

Chapter 59

Conquering Satan

(Romans 12:17–21)

Sooner or later every Christian has to learn the habit of practising total forgiveness. All of us will – sooner or later – find someone whom we have to forgive for something that is done to us which was terrible. David had to forgive Saul. Job had to forgive his friends. Joseph had to forgive his brothers. Even Jesus had to show love to Judas to the very end of his life. In Romans 12, Paul is pressing us to face every situation in which we might find ourselves with faith, love and Christian boldness. Now he comes to a small unit in which he speaks to us about our attitude to wickedness and to ill-treatment from our enemies (12:17–21).

1. **First comes a simple prohibition of vindictiveness.** ¹⁷*Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Take thought beforehand for things that are good before all people.* It is an absolute rule that arises out of the royal law of the kingdom, the law of love. The words are easy enough to understand. The difficulty is not in understanding them but in obeying them! Paul goes further still. ‘Take thought beforehand for things that are good in the opinion of all people.’ The implication is that everyone, Christian or pagan, is able to recognize when a person is refusing to be vindictive. When a Christian reacts to ill-treatment with loving kindness, even the pagan sees that something wonderful is happening. Freedom from vindictiveness requires thought **beforehand**.

The Christian has to do some thinking about his life, **before** particular crises arise.

2. **We follow purity first, then peace.** There is a limitation to what Paul has said about peaceableness towards others. It is not a matter of ‘peace at any price’. There are times when ‘peaceableness’ is not possible. James said that the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable. Purity has to come above peace. So here Paul is slightly modifying his previous thought when he says, ¹⁸*If possible, as far as concerns you, seek peace with all people.* He knows there are times when it will not be possible to follow the demands of peace, because the demands of purity are higher.

3. **We give room for God to act.** Next he says: ¹⁹*Do not take revenge, beloved, but give place to God's wrath, for it has been written, 'Vengeance is mine; I will repay,' says the Lord.* He is now drawing attention to a special temptation: the problem of revenge. He has a sharp command. Paul says, ‘Do not take revenge . . .’ Instead we ‘give place to God's wrath’. ‘Give place’ means ‘get out of the way and leave room for something else’. By leaving aside the taking of revenge in situations of injustice towards ourselves, we are leaving open the possibility that God will act on our behalf. Actually the desire for justice is very close to the heart of God. But God does not like to act in matters of justice as quickly as we would like. He has it on his mind to do some ‘repaying’. Why do we need to worry ourselves about what he has pledged himself to do? Of course we do not abstain from vengeance in the hope that our enemies will suffer at God's hand! Romans 12:20–21 makes it clear that this is not Paul's idea at all. Yet it is a fact that after we have decided to do nothing vindictive about insult and ill-treatment, God himself is provoked to action on our behalf. God cannot bear the thought of our being ill-treated. There is a blessing that comes upon those who trust God amidst hostility and persecution.

Not only do we not avenge ourselves, we are to positively work for the good of our enemies, as if they were our friends! ²⁰*But*

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if your enemy hungers, feed him. If he thirsts, give him drink. For doing this you will heap coals of fire on his head. The Christian has high hopes for his enemies. The reference to ‘coals of fire’ is a way of saying, ‘You will bring him to change his mind about you.’ The saying seems to depend on an ancient custom in which a man who had offended but then changed his mind carried a container of hot ashes on his head! There is nothing that brings our enemies to repentance more than to show persistent Christian love to them, even when they are treating us badly. Our hope is that when our oppressor and persecutor sees that we are not bitter, not resentful against him, and that we seek no revenge, he will realize that what makes us the way we are is the help we have from outside of ourselves. The best way to overcome an enemy is to make him a friend.

Paul’s last word in this particular matter is: ²¹*Do not be conquered by the evil one, but conquer the evil one by good.* We are being conquered by Satan when we repay evil for evil. But we are to conquer evil by good. Paul pictures an attractive and congenial kind of ‘holiness’. It is a pleasant and healthy kind of personality that Paul envisages. We shall never be utterly sinless, but it is possible to become people of love and faith and hope and cheerfulness. There is a kind of ‘blamelessness’ that the Christian ought to reach. The total picture in Romans 12 gives us an overview of the godly person. Such a life begins when we have experienced the greatness of God’s salvation, and his many mercies toward us, and we yield ourselves to him in body and in mind. This is conquering Satan indeed!