

Glen Park Gospel Church
Tuesday Evening Bible Study Group Notes

Rev Chris Trinham

Studies in Romans Series 6

No 29

Living for Christ in an Abrasive World

Scripture Reading: Romans 12:14-21

Nero's rule helps form the historical context of the life of Paul, and our studies in his letter to the Romans. Romans was written during the early benign period of Nero's administration. In 59AD Paul appealed to Caesar and had every confidence of a fair trial as a Roman citizen and acquittal (Acts 25:11&12). There was no reason to expect a Roman policy of persecution for the primitive Church. It was the Jewish leaders who pursued Paul and the harassing heretical Gnostic teachers were a doctrinal concern. Although there is no written verification (and some people disagree), it is generally understood that Paul's imprisonment was over well before the fire of Rome in 64AD. His second Roman imprisonment and martyrdom probably occurred in 66AD, at a time when Rome was reeling under demented Nero's reprisals. This later imprisonment under severe conditions is the background of 1 & 2 Timothy and Titus. Paul's Roman letter was written in 56AD. This information will direct us in our interpretation of these current studies. We need to be careful to not read into words a meaning that was not intended.

Although he had never been there, Paul, knowing political, religious and cultural situation in Rome, provided for his Jewish and Gentile brothers, some principles or rules for living as a Christian in a 'secular' society, principles we would do well to take on board. They make a paraphrase.

First, v14. *Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse.*

The word 'persecute' in the first instance means 'to pursue' as a runner in a foot race, not necessarily involving violence. It is probably translated persecute because of the reference to vengeance in v19. The word has an application of persecution when the context is malignant. Here however the context is that of identifying with others in need. It is true that hostile Jews pursued Paul from city to city because of his teaching. The word has the thought of systematic harassment, as say, one who is consistently critical or even sarcastic. In this context Jesus taught, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute (harass) you," Matthew 5:44. The word 'bless' means to 'speak well.' If someone is hostile toward you, you respond with good, not evil words to them. Here is an important attitude for the believer either in your family, the fellowship or in wider society. Rule No 1: Soak up the insults of others, returning soothing words, avoiding a sharp response.

Second, v15. *Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep.*

Joy and weeping express the hills and valleys common to human experience. Some of us are more able to empathise than others. Sharing these highs and lows is often not a simple matter. First, people must give us permission to enter these private moments in their lives; the right must be earned by a true shared respect. Second, some of us are better endowed than others with natural gifts, but this does not mean that the rest of us are exempt. Third, be careful not to exceed our invitation.

Rule No 2. Seek to share the high-low experiences of others.

Third, v16. *Be of the same mind toward one another; do not be haughty in mind, but associate with the lowly. Do not be wise in your own estimation.*

'Mind' in this reference 'implies a moral interest or reflection, not mere unreasoning opinion'- Vine. As we identify in the emotional experience of others, so we are to key into their thinking. If we have come a good way along the spiritual pilgrimage it is easy and natural for us to relate to others on that level. If so, Paul tells us to be careful to go back to where our people are thinking and key into their level. It might seem to be rather low, but

this is where they are at. Unless we link into their level, we have lost them. So let's listen, and learn before we speak.

Rule No 3 Key into the thinking of others. Don't run away with yourself.

Fourth, v17. *Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men.*

Evil in this verse is 'whatever is evil in character ... whatever is morally or ethically evil' Vine. If somebody does something bad to us, don't pay them back in kind. This will escalate and perpetuate the problem. Rather work out what we can do that others can see is an appropriate response. The word 'provide' NASB & AV or 'be careful' NIV carries the meaning of forethought or providential care. Paul says that we ought to work out a good response that all people can see is good and just. The aim is to stem flow of evil without doing despite to the persons involved..

Rule No 4. Carefully counteract evil with evident good.

Fifth, v18. *If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men.*

'If possible' could be written, 'If you have the power' cultivate, work on peace with everyone. This continues the thought of v17. Cultivation is a process and requires a long term plan. In the agricultural sense planning precedes planting, planting precedes the harvesting. The principle of Scripture is true, *for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.*

Rule No 5. Plan to plant the seed of peace into the prepared ground of others.

Sixth, v19. *Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath 'of God', for it is written, "VENGEANCE IS MINE, I WILL REPAY," says the Lord.*

'Of God' is not found in the Greek text, only the translations. It is inserted because translators felt that it is a reference to the quotation that follows. However not all scholars see it this way.

It is just as valid to see it in the context of Paul's main thrust in the whole passage, that is, that we ought to pay back good for evil. Thus we are to leave room to accommodate the wrath of men, ie to smooth the way for reconciliation at best or peaceful accord at worst. Some versions correctly translate 'the wrath', thereby pointing out a particular wrath, that is the wrath Paul has been urging his fellow Christians to assuage. Revenge and vengeance in this verse are words derived from the same Greek root.

Remember this, believer, God reserves the whole right of vengeance for Himself, and there is a difference between His vengeance and ours. We pay back evil against evil; God recompenses what is just. He is holy, perfect in knowledge and gracious in His dealings with men, and we can leave it to Him to deal with our adversaries correctly.

Rule No 6. Let others be vengeful, you leave that to God; it's His prerogative.

v20 *"BUT IF YOUR ENEMY IS HUNGRY, FEED HIM, AND IF HE IS THIRSTY, GIVE HIM A DRINK; FOR IN SO DOING YOU WILL HEAP BURNING COALS ON HIS HEAD."* Quoted from Proverbs 25:21 where the words, 'And the LORD will reward you.' are added. Again there are two ways of looking at this passage. The first is that by treating an enemy well we will make him burn with guilt. The other is that in ancient eastern lands, an host would provide for his departing guest to take with him a pitcher of coals with which to rekindle the fire on his hearth, which would have gone out during his visit and these were carried on the head, as is common in those countries even today. This is confirmed by Paul's final instruction.

Summary. Paul summarises his teaching on living for Christ in an abrasive world in v21 *Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*

Another translation of this verse is:
Don't cower under evil, but overcome evil in generosity.

Bible quotations in this study are from the NASB, unless otherwise acknowledged.

Welcome

Glen Park Gospel Church

Lower Road, Eltham North

Sundays 10.30 am

These notes may be reproduced in part or in full when distributed without cost, if the words 'Used by Permission, Glen Park Gospel Church.' is included