

Gamma

Romans 12:9-21

Study 20 NEW RELATIONSHIPS: FRIENDS AND ENEMIES

1. v.9 How can we love unlovely persons who we do not like and yet still be “sincere?”

This does not mean that you should never do a loving deed unless you “feel” loving! It means rather, that as we do loving deeds, we must work on our hearts to put aside condescension, irritability, bias, and selfishness. It is hypocritical to act loving when in your heart you despise someone. On the other hand it is unrealistic to insist that one’s heart be warm and kindly disposed before we do kind actions of love. So what is the solution?

There is a third way. A Christian goes about doing love while repenting, softening the heart through the recollection of his sacrifice for us (Rom.12:1-2). How does this work? The gospel is this: we are not loved because we are lovely, in spite of our unloveliness. We are not loved because we have made ourselves worthy of love, but because Jesus died for us when unattractive in order to make us attractive. Now if Christians think of this as they are serving unattractive persons, they will find a repentance growing. “Oh, Lord! I was so much more unattractive to you than this person is to me. Yet you were tortured and killed — you gave up your life for me! And all I need to do is to give up some time and effort for this person.” Now a person who does not understand the gospel cannot do this. A person who is just generally moral and nice cannot do this. They have to choose between the two inadequate alternatives, either: a) phony love (niceness toward people you dislike) or b) sporadic love (kindness only toward people you like). But if you show love as you repent, your heart is softened as you serve, and your service is sincere toward God at that moment, and becomes more sincere toward the people as you go along.

Don’t let this point go by without reflection! Ask: how does the gospel (as opposed to mere moralism) give us the only answer to really sincere love?

- 2. v12 Why do you think people in the church struggle with Paul's call to "outdo one another in showing honor"? If the church does struggle with this, how can we change the tone of Christian community away from competition and backbiting? (Get your group to share and discuss)**

- 3. Honestly share your level of "zeal" for the things of God right now? What's stifling your zeal? What can be done to address this? (v.11)
(Get your group to share and discuss)**

- 4. a) What things are we to do to those who are hostile to us? v.17-21**

The basic principle laid down in summary in v.21 is "overcome evil with good." The word "overcome" is a military word, and it means to "overpower." It is an extremely penetrating and radical insight. Paul says that to repay evil with evil is to immediately lose the battle to evil! The only way to defeat evil is with doing good to the one who has done harm. In other words, if you hate a person who has wronged you, that person has won! The only way to defeat the evil is to forgive and love the person. Another way to put it — when we identify "evil" too closely with the "evildoer," so to destroy evil is to destroy the evil doer, we unwittingly become a pawn of the evil force that is behind the evildoer. (In Lord of the Rings, any good person who uses the Ring of the evil Lord to put down the evil Lord would become evil in the process. It is the same temptation.) So the secret of overcoming evil is for us to see "evil" as something above and distinct from the evil doer. Our basic goal is to forgive and love and show kindness to the evildoer.

When we do that, there are two results:

- a. The spread of evil is checked toward us. Its hatred and pride does not infect us, and
- b. the spread of evil may be checked in the evildoer. He or she may be softened and helped by our love. Paul says that our good deeds and words could "pour burning coals on his head," which is a way of saying that it is possible that repentance may occur. The hostile person may be led to shame and alarm and remorse, rebuked by our kind life.

What this means practically:

- a. To not avoid the hostile person. v.18 “as far as it depends on you, live at peace with all.” It is common, when someone has wronged you, to simply avoid that person. You may say, “I am not paying them back, but I don’t want to see them.” But your avoidance could be a form of payback. To avoid the person does not overcome the evil! (See below for a qualification.)
- b. To express loving words and actions. v.14 “bless” and v.20 “feed... your enemy.” This means simply that you are to speak and act courteously and kindly to those who are hostile. We must be careful here! For sometimes we may do kind things to a hostile person simply as a way to shame him/her or “rub their nose” in it. That is not the motive. We thoughtfully find ways to wish the person well and do helpful things and speak respectfully to them.
- c. To forgive, and forego any repayment. v.19 “never avenge yourselves” There are boundaries though. Verse 12:9 still reminds us that we are not loving wisely or truly when we enable someone to sin or sin against us. There are great degrees of hostility. Enemies may be so dangerous that for you to have anything to do with them is to invite them to sin. In that case, the “good” you can do them is to stay away from them. See *Bold Love* by D.Allendar, which distinguishes between loving an evil person, a very foolish person, and a “normal” sinner.

b) Why are we to do them? (i.e. what are our motives and reasons for the above)?

Both the power and the model for this is, of course, the gospel. Christ died for us while we were his enemies. (Romans 5:6-10). That action is not only the paradigm for us, but the thought of it becomes our power to follow through. That is why Paul here reminds us of something very powerful — “leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written: ‘vengeance is mine... says the Lord” v.19. What we are being reminded is that all resentment and vengeance is taking on God’s role as judge. It is playing God.

But

(1) only God is qualified to be judge (we are imperfect and deserve judgment ourselves) and

(2) only God knows enough to be judge (we don’t know all about the offender, what he/she has faced and deserves) and

(3) Jesus took the judgment of God. So Paul is saying: “Think this! Either these persons you are angry at will repent some day and Jesus will take their judgment, or they will not and God will deal with it. But in either process, you are not involved.”

The gospel should make us remember that, if God decided to square all accounts with us, where would we be?

5. How does Paul's teaching on enemies help you think about facing a hostile world today? How does it change your expectations about what you will experience in this life?(Group to share personally)

6. Look at the following list and do a personal inventory.

- a. Love the unattractive people but with repentance and sincerity. v.9
 - b. Love but don't make the person an idol who leads you to allow him/her to sin or you to sin. v.9
 - c. Love with dogged affection over the long haul, no matter what. Stay loyal. vv.10-12
 - d. Love by making people feel honored and valuable. Listen and show utmost consideration to those around you. v.10
 - e. Love by being generous in a practical way with your home, money, and time. v.13
 - f. Love without bitterness. Don't pay back or hold resentment against others. v.14
 - g. Love with empathy. Be willing to be emotionally involved with others. v.15
 - h. Love with humility, Be willing to associate with people who are very different from you. v.16
 - i. Love by not avoiding hostile people, but planning appropriate kind and courteous words and deeds. v.21
- a) In which 2 of these am I weakest?
- b) Where will I need them next (where will I be tested)?
- c) What practical steps can I take to strengthen myself in these two areas?

Share your answers

Close is prayer for another