five verses is that people who fear God, trust God, and have faith in God live radically different lives. In fact, they do things that might not even make sense. They act in a way that almost makes people ask, "What motivates you to do this?"

Notice the radical steps that believers are to take towards hard people:

- We are to bless those who mistreat us. (Notice, in particular, how "bless" is repeated and set in contrast to cursing.) (v 14)
- We are not to repay evil for evil (v 17a)
- We are to do what is right in eyes of others (v 17b)
- We are to rely on God's ability to be the Judge (v 19)

3. By overcoming evil with good

If you put all of this together you will see very clearly that the hope of gospel-promises is not meant to be something that simply gives you comfort and assurance; the promise of the gospel is designed to give you courage and power.

Paul directs believers to put on love towards people who do not love us. Particularly, he instructs believers to respond to painful people with Christ-like love.

Paul is echoing the words of Jesus:

44 But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, 45 that you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. 46 For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? (Matt 5:44-46)

Jesus essentially links loving enemies to blessing them, doing good to them, and praying for them. And He says that this is a chief characteristic of those who are the sons of God. To love those who love us is not anything unique (v 16). But loving those who do not love us shows that there is something else motivating your life. Jesus basically says that since God is like this, you should be like this.

Our radical, loving actions display that we know what God is like!

Chapter six of Luke says the same thing, but he adds a bit more color to the picture:

"But I say to you who hear: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, 28 bless those who curse you, and pray for those who spitefully use you.... But if you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. 33 And if you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. 34 And if you lend to those from whom you hope to receive back, what credit is that to you? For even sinners lend to sinners to receive as much back. 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 (Luke 6:27-28; 32-25).

Since God is kind to the unthankful and evil, we are to image Him by loving our enemies. In so doing, we will show that we really know God. Or, for our study, we will show that we fear God, trust God, and have faith in God.

I heard someone recently teach on the armor of God, and he was talking about the role of the shield of faith. He said that the shield was large enough to cover the whole body, and that it was not intended to be a shield for the rear of the battle but for the front. When soldiers charged the wall of a city they would be in imminent danger from falling rocks, flammable materials, and arrows. And this shield was meant to give you protection as you went into danger. The shield of faith was designed to give you protection as you charged the wall of a fortress.

Let me give you yet another analogy. Do you view the promises of God primarily as body-armor for combat or a blankie for comfort? Last week we reviewed some great and compelling gospel promises but to what end? It would be an enormous mistake to think that these promises were given to you just so that you can no longer be afraid of people or to be trapped by what they think of you. The promises take us further than that. They are body-armor not just to make us safe, but to give us courage to do what we could never do without them.

Do you feel how much godliness this takes? Do you sense how much fear of God, trust in God, and faith in God this kind of choice would take? God call us to overcome the evil of the fear of man with good. He calls us to run to Him, find safety in our relationship with Him, and then love people in ways that seem a bit radical. We overcome evil with good.

So, my point today is this: **Living on gospel-promises frees me to love people even if they don't love me back.**

How Do We Do This?

I'm calling you today to close the circle on our study of the fear of man by loving the very people whom you fear. I'm calling you to do something that the world would look at and then ask, "Why do you do that?"

We do this by...

1. Understanding that this is why God made me safe in Him!

Why have we spent so much time on fear, trust, and faith? We did this so that you could have the spiritual resources that you need. Fear, trust, and faith are given to us so that we might display the power of God as He lives through us. They were **not** given to us just as decorations on our walls in comfortable houses. Rather, they are meant to free us to do what God want us to do!

I'm free to make a mistake! But I'm also free to love hard people!

2. By recognizing my need to love them

It all starts with your heart. For some you, step number one will be simply praying something like this: "Lord, today I realize that you want me to not only stop fearing _____; You want me to start loving _____." And you will need start by asking God to change your heart towards them.

Where once you used to dream up ways to get even or to find ways to minimize their importance in your life ("I don't care what they think anyways."). Now you are faced with this huge question – "Will you start to love them?"

3. By finding some creative ways to demonstrate love

It is not enough to feel love on this inside. In fact, you should not wait until you **feel** like you love them to do something loving. Instead, you should act on what you know God wants you to do and leave the feelings to Him.

Now you will have to work this out depending on who it is or the nature of your relationship but here are a few ideas:

- Have a pleasant tone and a welcoming face when you see him
- Ask her a question about something important in her life
- Pay him a compliment over something that is important to him
- Express your appreciation for her help or her input
- Pray for him daily
- Find a creative way to lighten his load and make him succeed
- Tell them the honest truth, but first say, "This is really hard for me because what you think of me is really important."
- Buy her something special or treat him to lunch
- Make it a point to sit by her at lunch or invite her to come out for coffee
- Thank him for being your boss and express your gratitude for patience with you
- Defend her when people talk about her behind her back
- Choose to be kind and gracious even when he is not

And then (and here is one of the most important things that I will say all day!) let their response to your action GO! Do not do this just because it works. You do this because, first and foremost, it honors God. You love people to give God what He wants.

