



# TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

## Transformed Retaliation (2)

Romans 12.19-21

David Anguish

### Introduction

One of my favorite stories from Landon Saunders's *Heart of the Fighter* series is from "Heart Overflowing," a lesson about joy and exuberance in life. As he told it:

Some will come for counseling, and they will say "My boss is always on my case. Always on my case. They'll get [all] over me and say 'Why did you do that? Why did you do that?'" And I said, "Yes, and you probably tried to explain and it sounds like you're giving excuses and you're rationalizing and then the boss gets angrier and angrier." "Yes, that's right, that's exactly what happens." Well, here's what you need to do. The next time he does it, just look up and say "I'm incompetent." Well, the next day it happened. "Why did you do it? Why did you do it?" And she looked up and said "Because I'm incompetent." And the boss said, "Oh, no you're not incompetent." We just somehow need to keep that spirit of exuberance.<sup>1</sup>

It's amazing how a different kind of response can diffuse a potentially explosive situation! That's one lesson to draw from this text. But, there's another, more pressing lesson. Paul answers the questions that arise from vv. 14-18.

1. Remember: "Bless those who persecute . . . Repay no one evil for evil, . . . so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all" (12.14, 17-18).
2. But, what happens to the evildoer? The bully? It doesn't seem fair. He runs roughshod. We repay with good. Doesn't anyone ever stop him? Square things up? Make sure he pays for his sins? Render justice?
3. Good questions. Real questions. Questions Paul confronts in vv. 19-21.

### Expectation (12.14a, 21)

Verse 19 shifts the burden of vengeance from our limited power and perspective to God.<sup>2</sup>

1. It introduces a subject with which Paul's Bible readers would have been familiar.
  - a. At times when Israel was a political force capable of striking back in a meaningful way, we have record of both human and divine vengeance (e.g., Num. 31.2; Judg. 15.7; 1 Sam. 14.24).
  - b. "In the prophets, however, the thought is almost always of divine punishment--on Israel's enemies, or on Israel itself (e.g., Jer 5:9; 23:2; Hos 4:9; Joel 3:21; Amos 3:2, 14;

- Nah 1:2). It is this prophetic language which Paul has in mind, as the λέγει κύριος [*legei kyrios*] following the Scripture quotation shows (Deut 32:35), since many of these threats of punishment are expressed in first-person prophetic speech with a λέγει κύριος added, whereas it does not occur in the Deuteronomy passage itself.”<sup>3</sup>
2. “The wrath (ὀργή, *orgē*) of God” will, Paul says, act justly.
    - a. 1.18ff. shows that “wrath” in Romans need not be restricted to future judgment (as 13.4-5 will reinforce).
    - b. “The taking of vengeance, that is, acting independently of or beyond the law, is denounced in the OT (Lev 19:18; Prov 20:22; 24:29), with the specific thought sometimes added in postbiblical Judaism that vengeance can be left to the Lord, . . . but already implicit in the prophets’ frequent talk of divine punishment. . . .” (Dunn, 750).

Verse 21 declares why we should give place to God and ties it to the previous exhortations: “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”

1. “The present tense indicates a call for dedicated persistence” (Dunn, 751).
2. Again, what is to direct our course is the pursuit of good.

### *Rationale (12.19b-20)*

Verse 19b cites Deuteronomy 32.35 as proof that vengeance is the Lord’s prerogative. Verse 20 cites Proverbs 25.21-22 (almost exactly from the LXX) to explain the reason.

1. Was Paul referring to a specific act of vengeance, or endorsing a positive response to hostility as opposed to a passively resigned spirit that “leaves it all to God”?
2. What exactly did he mean by “heap burning coals on his head”?
  - a. Is this the judgment God will render to those who afflict his people?<sup>4</sup>
  - b. Is it the positive sense of bringing about a burning shame that leads to repentance (the most often cited interpretation today—Dunn, 750)?

Some things we can say about the text and its background.

