

THE ROAD OF THE RIGHTEOUS

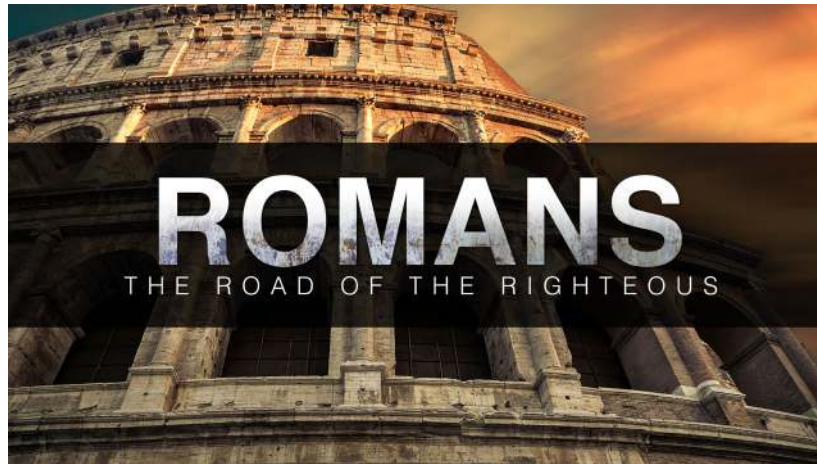
Expositional Study Of Romans

Romans 12:17-21

Written By

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As we conclude our study of Romans chapter 12, which is the first of four closing chapters telling believers who are justified by faith in Jesus who to live, we would be wise to remember Paul's opening command to this highly practical and pivotal passage.

¹ Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, *which is* your spiritual service of worship. ² And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.

In order to mature in the faith, we, as Christians, must live out the essence of the meaning of the word. We must be "little Christs." How do we reflect Him and His holy image? We submit daily to the commands Paul built into these verses.

One, daily we must see our lives as His lives, meaning we must make radical sacrifices to put His character and His example of living and thinking in the place of ours. Question, what have you sacrificed as we have moved through these penetrating, powerful verses? What godless thing or way have given up so holiness can shine through? Two, daily we must work hard at not conforming to this evil, wicked ways of this old world. Question, where have you stopped mirroring the world around you? Three, daily we must allow our minds to be transformed in His mind by shunning sinful ways and filling our minds with His thoughts and His ways. Question, what about your mind, your thinking is completely different than when we began an analysis of Paul's words here? To live in this way is to move on to spiritual maturity. Are you moving forward?

To strive for spiritual growth involves an understanding and application of how Paul's opening commands work out in our lives. From verses 9 to the end of the chapter, the wise apostle demonstrates, by way of divinely inspired commands, just exactly where need to give perpetual time and attention to in order to maximize that coveted growth. As we have seen, a main idea permeates this practical passage.

Radical Righteousness Must Permeate Our Sacred And Secular Lives (Rom. 12:9-21)

A mature Christian is, by definition, Christlike in every area of his life. He is not just godly at church but is the same wherever life finds him. A mature Christian is, by definition, one who is always paying strict attention to the commands Paul details here for he knows these lead to maturation. Are you keeping your eyes on these verses daily? Are you making appreciable movement toward holiness? So far, we have studied fourteen concepts. You might do well to type them out on a card, laminate it, and place it on the dashboard of your car so you remember who you are supposed to be in Christ:

- Be Radically Righteous With Love (Rom. 12:9)
- Be Radically Righteous Toward Evil (Rom. 12:9)
- Be Radically Righteous Toward Good (Rom. 12:9)
- Be Radically Righteous Toward Loving The Family (Rom. 12:10)
- Be Radically Righteous Toward Honoring Family Members (Rom. 12:10)
- Be Radically Righteous Toward How You Function (Rom. 12:11)
- Be Radically Righteous Concerning Hope (Rom. 12:12a)
- Be Radically Righteous Concerning Tribulation (Rom. 12:12b)
- Be Radically Righteous By Means of Persistent Prayer (Rom. 12:12c)
- Be Radically Righteous Concerning Caring For Christians (Rom. 12:13)
- Be Radical When It Comes to Hospitality (Rom. 12:13)
- Be Radically Righteous Toward Enemies Of The Faith (Rom. 12:14)
- Be Radically Righteous Toward Those Who Face Joy And/Or Sorrow (Rom. 14:15)
- Be Radically Righteous By Being Low Minded Not High Minded (Rom. 12:16)

