

Sermon 167: Romans 12:14: 'Bless those who curse you.'

OUTLINE

Why we bless
How we bless

INTRODUCTION

The Christian message of love is what sets it apart from all other ethical or religious teachings. This message of love can be boiled down to four love commands, love God, love you neighbour, love each other and love your enemies. Not to say that other groups don't emphasize love. No other ethical teaching has all four of these nor to the same extent or in the way we are called to pursue them. Our love for God, is not a self-interested love for what we can get out of God but we love God for Himself in a manner fitting to His supreme majesty and glory. This love is the placing of God in the proper place in our lives and affections as we respond to Him according to all that He has revealed of Himself to us in biblical revelation. Loving our neighbour as ourselves, not as far as is comfortable or affordable but an honest love that seeks another's true highest good, not merely to satisfy another's sinful fancy. Respecting the dignity of human beings as being made in God's image and treating a person according to that dignity not according to what they have earned, their age, their usefulness in society, intelligence levels, etc. To love Christians who are one with us by the Spirit and to who we are eternally bound with an expression of family love fitting to our new unity. The prioritising of our new members who we are one with eternally over the goods of this world which are fleeting. But perhaps most surprising is the fourth, to love our enemies. In all other Ancient Greek literature until this time there are no other examples of this teaching of loving our enemy. Paul began this section of commands speaking about letting love be genuine and abhorring what is evil, v9. Here he is working that out as Christians love their enemies as they face the inevitable pain of persecution and sin.

In v14-21 Paul gives us four negative commands, accompanied by four positives that have to do with genuine enemy love. Do not curse—bless; repay no one for evil—do what is honourable in the sight of all; never avenge yourself—leave it to God; do not be overcome by evil—overcome evil with good. Today we are looking at v14, 'Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.' As we look at this command we will be looking into why we bless and do not curse when the OT seems to allow for it, and secondly we will explore how we go about fulfilling this command.

Why we bless

This commandment is taken from Christ's own teaching, Matt. 5:43-48, "'You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is 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. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.'" Luke 6:27-30, "'But I say to you who hear, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. To one who strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also, and from one who takes away your cloak do not withhold your tunic either. Give to

everyone who begs from you, and from one who takes away your goods do not demand them back.'

Now blessing and cursing we need to understand. John Murray points out that there are three types of blessing: we bless God, which is declaring His praise, we are not adding anything to God but giving to Him the praise due His name; God blesses us, here He does add to us what He seeks to give to us. Thirdly, and this is what both Paul and Jesus are teaching us, we bless others, this is where we seek a blessing from God on another. In this instance we are seeking God's blessing on an enemy. To curse is the opposite to seek God's justice against another.

Notice that at the beginning of Matt 5:43 Jesus starts with the words, 'You have heard that it was said, ...' This is a common saying found in the Sermon on the Mount, and indicates that Jesus is departing from the 1st century interpretation of the Law and is putting forward the correct understanding of the Law. In most instances it is usually just a matter of interpretation, for example in v38 He highlights that the saying 'An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth,' has been abused by being applied out of context. It was originally given to guide judges in the sort of penalty that should be applied so that there would not be an inordinate over punishment of crimes, but that the punishment should fit the crime. This saying was being abused by being taken out of the law courts and used as a principle to justify revenge in private matters. However, when it comes to v43, Jesus is not merely correctly interpreting a verse from the OT, He is taking away something that was never thereto begin with. 'You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.' The, 'love your neighbour,' part is true and part of the OT teaching, but the, 'hate your enemy,' part is an addition that found its way into Judaism, but not from the Scriptures. The first century Judaism institutionalised racism which was not the teaching of the OT.

Now here is where some of the difficulty arises. Some think that the OT was a time where you were allowed to hate your enemies, but now the NT is a time for love. The reason this is a bad thing is that there have been many heresies that have begun by making the God of the OT a bad angry God, but the God of the NT a loving God. It has the seeds of atheism in it if followed to its logical conclusion. It has resulted in antinomianism, where people say that the OT was about law, and now we are Spirit led, or live by the law of love. It resulted in one of the first liberals who discarded parts of the Bible as man's word, and he only kept those parts that did not have an apparently angry God or law in it—Marcion. It has played into the hands of those who believe that religion evolved from a savage polytheism to a cultured monotheism, making Christianity, not the truth, but just another religion amongst many. Add to this some of those difficult statements in the psalms where David talks about hating people, "Do I not hate those who hate you, O LORD? And do I not loathe those who rise up against you? I hate them with complete hatred; I count them my enemies." (Psalm 139:21-22) Are there 2 different types of teachings on how we should be towards our enemies? Is the OT a redundant book that Christians are no longer to read and obey? Let's try and answer some of these difficulties.