1. The spirit of the Sermon on the Mount runs throughout these verses (Matt. 5.38-48; cf. vv. 14, 17, 19, 21).
2. Egyptian wisdom literature (which Proverbs often echoes) gives evidence of a “repentance ritual, in which carrying coals of fire (in a dish) on the head was evidence of the genuineness of repentance” (Dunn, 751).
  - a. This symbol might have been “in the air” in antiquity, a proverbial way of saying, “do good to the evildoer and you might influence him to repent” (like some sayings today that are left over from historical circumstances that have been long forgotten).<sup>5</sup>
  - b. The Jewish Targum (a rabbinic translation or paraphrase of a book or division of the OT) of Proverbs 25.21 adds, “on his head God will hand him over to you” or “will make him your friend.” The idea is that of winning him in a missionary sense (see Dunn, 751).
3. The omission of the last phrase from v. 22, “the Lord will reward you” in Paul’s citation could indicate that he seeks “to avoid any self-seeking in the action advocated. If so, this would confirm that Paul understood it as an expression of outgoing love seeking only good for the enemy in line with v. 14 (Matt 5:44=Luke 6:27)” (Dunn, 751).

4. Taken together, we conclude that Paul intended to teach believers to respond positively to the evil of others, meeting enemies with hospitality and kindness.

### *A Matter of Faith*

1. We are left with an assurance that God will act against those who persecute and curse, but are given no definitive answers about *how* or *when* he will do so.
  - a. Since sins have consequences (Rom. 1.24, 26, 28), and God has at times intervened providentially to punish evildoers (e.g., Dan 4.28-37; Hab. 1.1-2.4), his vengeance might at times be seen in contemporary human events.
  - b. Romans 13.4-5 teaches that government is a divine agent of vengeance.
  - c. The martyrs of Revelation 6.9-10 serve to caution us that his vengeance may not be brought to bear until a later time.
2. Where does that leave us?
  - a. We trust that God will keep his word.
  - b. We concern ourselves with godly retaliation: we do good, refusing to stoop to the level of the evildoers who persecute and curse.
  - c. We hold to the hope derived from the resurrection: Jesus did good, was executed, but was vindicated (1 Tim. 3.16; Phil. 2.8-11; cf. Rom. 8.31-34).
3. So, let's test ourselves in light of the call to living-sacrifice transformation.
  - a. Do we leave vengeance to God, or try to take on his prerogatives?
  - b. Do we retaliate with good or succumb to the temptation to pay back?
  - c. Do we *retaliate* with good or just passively endure the evil?

September 15, 2013  
revised October 12, 2018  
[www.davidanguish.com](http://www.davidanguish.com)

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Landon Saunders, "Heart Overflowing: Command the Joy that Moves Ahead No Matter What," *The Heart of the Fighter*, <http://www.heartbeatlife.org/resource/audio/secular-audio/heart-of-the-fighter>. Accessed September 12, 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Notice the footnote in the ESV for the phrase "leave it" in v. 19. Literally, as in the note, the words are "give place" (δότε τόπον, *dote topon*) (see also KJV, ASV, NET). In my view, "give place" is preferred, not just because it more literally translates the words, but because of the ambiguity of the phrase "leave it to God." While the context shows that Paul was not calling for a passivity that sits still while evil runs amok (and over us), some take the words "leave it to" to mean that. "Give place" is better to help us avoid this misunderstanding.

<sup>3</sup> James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 9-16*, Word Biblical Commentary 38B (Dallas: Word Books, Publisher, 1988), 749. Dunn goes on to point to a communal application of v. 19, noting that, while the threat of an uprising may have seemed remote in Rome where the church struggled, the activities of the Zealots in Palestine might have served as a warning "of how an oppressed people or persecuted minority might turn to acts of revenge, . . ."

<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., the note on this verse in the *ESV Study Bible* where the writer argues that the figure of burning coals was often used in the OT to refer to God's judgment (citing 2 Sam. 22.13; Ps. 11.6; 18.8, 12-13; 140.10).

<sup>5</sup> For example, a high school friend used to say, "You're not worth a continental." I doubt he was aware of the origin of the term in the issuing of paper money by the Continental Congress during the American Revolution. As one web site summarizes: "This 1776 note is typical of the paper money issued by the Continental Congress to pay for the costs of the American Revolution. Due to over-issue and lack of confidence in the government, the notes were soon nearly worthless--'not worth a continental.' Eventually, Congress redeemed them at 1/100th of their original value in bonds, which did not mature until 1811" (<http://historywired.si.edu/object.cfm?ID=437>, accessed September 12, 2013).