Admit it. Having re-read these commands, it is easy to see why we must always pay attention to them. We struggle with the flesh (Rom. 6-7) . . . with the Spirit's help, of course, and just when we have supposedly mastered one area, like being more hospitable (Rom. 12:13), we bite the proverbial dust when it comes to being humble as opposed to haughty (Rom. 12:16). When this occurs, we reconnoiter and re-position ourselves to gain victory in the area in question. This process is spiritual maturation, pure and simple.

Paul closes out this convicting, challenging chapter with command number fourteen, which, in turn, is broken down into similar concepts needing our time and attention. Don't expect this final command to be any easier than the others for it touches at the most personal level. Here, Paul presents a counter-culture command to beat all commands for life-change:

Be Radically Righteous Toward Those Who Mistreat You (Rom. 12:17-21)

One thing is certain in our ever-darkening, godless culture: it is covertly and overtly opposed to Christ and Christian thinking. Why is this the case? Jesus's answer is right on target:

¹⁸ If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before *it hated* you. ¹⁹ If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. ²⁰ Remember the word that I said to you, 'A slave is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you; if they kept My word, they will keep yours also. ²¹ But all these things they will do to you for My name's sake, because they do not know the One who sent Me (John 15).

The world hated Christ because He stood in their sinful way, He showed them their sin, He challenged their false ways and erroneous thinking, He exposed their clever arguments to prop up their vacuous religiosity and morality, and He called them sinners and challenged them to turn to Him for salvation (John 5:24-25). Because you are related to Him, you will, by means of that intimate familial association be hated and opposed to.

- Refuse to bake a cake for a same-sex couple who have chosen to live a sexually deviant life from what God created and established you are immediately called names and sued.
- Verbally oppose Islam being taught to your children in school because it is a religion and immediately you called a racist and a bigot.
- Kindly refuse to photograph a lesbian "commitment ceremony" as Elane Photography did in 2012, and immediately you will be slapped with a hefty fine for your hateful action, even though you adhering to God's prescribed model for what constitutes a true marriage.
- Attempt to be a Christian and a Constitutionalist at Yale Law School, like Aaron Haviland, a graduate of the United States Naval Academy and the University of Cambridge and a Marine veteran, and you will possibly face verbal harassment and cyber-bullying from your "law-minded" school and students.¹

You get the drill. Seek to live a Christian life in the secular culture and you are hated and opposed at an ever increasing and alarming rate. When, not if, you are mistreated for your faith, what should you do, how should you respond? Yeah, what would Jesus do? Paul's imperatival words in the ensuing verses of this inspired section of Scripture tell us exactly how to live, how to navigate the turbulent, unpredictable white-capped seas.

First, decide right now to never go tit for tat with anyone . . . saint or sinner . . . who has done you dirty. Never. Paul's words could not be any clearer:

¹ Aaron Haviland, "I Thought I Could Be a Christian and Constitutionalist At Yale Law School. I Was Wrong," *The Federalist*, March 4, 2019, accessed November 7, 2019: <https://thefederalist.com/2019/03/04/thought-christian-constitutionalist-yale-law-school-wrong/>.

¹⁷ Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men.

Gulp. Tough words, would you not agree? Tough because we are naturally wired to get even when evil is leveled against us. This is, however, not how we are to respond. In the Greek Paul employs a play on words to drive home how we should respond. “Evil” is *kakos* (κακός) while “right” is *kalos* (καλός). Interesting. Sometime the difference between incorrect and correct behavior is just a slight change in how you approach things. How will you respond when you experience an evil situation? Will you be *kakos* or *kalos*?

Paul’s words, of course, are derived directly from Jesus’ s opening sermon:

³⁸ You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.'³⁹ But I say to you, do not resist him who is evil; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn to him the other also (Matt. 5).