Jesus calls us to love like He did. "When he was reviled, did not revile in return; when he suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously" (1 Peter 2:23). Conquering the fear of man means that we can commit ourselves to God with such abandonment that loving others, especially those whom we fear, is possible.

4. By choosing to sacrificially love people who will likely reject us

This week our leadership team spent a few days away together, and during that time Nate Irwin, Pastor for Global Outreach, shared a story that I think captures a compelling application of what happens when you are free to love people who do not want to be loved. It is the story of Tom Little, one of nine people killed in Afghanistan by the Taliban while they were on a medical mission to a dangerous and remote area.

Tom was part of a medical team that was about to embark on a particularly difficult journey to bring eye, dental and mother-child clinics to a very remote region of Afghanistan. To avoid traveling through an area of heavy fighting, their route would involve hiking about 80 miles over a 16,000 foot pass. The medical equipment would be brought into the valley by horses, but since the pass was still snow-bound, it had to be lugged by hand to another set of animals on the other side – especially strenuous at such a high altitude. Libby was not physically part of the team, as she was in the U.S. awaiting the birth of the Little's first grandchild. Yet every 12 hours, she spoke with Tom via cell phone. She also emailed regular updates to MedSend and others who were praying for the team. We rejoiced to read that the team made it over the pass and to the village where they began conducting the clinics. Yet for the first three days, the weather was miserably cold and wet. Libby wrote: "The villagers kindly opened their home to them, but it was hard going on hundreds of patients each day who had walked such distances and had no shelter but the trees. But the crowds keep coming!" By the sixth and last day of clinics, the team was exhausted. "Some of the doctors have spent long nights watching and caring for some very seriously ill patients," Libby reported. Yet they began the perilous return trip at 4 a.m. last Tuesday, facing "a solid torrent of freezing rain above 13,000 feet with blinding snow at 16,000 feet," the most awful weather Tom had ever seen. The group dragged themselves to a shepherd's hut, where they crammed together to keep warm. Their clothing and sleeping bags were soaked. They had given their dried beans and rice to the villagers so they ate MREs, pre-packed high-calorie military food.

After walking another day, they made it to their vehicles, where the swollen river was impassable. They hoped that the river would go down by the next morning, when they would rebuild the road and be on their way. After that, Libby did not hear from Tom again.

For those of you unfamiliar with the story, Taliban fighters stopped their vehicles, dragged out each team member and executed them.

Now you might wonder what motivates someone to that kind of self-sacrificing love. I want you to hear it from Tom himself. Here is what he wrote in his newsletter in 2008:

When things aren't what they ought to be

"Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." Rom. 12:21

The Greek word that is used for "evil" in this text is "kakos" which has a very wide usage regarding all that is bad. Thayer's Greek Lexicon, however, perhaps best sums up its meaning with the short phrase "not such as it ought to be". Perhaps this phrase points to the heart of what universal evil is all about but at least it fits very neatly with the situation here in Afghanistan. Things certainly are not what they ought to be! There is an ugly war

that is being waged in much of the country, corruption is rampant within the central government and hopeless poverty is the norm for the multitudes of ordinary Afghans while the few that are well off routinely flout their often ill begotten riches in ways that can only be considered distasteful. In addition, security even within the capital city is compromised as bands of criminals roam the streets looking for murder or kidnap victims. Afghans have endured this threat for quite some time but in the past months foreigners have become the prime targets.

We are tempted to respond to this unfortunate situation by words and/or acts of anger and revenge. It is also easy to make the generalization that every unknown Afghan that we happen to meet may be the ones that are out to “get us”. Such a life of suspicion is good neither for us nor for the unfortunate folks that we daily happen to meet. In fact, just as Paul warns, we can easily be overcome with this evil that is around us and thus contribute to this “kakos”. Libby and I are learning now that it does take a conscious effort of prayer and action on a very personal level to reverse this process. This “overcoming evil with good” can take many forms at our workplaces, with our neighbors or in the bazaar. It could be summed up, however, by both demonstrating in practical ways and/or if necessary speaking about grace, justice, mercy and agape type love.

Please pray that we will indeed contribute to the “good” that we trust will eventually overcome the deep-seated “kakos” that exists in this place. May He also use you for this purpose in your own places.

Imagine what would have happened if Dr. Tom Little would have only chosen to minister to those who wanted him to love them. It struck me that in order to reach unreached people groups, you’d have to be willing to love people who might never love you in return.

Do you see the gospel-good that can come from loving people on the basis of promise not your performance?

One of my favorite scenes from the Passion of the Christ is at the very end of the movie. Jesus is on the cross. He is a bloody, painful mess and yet he prays, “Father, forgive them.” While he is praying, the high priest walks by the foot of the cross and listens. A thief on the cross next to him says, “See! Even now he prays for you!”

We began this series with a quote from a college professor of mine: “Mark, when you live your life in light of what other people think of you, you end up hating them.”

And I’d like to end by pleading you to see and live by another thought: “When you live your life in light of gospel-promises, you are free to love people – even hard people or people who don’t want you to love them – for the glory of God.

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