Firstly, one of the key questions in addressing an issue of this type is this, 'What time is it?' Are we looking at a portion of Scripture that is BC or AD? So as we try and reconcile the psalms with the teaching of Jesus we note that the psalms are BC. Having noted that the psalms are BC, and next to that noting that the psalms are therefore part of the OT that points forward to Christ, we begin to see the psalms a little more clearly. Perhaps you have never realised this but because David, who is a type of Christ, wrote many of the psalms; and Christ took the psalms as His own words during His ministry, especially on the cross; on account of this we need to see the curses of the psalms as curses upon the lips of Christ. Now perhaps this has compounded the problem for you and not solved it. For as you look

at the psalms where David is calling down justice on his enemies, and you see Christ on the cross praying that His enemies be forgiven, you are not helped by the thought that the prayers in the psalms are the prayers of Christ, for there still seems to be a clash. Let me try and illuminate a little further. The psalms are glimpses into the various offices of Christ that He held, and holds. At times we will see Christ in the psalms as the persecuted and righteous plaintiff; at other times we will see Him regal and speaking like a King; at other times we will see Him as a judge, and at other times as the one who stands before God in our place as the guilty sinner. David in the role of warrior, judge, king, sinner, innocent victim, shepherd, and although not a priest, desired to be one; in all of these roles we see David reminding us of Christ in the psalms. It is primarily for this reason that the Christian is to rejoice in the psalms, read them and sing them. We are not to take the curses upon God's enemies as opportunities for personal revenge, but see them upon the lips of Christ who will one day come and judge the living and the dead. Knowing what time it is and what sort of literature the psalms are help us reconcile these apparent problems. And just as we can happily accept that Jesus can come as both saviour and judge, He can pray for justice and forgiveness as well. This leaves the words of Christ before us with nowhere for us to hide, we cannot run to the psalms and try to use them to justify our hatred or revenge, those are Christ's words; we have no choice but to love our enemies.

Another reason why the OT curses are not normative for the Christian is because of the covenantal context we are in. Under the Mosaic Covenant God was rebuilding Eden with Israel. It was to be a garden where God and His people dwelt together in holy fellowship. It was a place where all the seed of the serpent was to be driven out to image the new creation, a place with no sin. Like the garden of Eden there was a probationary element, if you obeyed you lived, if you sinned you died. And if Israel were obedient they would inhabit the land. The king of Israel and the armies of Israel played an important role in pointing forward to the time that Christ would rule His people and judge sinners. The holy wars of Israel were eschatological intrusions. So when David speaks in words of judgement, he is as the king reflecting this aspect of what God intended to convey. Those words of judgement against the sinner both in Israel and without are pronounced by the judge-king who points forward to Christ. When we sing or pray those parts of the psalm where David is speaking in terms of righteous condemnation we see those words not to be actioned by ourselves in a holy war as David was given to do a far particular time and purpose, but to be actioned by Christ when He comes again. We appropriate them not as sanctioning personal hatred but see them pointing to the one who will ensure every injustice receives exactly what it deserves. The King has taken His throne, and has announced His intention to return, and when He does it is then that He will call all to account. Until then we preach announcing that today is the day of salvation, and demonstrate His love and forgiveness by loving and forgiving our enemies. We call all to leave their sins and come to Christ for amnesty while the offer is available.

Many religious people who think they are better than others, who are racist, who have a distorted view of God's love hide their personal hatred behind a false theology. This is the mask Jesus is pulling away in His teaching.

Some have tried to translate these OT curses into NT prayers of eternal judgement upon an unbeliever. In the past the Roman Catholic church would pronounce anathemas on the souls of heretics and great sinners. This is not what we are called to. Even when we administer church discipline, it is not a case of the church sitting in the judgement seat of Christ and damning a person to hell. No church discipline is a time of truth telling where we tell an individual that their lives do not match their confession, that they need to repent and

the doors of salvation stand open to anyone who will humble themselves before the Lord. Hence the name church discipline not church judgement.