What God had given Israel as a guideline for civil justice, the Pharisees turned into a guideline for personal revenge. The Torah mandated justice should be equitable and fair. If a tooth was lost in a fight, a tooth could be removed, as it were, from the perpetrator (Ex. 21:24; Lev. 20:20; Deut. 19:21). You could not, however, go beyond this, but that is what the Pharisees did. They purposefully loosened what God had tightened so they could sin and feel good about it. Such are the ways of godless and lawless sinners. They are always thinking of clever ways to twist and distort laws so they can expand their lawlessness under the guise of law.

Was Jesus, along with Paul, saying we cannot stand up for what is right and holy? No. Was Jesus, along with Paul, saying we cannot oppose evil? No. Jesus resisted evil on many occasions . . . like when He cleared the temple of the greedy moneychangers (Matt. 21:12; John 2:15) and when He verbally exposed the Pharisees for their tainted, godless view of the Law (Matt. 24). Paul wasted no time staring down evil either. Whether he opposed false teachers in Galatia (Gal. 1), or a sex addict in Corinth (1 Cor. 5), Paul resisted evil. What neither man did, however, was to return evil with evil, ever . . . never. Why? The civil society is entrusted with the divine obligation, as we shall see in Romans 13, with establishing justice, and one day, as Paul will demonstrate in the ensuing verses of chapter 12, God will settle all accounts before His holy throne. In the meantime, we are not to personally work to settle old scores ever . . . never.

Stop and take a hard, honest look at your life ask yourself some timely questions:

- Have I been mistreated? If so, go to the second question.
- Am I plotting on getting back at the person in question in a godless manner? Am I purposefully setting up things to undermine someone who has undermined me at work? Am I arduously working to stall someone else’s career because they stalled mine? Am I lacing a tweet with words that would make a Marine DI blush because a person launched a profanity laced tirade for little to no reason?

Remember, there is nothing wrong with standing for that which is just and right. There is, conversely, everything wrong with combatting evil with more evil. Are you guilty? If so, realize this leads to spiritual immaturity, not maturity. Perhaps you need to make some course corrections soon.

On the positive side, maturing believers are to do that which noble in all situations.

¹⁷ Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men.

I like the way the New American Bible translates this clause:

¹⁷ Do not repay anyone evil for evil; be concerned for what is noble in the sight of all (Rom. 12).

That is good advice. When you are wronged and are tempted to act (re-act) in an evil, godless fashion, you need to stop and ask yourself: “What is noble and right in this scenario?” Ask and God will show you if you will listen.

What questions might you pose?

- Is it noble to send a kind email in response to a biting, cutting one?
- Is it noble to step into an explosive family argument and ask if I can stop the inquisition and pray?
- Is it noble to *not* advise and push my attorney to make life miserable for my ex because he/she has recently made my life miserable?
- Is it noble to hug a person who has wronged me when I bump into them at Wall-Mart?
- Is it noble to pay, again, for counseling for a child who continually makes our marriage a warzone by going off the proverbial rails?
- Is it noble to be obedient to a father who rides me hard about my grades?

Pose the question and expect a quick answer. Then, apply the radical answer and you will not only grow up on the faith, you will show the person in question what being Christlike really means.

Second, always strive to be peaceful but do not be clueless about carnal people (Rom. 12: 18). I have learned the importance of this command on the anvil of thirty-three years of pastoral ministry.

¹⁸ If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men. (Rom. 12).

As a young pastor of a church plant, I thought I could be at peace with everyone who attended the growing church. How naïve I was. Chalk my thinking up to youthful enthusiasm and excitement. I quickly learned why Paul made this command highly conditional.

Sometimes, no matter what you do to bring peace to a situation or relationship, you cannot reach a point of peace. Why? Let me count a few of the reasons. because the other person is not a peacemaker, even though they may say they are.

- Sometimes people *are* evil and will not repent of their evil and sin because they enjoy it. Some of the folks in the Corinthian church validate this point in how they treated their church planter, Paul.



