

**Bless Those Who Persecute You**  
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church  
August 7, 2022-AM Service  
Reverend Peter Jonker  
Romans 12:9-21

Today our focus begins in verse 14 of our passage. “*Bless those who persecute you, bless and do not curse.*” I don’t know if you noticed this during your memorization, but it’s a place where the passage takes a turn. Up till now, Paul’s instructions have been primarily concerned within how we treat each other within the church. ‘Share with *the Lord’s people* who are in need.’ ‘Be devoted to *one another* in love.’ ‘Honor *one another* above yourselves.’ All these are, first of all, instructions about how church people should treat each other. But in verse 14, Paul turns our hearts in a new direction. Now the Holy Spirit is teaching us how to relate to outsiders, people out there who do not share our beliefs, people out there who are maybe even hostile to us. Our enemies. Our persecutors.

That’s an important topic. It’s also a timely topic. There’s quite a bit of debate in Christian circles right now about this question. People have very different ideas about how we should react to the outside world, and how we should react to those who are against us. Many people are in the mood to fight. That’s a pervasive mood in our culture. Everywhere we turn, angry voices are telling us that ‘those people’ are our enemies, that they are dangerous, and that we better be ready to fight them. For example, it’s a message that appears a lot on political fundraising letters and emails: “Did you know that the (insert opposing party’s name here) are planning to push their radical agenda on America. If they are not stopped, the America we love will be destroyed. This is no time for hesitation. This is time for action. Please give to (insert opposing candidate’s name here) so that we can stop their radical takeover.” Messages like that are coming at us all the time, and they form us. They tell us what to do with our enemies. You fight them...And if you have to fight dirty, well, desperate times call for desperate measures.

A few weeks ago, I heard about a political candidate who talked about how as they went on the campaign trail, they were followed by video trackers. Everywhere this candidate went, everywhere they spoke, they were followed by three people. These people recorded every move the candidate made and every word they said. Every public utterance was scrupulously recorded. Why? These three people worked for the opposing political party. They were looking for one slip of the tongue, one badly worded sentence that could be taken out of context. Then they could clip that quote and use it against the candidate. I did some reading on video trackers this week, and it’s a tactic used by both political parties. I don’t know about you, but I think that’s awful. It’s utterly graceless. But it’s where we are right now. The other side is the enemy, and you better be willing to do what it takes to beat them.

This attitude has crept into the church. There are an increasing number of church leaders and speakers and preachers and pundits who say, ‘this is no time to be nice. We can’t afford gentleness and kindness right now, we can’t afford to be winsome, because the culture has turned against us and we need to fight!’

What might Paul have to say about that? Or more to the point, does this attitude fit with what the Holy Spirit is trying to form in the hearts of God’s people? Paul was no stranger to enemies. While it may be true that there are many enemies of the church in our society, Paul’s situation was much more contentious. By the time he wrote Romans, Paul has nearly been stoned to death, he’s been beaten, he’s been flogged, he’s been the target of several angry mobs, he’s

been thrown in jail for his faith multiple times. When he writes Romans, he's on his way to Jerusalem and he knows that there are many people in Jerusalem who want to kill him. So this is serious opposition. Whatever opposition the North American church faces today, Paul's opponents, Paul's enemies, were far more dangerous. And how had the Holy Spirit trained Paul to face these enemies? What attitude did the Spirit grow in Paul as he faced the people who threw stones at him, and cursed him, and called for his death? I think you all know the answer. It's really clear in this passage. It's really clear because Paul says it twice. Verse 14: "Bless those who persecute you. Bless and do not curse." And then, in case you missed that, verse 20: "If your enemy is hungry, feed him. If he is thirsty, give him something to drink."

Three things here. First, I think (and most commentators agree with me) that Paul is quoting Jesus here. Specifically, he's quoting the passage from the sermon on the mount that Kristy read earlier in the service. The one where Jesus says, 'love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.' The one where Jesus says, 'if anyone forces you to go one mile with them, walk with them for two.' I know that Paul doesn't say that he's quoting Jesus, but that's probably because this particular Jesus saying was so well known he didn't need to say, "I believe it was Jesus who said" because everyone would have known the saying.

Second, notice that in these words the Holy Spirit is doing much more than training us in tolerance. The Holy Spirit is not simply calling us to put up with our enemies, the Holy Spirit is calling us to bless our enemies. When you bless someone, you wish them well. Biblical blessing is the act of wishing them God's favor. It's a prayer for the flourishing of the person you bless, or in this case, a prayer for the flourishing of your enemy.

And finally, when the Spirit trains us to bless those who persecute us and when the Spirit calls us to give our thirsty enemy something to drink, the Spirit is not telling us to be doormats. The Spirit is not training us to simply roll over. This blessing is a way of fighting evil. Giving our enemy something to eat and drink is a way of coming against the powers of darkness. To use the words of the passage, it's a way of overcoming evil with good.

Which brings us at last to the burning coals. Ah the burning coals! Ever since we started memorizing this passage we've had multiple people come up to us and say, "we really love this passage and the challenge of memorizing it, but what's with the burning coals?" One minute we're giving our enemy something to drink and the next minute we're dumping burning coals on his head? Is this some sort of cruel bait and switch? Is Paul saying, we should lure our enemy to our house with offers of food and drink, and then ambush him? "Here, have a glass of lemonade...and while we're at it, how about some BURNING COALS!"