How we bless

Now you will notice as you look at 12:14 that Paul says, 'Bless those who *persecute* you.' This gives us the setting that we are to envisage. Paul is reminding us that we are the church of God and exist as aliens in this world, that we are at war in the war of the ages where the serpent and the seed of the serpent will in every age arrange themselves against God's people and seek to destroy them. We are reminded of the fact that we are following our Saviour who was hated by the world and will receive the same treatment. We are set against the beliefs and practices of every age. We stand for truth against lies, holiness against sin and love against hate, but every generation is sinful and continues to perpetuate that sin in many ways. The book of Revelation reveals to us that the devil is active in the world of man and in the kingdoms of men, that the devil is the puppeteer behind persecuting government, deceiving false religion, and seductive culture. Jesus prepared His people to be persecuted and armed them with a battle plan when it happened. Bless those who persecute you.

Now this word persecute not only speaks of the war we are in but the innocence of God's people. We are wrongly being persecuted, we are being persecuted for the sake of Christ's name, we are persecuted because being salt we cause pain by standing in opposition to the sin and lies in society. Because we speak with a prophetic voice to this generation about its sin we are rejected, scorned, mocked and hated. And this is the harder side of suffering. When you have done wrong and you deserve your punishment, you are humble and recognise that you deserve the pain you may be experiencing. But when we are the innocent party, when people are believing a lie and deliberately and maliciously misrepresent you, when the strong take advantage of the weak simply because they can, when you have been doing good and it is repaid with evil, this is when it is hardest to love your enemy. And yet this is when Paul is calling upon us to love our enemies and bless them. We are called not simply to empty words of seeking placing but a heart felt desire for another's good from true love.

How do we love the unlovely, more than that how do we love those who by their actions provoke anger and hatred from a sinner's heart? How can victims of injustice love the criminal? Is this the place where we allow for the, 'Love is not a feeling it's an act of the will' thing? Or is Christ calling for us to genuinely feel love for our enemies? We can understand an abused child continuing to love their abusive parent; the family bond is a bridge that helps cross the gulf between them, but what about an enemy who is a stranger? The key is in the word 'bless' it implies praying for them, this is Christ's example on the cross and when the Spirit works on our hearts.

Perhaps you think that it would be an impossible thing to feel a measure of love for someone who is torturing you to death, but as we examine the example of Christ, we can see Him on the cross, with the most reason not to love His murderers, we see that He is filled with compassion and pity for them. In His prayer He does not dwell upon their sin, but upon any part of them that might rouse God's pity and compassion. They knew that they were killing a man who did not deserve death, who was perhaps a prophet, who spoke and claimed to be the Son of God, yet there was still some area of ignorance to the full measure of what they were doing when they nailed Jesus to the cross. In His dying He loved His enemies by praying for their forgiveness, not burning with anger over the injustice they had done Him, but dwelling on their darkness and blindness. When we look at this

prayer of Christ we should not try and establish some new, weird teaching like, Jesus thought their good deeds would outweigh their bad; or that their ignorance excused them; etc. No, instead we should note the other centred focus of His dying thoughts; the focus on mercy not justice; and a heartfelt desire for their best good.

Now, I can hear some of you saying, 'Yes, but He is Jesus, and I am not!' And perhaps with this you would feel that we are not obliged to aim so high, or if aiming to never believe that we will ever achieve it, and live enslaved to the futile goal of loving like Christ, even though we will never be able to. This is not the Christian life that God has called us to. The Gospel provides what the Law demands, and it is no different with this command. How then does the Gospel enable this enemy love to flow in our lives? The answer is found in, our union with Christ. When someone is born again, they do not merely experience an inner renewal, but also experience a mystical joining to Christ. The Holy Spirit who comes to dwell in us causes us to be joined with the risen Christ, so that, as it were all the space between us and the risen Christ is immediately bridged in a type of time and space warp, and we are joined to Christ. Think of the Holy Spirit as the lifeline between you and Christ, and the risen Christ is presently acting upon you to change you more and more into His own likeness by His Spirit. As a believer the Spirit is making a new person out of you, and making you more holy. However, this process is not abstracted from Christ. The fruits of the Spirit of love, joy, peace, etc. are not merely the fruits of love, but of Christ's love; joy but of Christ's joy. The image of God that you are being renewed into, is the image of Christ. So, when we say that He was Jesus and we are not, we have not said enough. For in the Gospel God has made it possible that we as fallen sinners can begin to reflect something of Christ even now. This includes enemy love. Church history is full of such accounts of love. Here is an example of an old woman in Russia praying for a young officer who is just about to strike her in a raid upon her church:

"I saw an old woman near the wall, fear on her face, lips trembling in prayer. I couldn't hear what she was saying because of the noise. Her praying infuriated me and I dashed over a few steps and raised my club to hit her. She suddenly saw me poised, ready to strike, and she prayed loudly. I listened for a second to her prayer, more out of curiosity than anything. As my arm was raised, ready to lower my club on her defenceless head, I heard her words, 'God forgive this young man. Show him the true way. Open his eyes and help him. Forgive him, dear God.'" ¹

An issue here that need to be resolved is the one of forgiveness. This is the great hurdle to loving our enemies. And to compound the problem Christians have got it into their minds that they have to receive an apology first, before they are obliged to forgive. And part of the thinking behind this attitude is this: If God only forgives our sins once we repent, surely we should only forgive our enemies sins if they apologise and seek our forgiveness. However, this is not true. We are commanded to give unconditional forgiveness. Ideally our enemies should seek our forgiveness, but if they don't we still have to forgive them. We are not God who have a law that needs to be satisfied, nor does anyone owe us their allegiance as they do to God that we demand an apology. In fact if we are to follow Jesus example, He did not pray for their forgiveness after they stopped hurting Him either, but during their sinning against Him.

Let me end with an illustration of this love in action, for as Frederick Beuchner said to begin with, loving our enemies is alien but it will also turn the world upside down. It is my prayer that as we end with this you will go out in the strength God provides and love your enemies:

1 Sergei Kourdakov, *Forgive Me, Natasha*, (Bath, London, Lakeland, Marshall, Morgan & Scott: 1977), 178.

The story is the story of Pastor Son, a Korean pastor who was faithful in preaching the Gospel in both the Japanese invasion and the Communist uprising in Korea. He ministered faithfully amongst lepers, but the part of his story that I want to share with you is about the death of his sons. His sons were both Christians who were intending to go to the States for training to go into the ministry. However, during the Communist uprising amongst the students, his two sons, his eldest sons were shot by some other students, because of their Christian faith, they preached while they died. When the message of his son's deaths first came to him he, with the messenger and several lepers all turned to God in prayer, and he prayed, "Dear Lord, we thank thee that they died as martyrs"; and then, 'though we do not know who they were, we forgive those who killed my sons. Father, Father,' he cried, 'give us Thy love. Love which can forgive them....'² One eye witness gives this account of their deaths: First the death of the eldest son Matthew, "Realizing that he was about to be shot, Matthew cried: 'You must repent and believe in Jesus. Though I die now I will go to heaven, but how can you escape the fearful punishment of hell?' The rioters were blind with anger: clenching their fists, they snapped out the order to shoot. 'Father,' cried Matthew, 'receive my soul. Forgive their...'³ He did not finish."³ Shortly after that John the second brother was shot and he too prayed just before he died, 'Father, forgive the people their sins. Help them to repent. Receive my soul and watch over my father and....'⁴ After these moving eye witness accounts, the father, pastor Son got up to speak: "Dear brethren,' he began, 'I have heard Mr Hong's report. I firmly believe that my two sons, Matthew and John, have gone to heaven. But, as Matthew said, those who killed them will go to hell. I cannot escape this knowledge. Can I who preach the Gospel in order to save people from going to hell, go on my way, unheeding, while those who killed my sons die without repenting? Had they been strangers from another country it would have been my duty to try and save them, but they are my own countrymen, and this makes my duty more compelling. When the people of a country fight against each other, who can tell where it will end? Each side will take revenge on the other, and this could go on until almost all are destroyed. Therefore the tide of revenge must be checked: Let someone go to Pastor Duk-whan Ra in Soon-chun and tell him that those who killed my sons, if they are found, must not be beaten or put to death. I will seek to convert them and adopt them as my own sons.'⁵ God opened a door that one of the boys that took part in the shooting should be saved from execution upon his request, and the boy was converted and went on to study for the ministry. All of this love however, is merely a pale reflection of the greatest enemy love where God gave His Son willingly die for the forgiveness and adoption of His enemies. May God give us the grace to emulate it.

2 Yong Choon Ahn, *The Seed Must Die*, (Belford Square, London, IVP: 1972), 54.

3 Ibid, 59-60.

4 Ibid, 60.

5 Ibid, 60-1.