- Sometimes people enjoy creating mayhem or stirring the pot wherever they go. Yes, some people think it is their spiritual gift to pass around information/disinformation to get people mad and upset at each other.
- Sometimes people live for rhetoric and not reason, thinking that employing biting, mean-spirited words is an argument. Try reasoning with them and you will never leave the batter's box. Been there. Done that.
- Sometimes people, like the Pharisees, will not, under any circumstances, abandon their vacuous, vicious viewpoint no matter what the facts say.
- Sometimes small-minded, low self-esteem people live to tear you down in order to build themselves up.



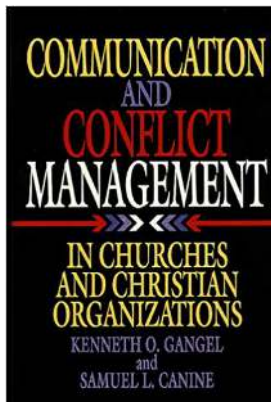
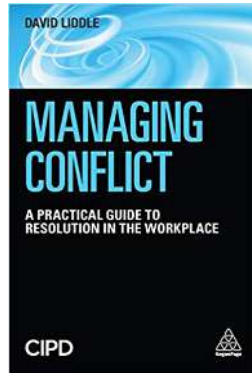
- Sometimes people live to set you up so they can create a stir. Once a lady called me on the phone and said, "Pastor, I'm working on the committee for our spaghetti dinner, and I was wondering what type of tablecloths you wanted for the event." At the time, I was knee deep

in a sermon, so I quickly said, "When I think of an Italian dinner, I think of red and white checkered cloths." "Thanks," she replied and then she hung up. With fifteen minutes I received another call from another committee member, "Pastor, I'm on the spaghetti dinner committee, and I just heard you chose checkered clothes when we wanted white ones. How could you do that?" I had been set up by a woman who loved to create battle scenes between unsuspecting people.

I could go on, but I won't. I'm sure you get the point: Sometimes people do mean things to us, and we are responsible for making things right and creating peace (Eph. 4:3). However, we must be wise as serpents and meek as doves and understand there are some people we can never live peaceably with because they are troublemakers usually masquerading as peacemakers.

What should we do when we encounter them? Here are a few ideas I have employed over the years.

- *Do all you can to establish peace.* If you have to meet with them more than once, do it. Preferably have others with you to make sure there is a high level of accountability during and after the conversation.

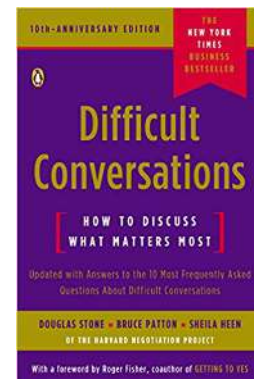


- Do study the art of conflict management. I have many times, and there is always room for improvement. Here are a few titles you might find helpful:

- Do tie your spiritual little tree off to a bigger spiritual tree. When I faced a wide array of mean-spirited people as a young church planter, I

asked Dr. Bill Yeager, a man who had pastored the 5,000 member First Baptist Church for thirty years in Modesto, CA, to be my battle-buddy. This former Air Force B-17 tail-gunner and seasoned retired pastor pour his life and experience into my life. He, more than anyone else in my life, showed me how to handle conflict in a godly, biblical fashion, and for that I am deeply grateful. He also showed me how to differentiate between sheep and goats, and how to act accordingly. Who is your battle-buddy?

- Do confront the person in question with the facts. If it is a Christian brother, Christ's words are highly instructive:



¹⁵ And if your brother sins, go and reprove him in private; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. ¹⁶ But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed. ¹⁷ And if he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax-gatherer (Matt. 18).

Sound, rubber-meets-the-road counsel. The goal is restoration, but if the person persists in their pernicious position, you are to pull away from them. A lady years ago yelled and cursed Liz in front of a number of parishioners for not saving her a seat at a wedding reception. Liz later encountered the woman in the bathroom and she continued to deride and curse Liz for not thinking about her. Liz responded that she was sorry, but that she had to care for the entire church, not just one person. Eventually, we had to pull away from that couple because they were so acidic. Tragic.