No, that's not what Paul is saying. Verse 20 is a quote from the book of Proverbs—Proverbs 25:21-22. And both there and here, the burning coals are not literal burning coals, they are an image used to describe a state of mind. What do we sometimes say when we are trying to describe what shame feels like? We say we are 'burning with shame.' Shame feels like a heat. When you are ashamed you burn, especially your head and face. So to heap burning coals on your enemy's head is to cause him to feel shame, shame for what he did to you. It's not just shame though. It also suggests something that is constantly on your mind. When you can't stop thinking about something, it burns in your brain. So Paul is saying, when your enemy does something nasty to you, and you respond with the kindness of food and drink, you will make him ashamed about what he did, and he will not be able to stop thinking about the kindness you showed him. So this blessing your enemy is not a surrender, it's a grace-tipped arrow that can pierce a malicious heart.

This is the dynamic behind Jesus' words in the sermon on the mount when he says, 'if someone forces you to walk a mile with you, go with him two.' I've mentioned this before, but let me remind you. In those days a Roman soldier could stop you on the street and order you to carry his pack. Kind of a nasty thing to do, but they had that right. You would have to stop everything you were doing and you were compelled to walk with him for exactly one mile. After a mile, you could drop the pack and get on with your day. Jesus is saying, if a Roman soldier asks you to carry his pack, don't just do he required first mile; offer to carry the pack for an additional mile as well. Why? Think about how that would heap burning coals on the soldier's head. For the first mile, the soldier would be walking along side you as the authority figure. 'I'm the soldier. I gave an order. This person is under my power and authority.' But then you offer to carry it a second mile, what happens to the situation? The power dynamic is reversed. Now the soldier isn't swaggering; he's wondering, "What's going on? Why is he being kind? Who are these Christians and what makes them do stuff like this?" His head would be on fire with questions. For the second mile the grace of God would be in charge of the situation and it would be working in the heart and mind of your enemy.

"When your enemy is hungry feed him. When he's thirsty, give him something to drink. By doing this you will be heaping burning coals upon his head." It's not rolling over; it's how we fight evil.

Like you, I've had very little true opposition to my faith as I've grown up. Lots of people have told me that they don't believe what I believe, and I've certainly seen things in the world that are in clear opposition to the way of Jesus, but I've had very little challenge or ridicule aimed at me. One of the only times I can remember happened at the Denny's on Plainfield and I-96. Way back when I was in seminary, I worked at East Leonard CRC as an intern, and as part of my duties I led a weekly Bible study with some guys. One morning, in the middle of our Bible study while we were talking about our passage, a couple of young men who looked like they were in their early twenties started saying, just loud enough so that we could hear it, "Jesus isn't real, Christianity is dumb. Christians are full of it. It's all a bunch of wishful thinking." It was clearly aimed at us. We all just kept talking and pretended not to hear it. But I was shocked and then I was angry. We weren't bothering them. Why did they feel the need to harass us? I didn't do anything specific, but I shot them a dirty look when they spoke, and when I walked out I scowled at them. I also spent the next day or so, running revenge fantasies in my mind, imagining how I could have zinged them with a clever comment. I thought about this incident this week as I studied Paul's words, and suddenly it became clear to me what I should have done. 30 years later, I finally figured it out. As I left the restaurant I should have paid their bill. And I should have left a generous tip and a note wishing them well. And I should have done this without any smugness or self-righteousness.

I am convinced that all this stuff about blessing your enemies and heaping burning coals on their head is personal to Paul. He knows what it feels like to have these burning coals on your head. Here's why I think that. When do we first meet Paul in the Bible? In Acts 7, at the stoning of Stephen. After proclaiming Jesus, Stephen is stoned to death by an angry mob, and Paul is part of that mob. Paul is an enemy of the gospel at this point, and he approves of the mob. Paul probably threw a stone or two. Do you remember what Stephen says to his enemies at the moment he dies? "Lord, do not hold this sin against them!" Stephen asks for God's favor for the men who are murdering him—including Paul. In effect, he blesses his enemies. I think those words of blessing stuck with Paul. I think they became a burning coal in his head.

Why? Well, who wrote the book of Acts? Luke. Luke wasn't there when Stephen died. So how does he know what Stephen said? Paul told him obviously. Paul and Luke travelled together on the missionary journeys and Paul told Luke what Stephen said, because he never forgot those words. They burned in his mind. Not convinced? Check out 2 Timothy 4:16. Now Paul is the one facing death. He's in prison and he says his life is being poured out like a drink offering. He mentions that there are people who have done him wrong. Alexander the metal worker harmed him and he's hurt because some people who claimed to be his friends have given him no support and have not visited. What does Paul say about these folk? "*May it not be held against them.*" It's Stephen's words, almost verbatim. Those words have been burning in his mind.

Of course both these men learned these words from Jesus. They heard them in the sermon on the mount, but more to the point, they heard them from Jesus on the cross. On the cross Jesus looked at the people who had nailed him there, the people who hurled insults at him, the people who'd spit in his face and he said, 'Father, forgive them, they don't know what they are doing.' (Oh, and by the way, which gospel records this saying? You guessed it, Luke's.) Blessing your enemies isn't some obscure instruction at the edge of our faith. It flows down from the cross. It's a pretty good description of how you and I received our salvation—'while we were sinners, Christ died for us.' In the middle of the world of anger and vengeance, God has started something completely different: he has planted a cross. And from that cross their flows a grace and a hope and a power that fills his church, and will someday fill the world.

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