

Week 4:
“Sharing Our Peace”
Romans 12:14-21

LESSON PREP: COMMENTARY

These insights have been gathered from the Smyth and Helwys and New Interpreter’s Bible commentaries on the book of Romans. They are offered here to help discussion leaders prepare for the lesson; feel free to use these insights in your discussion of today’s passage with your small group.

Sharing the Topic

When my family was once dealing with specific issues with some other people close to us we sought out counseling from a trusted friend. The counselor had some great insight, which is similar to what Paul addresses here in Romans 12:14-21. In order for the issue we were facing to get better, it meant we had to make changes in our lives. The counselor said to think of the family system like a baby mobile - like the ones that we hung over a crib. When one of the items on the mobile is removed or is changed out, everything gets a little wobbly. Everyone has their role to play to help keep our lives stable. At first, when change happens those roles are forced to change and become unbalanced. Over time though the system will adapt and balance will be restored again, even though it will look very different, and hopefully much healthier.

Paul is addressing a family system that is brand new and still trying to find its balance, so he does what Paul always does- he writes them a letter. In this section of Paul’s letter to the Romans, Paul addresses the rough patches ahead for them and he gives them tools to use while they face these issues.

Sharing Scripture

Keep in mind that at this point in Paul’s ministry he has not been to see the Roman believers yet, so he’s building some rapport by passing on some helpful instructions. In today’s passage we find some directives that Paul feels the believers in Rome need to know as they grow in their faith and begin to experience pressure, both outside and inside of the church in Rome. Part of what he’s trying to convey is that there are better ways to react (other than retaliation and aggression) when followers of Christ face difficult times. As new believers, he’s letting them know that not everyone is going to

embrace their new ways of living, but when they face pushback, there are some things one can do to address the pressure they will face.

Romans 12:14-21 New Living Translation (NLT)

¹⁴ Bless those who persecute you. Don't curse them; pray that God will bless them. ¹⁵ Be happy with those who are happy, and weep with those who weep. ¹⁶ Live in harmony with each other. Don't be too proud to enjoy the company of ordinary people. And don't think you know it all!

¹⁷ Never pay back evil with more evil. Do things in such a way that everyone can see you are honorable. ¹⁸ Do all that you can to live in peace with everyone.

¹⁹ Dear friends, never take revenge. Leave that to the righteous anger of God. For the Scriptures say,

“I will take revenge;
I will pay them back,”¹
says the Lord.

²⁰ Instead,

“If your enemies are hungry, feed them.
If they are thirsty, give them something to drink.
In doing this, you will heap
burning coals of shame on their heads.”²

²¹ Don't let evil conquer you, but conquer evil by doing good.

A Few Questions Along the Way

The following questions may be helpful as opening discussion starters or questions to ask throughout the time together. Use them as you'd like.

- What does it mean to be humble?
- Who comes to mind when you think of someone that rejoices with others when others rejoice or mourns with others mourn? Who are they? What is it about them that stands out?
- Why do we act vengeful?

¹ Deut. 32:35

² Prov. 25:21-22

- What do we expect to happen when we act vengeful?
- What are the implications of living with hospitality, even to our enemies?
- What happens when we treat our enemies well?

Sharing Insights

With almost every new beginning there's a honeymoon period- at first things are fantastic! Everything is as one imaged and all is well. Everyone is happy and respectful. There are no disagreements, or if there are they find a way to keep it to themselves... at least for a little while. However, with anything long lasting, time passes and the shiny parts of the new reality begin to lose their shine. Underlying realities begin to show. The Roman church is very young and is growing. The leaders of the church are doing their very best, but now that the shine has begun to grow dim, the realities of the external *and* internal pressures start to show. Paul tries to address these negative pressures here in Romans 12:14-21.

Up until now in Paul has given theological foundations as well as instructions for community living. Here, in the middle of chapter 12, he transitions from ways the community can take care of one another to what to do when others attack you because of your faith. Paul doesn't list out specific attacks or persecutions, but generalized pressure that is natural when someone makes a change of any kind.

Paul offers 3 appeals to resist retaliation and vindication:

1. Do not curse your persecutors
2. Do not repay evil with evil
3. Do not act out of vengeance.

Do not curse your persecutors

As the Roman church grows closer to one another and they grow in their faith in Christ, their behaviors will naturally change. Living a life that honors Jesus will inevitably look a little different than a life without Christ. Believers are not to think of themselves as "better" by any means, just more aware of the impact of their decisions and actions on their testimony of Christ. As members of the Roman church make different choices and actions, the world around them will notice and will be off-balance for a while. Those in their immediate circles will notice the changes first, ever how small they may be. Then eventually, the outside voices will chime in, notice the changes, and begin to wrestle with how they will adapt to these changes. As our faith grows, the mobile will

shift its balance and others will notice. Paul has seen this shift occur in countless other churches, so he includes this list of to-do's to help the church deal with their new realities.