- Do show them love and compassion when given the opportunity. The couple I just mentioned years later experienced a sad tragedy. The woman's sister, whom I knew, was killed in a freak car accident north of our home. When we found out about it, our hearts went out to our former friend because Liz has lost her twin sister at thirty-three. Later, we found out through friends that the couple in question wanted to talk with us but didn't know if we would talk to them. When we learned they would be attending a public dinner event, we attended as well and made sure we connected with our former friends. No, we never

became best friends again because the woman in question never gave up her unfriendly ways. We did, however, step out in total faith and put ourselves out there with a goal of showing them the love of Christ at a horrible time in their lives.

- *Do realize that at times and after much effort you cannot fix the situation because it is not fixable.* When is it not fixable? It is not fixable when they do not want to admit sin, say they are sorry, or quit spreading disinformation around about you. It is not fixable when they continue to attack you for no reason. It is not fixable when they will not listen to your side of the story. It is not fixable when they will not listen to cold, hard facts from others. When you get to this point, then realize it might be time to move on, to de-friend them, to stop calling them, and so on. No, I did not say you should be vindictive and mean-spirited toward them. That would be sin. *Backing up emotionally is just wise in some cases*, but at the end of the day, you should *always* be ready to build a bridge to them if the opportunity presents itself.

Don't you just love Paul? He could be theologically heady, as he was in Romans 1-11, and, then, he could turn and be so down-to-earth and practical. I pray His words in this insightful, highly meaningful verse will help you move to a place of peace and health in your sacred and secular life, especially where you have encountered tough troublemakers.

As you might guess, Paul's advice about how to respond when (not if) we are wronged contains more wisdom for us to dig into:

Third, keep a proper, biblical perspective on vengeance (Rom. 12:19). What is God's perspective?

¹⁹ Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, "VENGEANCE IS MINE, I WILL REPAY," says the Lord.



Paul quotes here from Proverbs 25:21-22 and applies them to kingdom people in the Age of Grace. The concept of God's followers not being vengeful is woven through the Old Testament Torah and the New Testament. In any terrible, tragic, or twisted situation we are to leave vengeance to God, because He will be holy and just when He brings judgment . . . and He will do this one day as we learn from the Bible (Rom. 2:5, 8; 1 Thess. 1:10; 2:16; 5:9; Rev. 20:7ff). Paul's words even apply directly to believers who will, at the Bema Seat of Christ,

give account for how well they ran the spiritual race:

¹⁰ But you, why do you judge your brother? Or you again, why do you regard your brother with contempt? For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of God (Rom. 14).

God's justice will be applicable to *all mankind*. No one will escape it or get a pass because of who they knew, who they were, how many prestigious titles they held, how educated they were, who

they were related to, or how much money they had. God is, as Peter said, “no respecter of persons” (Acts 10:34). God is also faithful to His Word, and because of this He will one day bring swift, sure, and terrible judgment to those who deserve it.

Ostensibly, this means we are not to be the personal arbiters of vengeance. This does not mean the State and the government cannot and should not deal with evildoers, which is the subject, in part, of chapter 13. It does mean believers are prohibited on a personal level from leveling others who have leveled them. These are easy words to speak and hard ones to live out. If you don't believe me, then just listen to Craig Groeshel's life story:

My biggest struggle with bitterness started when my family discovered the awful truth about someone we had trusted in a position of authority over my little sister Most kids in our small town junior high school took at least one class from [a man named] Max on their journey through the sixth grade. To many kids, Max was a favorite teacher—always cutting up, telling jokes, and handing out easy As. To me, he became the object of the deepest bitterness that I've ever known.

Throughout the years, Max developed special relationships with his favorite students. Though none of us were aware of it at the time, we discovered years later that all his favorite students "happened" to be cute, young girls. My little sister, whom I treasured and loved, became one of Max's victims

Some studies show that as many as one out of three girls and one in four boys suffer some sort of sexual abuse. Whatever the numbers, this tragedy must crush God's heart. I know it crushed mine as a brother.