In v.14 the Greek translation of the word “persue” could mean several things. The most common interpretation- “being aggressively chased like a hunter pursues a catch”³. However, it's important to keep in mind the same word is used in v.13 which is interpreted as “extend hospitality” or “pursue hospitality”. Paul's choice in words is not accidental here. Being pursued can be good (as in hospitality) or it can be oppressive (as in persecution). He's puts to these two views so close together that the Greek reader/listener would see this juxtaposition right away.

It's as if Paul is saying, “Life as a believer will be great! However, when your life truly reflects the love of Christ, then there will also be persecution at the same time. So be prepared for it, and when it comes here's what to do...” When we're living into our callings as people of faith, we will experience mountain top highs and moments of challenges. Paul gives them tools to face the lows and challenges that reflect the teachings of Jesus.

V.15-16 begins Paul's list of things to do when hard times come. “Rejoice with those who rejoice, and mourn with those who mourn.” (12:15). He does not limit this sense of Christ-like presence to only believers. He's saying that when someone you know is joyful or is sad, no matter their beliefs, ethnicity, location of their hometown, religion, color of their skin, accent of their linguistic abilities, etc. be present with them as Christ is present with us in those same moments of life. He goes on to advise us to live in harmony and be willing to associate with others who are different from us. It's far too easy to remember how different we are. However, this scripture is calling us to put in the work it takes to live in our commonalities with fellow human beings. These verses also pull the reader back into Paul's earlier words from Romans 12:3,

“Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you.”

Paul continues with his list of rightful living when facing tough times by saying, to be more than civil to one another, but to live out love in how they acted toward each other.

³ <https://biblehub.com/greek/1377.htm>, Strong's Concordance, ref. 1377.

This young church needed someone to give them a new tool for facing push-back other than retaliation. The only way they knew to deal with conflict was with retaliation, so Paul says to not pay back evil with evil, but rather do what is right.

Do not repay evil with evil

In her book, Left to Tell, Inmaculée Ilibagiza describes living through the Rwandan genocide. One time she was hiding in a secret room in her pastor's house while the military entered the home trying to kill her. The whole time she was hiding she focused on scriptures of Jesus. She "imagined Jesus speaking to her in the moments of fear and uncertainty... moments that may well become her last moments, and she heard Jesus saying, 'Trust me. Have no fear. I will save you.'"⁴ Inmaculée continues to tell her story that as much as she wants to retaliate, she listens to the voice of Jesus saying to trust him instead and she takes a different path, one that "is right in the eyes of everyone" and lives in peace with others as v 17 - 18 says to do.

Do not act out of vengeance

In v.19-20 Paul continues his juxtaposed teaches of Do Nots...and Dos. The difference is here Paul pulls in some Old Testament teachings that are timeless. However, as we look over these teachings let us not think that Paul is throwing out justice for wrongdoing. He's all for justice, but he's trying to teach this new church that when wrong is done, it is not up to them to make deliver justice. Let justice come from God. They are not to become vigilantes and take revenge on people who pursue or persecute them. On the contrary, he gives them some instructions for how to usher in peace by demonstrating love and overflowing mercy.

Allowing the process of moral cause and effect play itself out opens the doors for reconciliation and healing. By returning evil we acts of love and kindness God is able to work in the lives of everyone involved. God will roll out justice but do so very differently than we might want, and his justice isn't punishment, but true justice which leads to a rebalancing of relationships and community. (see Deut. 32:35).

Here's is how Paul tells the Romans to act when they are ready to take matters into their own hands. Following this unconventional teaching will result in space for the Holy Spirit to work in everyone's lives. It's good words for us today! Proverbs 25:21-22 says,

⁴ Inmaculée Ilibagiza, Left to Tell, Hay House Inc., 2004, p.131

If your enemies are hungry, give them bread to eat;
and if they are thirsty, give them water to drink;
for you will heap coals of fire on their heads, and the Lord will reward you.

Sharing Stories

- Put group members into groups of 2-3 people. Give each person 2 mins to share a time that they have witnessed someone respond with love to a situation instead of anger, and how that impacted the outcome. Have someone be a “timekeeper” and call out the 2 min segments to allow everyone an opportunity to share and listen.
- When done sharing ask for 1 word outcomes that people experienced with love was shared instead of retaliation. (stick to 1-2 words per group to allow for equal sharing).

Sharing Prayers

Pass out post-it notes or index cards to everyone in the group. Ask them to write down 1 area in their lives that they need to respond with love. Have everyone put their cards/notes in a box / large envelope that is in the front of the room. Once everyone has put in their card, seal the envelope or box. Hold it up and offer a prayer and a blessing. Do not open the envelope, but keep it in the room in a visible place as a reminder (dispose of it in a few weeks).