I remember trying to absorb the painful truth. How should I respond? Should we track him down? Have him arrested? Beat the life out of him? Make no mistake; I was furious the moment that I heard about his abuse. But the more I thought about it, my anger blossomed into rage. The seeds of bitterness planted in my heart grew to a full-blown briar patch of revenge. I prayed that Max would suffer eternally in hell, and I vowed to make him suffer on earth before facing God's judgment.

My plan for revenge wasn't necessary. To my bittersweet delight, we found that Max was suffering in a hospital, fighting for his life against a crippling disease, muscular dystrophy. I remember thanking God for his justice in giving Max what he deserved.

Most would agree that my bitterness toward Max was justifiable [But] no matter how justifiable my feelings were, in God's eyes my self-righteous hatred was just as sinful as Max's crime. Even writing that statement all these years later remains difficult—how could my desire for justice be considered as sinful as this monster's lustful actions? The vast majority of people would agree that my hate and judgmental rage were more than justified.

In the course of time, however, I learned that bitterness never draws us closer to God. Bitterness is a nonproductive, toxic emotion, usually resulting from resentment over unmet needs I wanted [Max] to suffer [but] I was punishing

no one but myself and those around me who experienced the scalding spillovers of the acid churning inside me.²

Craig learned in the hardness not only the danger and destructive nature and anger and bitterness, but the value of letting God be God and waiting for the day when He brings true justice to the unjust for all eternity. Can you, likewise, mature in the faith by trusting in the living God to help heal your soul of the acid eating away at it?

Fourth, purposefully practice good toward those who wrong you (Rom. 12:20-21). Again, easy to say and hard to do, but not impossible to do if you chose this day to be obedient to God. Paul's words could not be more timely, especially in light of the tough, trying times we live in :

²⁰ But if your enemy is hungry, feed him, and if he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in so doing you will heap burning coals on his head. ²¹ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

How do we overcome the encroaching evil of our morally rudderless day? We overcome it by acts of goodness and love shown to the unlovely, the nasty, the mean-spirited, the hateful, the hypocrites, and the vicious and vindictive. There is no greater time you exemplify and model Jesus, your Lord, than when you chose to live like this.

A story from wore-torn, anti-Christian Iraq gives us the much needed motivational push:



Ghassan Thomas leads one of the few public churches that emerged [in Baghdad] after Saddam Hussein was toppled. His congregation erected a sign on their building that said "Jesus Is the Light of the World," but the church was raided by bandits who left behind a threat on a piece of cardboard. It read: "Jesus is not the light of the world, Allah is, and you have been warned." The note was

signed "The Islamic Shiite Party."

In response, Pastor Ghassan loaded a van with children's gifts and medical supplies—which were in critically short supply following the American invasion—and drove to the headquarters of the Islamic Shiite Party. After presenting the gifts and supplies to the sheikh, Ghassan told the leader, "Christians have love for you, because our God is a God of love." He then asked permission to read from the Bible. Ghassan turned to Jesus' words in John 8, "I am the light of the world." He then showed the cardboard note to the sheikh. The Muslim leaders, astounded by Pastor Thomas's actions, apologized.

² Craig Groeschel, *Soul Detox* (Zondervan, 2012), 92-94.

"This will not happen again," [the sheikh] vowed. "You are my brother. If anyone comes to kill you, it will be my neck first." The sheikh later attended Pastor Thomas's ordination service at the church.

Pastor Ghassan could have loaded a van full of theologically objectionable, but true signs, driven over to the headquarters of the Islamic Shiite Party, and placed them everywhere. But he didn't. He went and ministered to wounded Shiites with medical supplies, coupled with toys for their toy-less children. Love won the day, not hatred. And the light of the world, Jesus, shone just a little brighter that day in the darkened theological world of the Shiites.

As a saint, you will be wrong in the old world. How you respond will determine whether you are really growing up in the faith or not. I pray you will choose to do the right thing for that type of counter-culture living has the potential to not only mature you, but to turn this nation back to God.

So who is God looking for right now? He's looking for the next saint named Ghassan. Is that you?