



## Session 4 – Innovation Not Indignation

# Could You Be “Playing God” and Not Even Know It?

*But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them  
without expecting to get anything back.*

*Then your reward will be great,  
and you will be sons of the Most High,  
because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked.  
Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.*

—Jesus of Nazareth

What do you do when you get the shaft? How do you respond when you get a raw deal? When you're cheated on a business deal? When someone gossips about you and spreads lies that ruin your reputation?

What are you supposed to do when someone wins the award, the race, the trophy, or even the girl, and you know they cheated? We all face situations in life where we've been wronged, cheated, and treated unjustly. But as followers of Christ, how are we to respond?

Now, as if able to read our minds, the Apostle Paul warns us against falling into the temptation of “payback.” This was my first response when Jimmy threatened me on the basketball team in college. After sleepless nights and uncomfortable anger inside me, I soon came to realize the wisdom of Romans 12:17–20.

PAGE 1

*Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.*

*Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for -God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. On the contrary: "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head."*

## Fighting Fire with a Gas-Filled Hose . . . It Just Doesn't Work

This passage launches into our psyche with a strong negative command—"Do not pay anyone evil for evil" or literally "*never* pay back evil for evil." And in case we missed the point in verse 17, notice the command in verse 19: "Do not take revenge my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord." In other words, personal retaliation is a prohibited response for God's people.

Although everything in us wants to "pay back" those who have robbed, cheated, or hurt us, the Spirit of God clearly warns against that behavior. In fact, personal retaliation is like fighting a fire with a hose filled with gas; it only adds fuel to the fire. We may think getting back at the other person will be satisfying, but instead it escalates the conflict and pulls us into the evil itself.

After this command, the second half of verse 17 and verse 18 provide us with two specific ways to deal with people in a fallen world. The first is a preventative measure. It says, "Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody." The phrase *be careful* literally means "take thought of or consider carefully what is right in the eyes of others." The New American Standard Version even translates it as "respect what is right in the eyes of all men."

As Christians, we often set ourselves up for evil by being naive. To take thought beforehand of what is right in the sight of other men helps eliminate many negative situations. We are to be shrewd as serpents but gentle as doves. We cannot ask the world or expect the world to live by our standards or ethics. The world is, in fact, incapable of doing so.

So why are we surprised at selfishness, greed, backstabbing, people not keeping their word, lying, failing to pay, betraying a confidence, or using information that we've shared with them against us? Instead, in our relationships with those outside of Christ, we need to carefully consider what is "right in their eyes." For many, lying or stealing is not a problem unless you get caught. For many, envy, jealousy, or doing whatever it takes to get what you want is simply a way of life.

We are admonished to take careful thought of how others think, realizing everyone acts in a way that makes sense to them. In this way we will find ourselves far less vulnerable to being on the receiving end of evil. We will all experience plenty of evil in our lifetime, but wise Christ-followers can prevent much of it by applying Paul's advice to our lives.

## Our Response Reflects the God We Serve

After giving us some wisdom to prevent evil, verse 18 provides us with a prescriptive measure to reduce conflict in relationships: "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone." Notice that the goal is to be at peace, to live in harmony with all men—believers and unbelievers. Why? Our testimony is more important than our rights. How we respond to injustice and personal attacks is more important than getting our way or proving that we're right. This has been one of the most difficult lessons in my life. I am a "justice junkie." I -don't want to let it go until everyone knows "what really happened and we make it right! Yet in the last few years I have learned the wisdom of the phrase *just let it go*. I found comfort and peace in knowing that God knows, He is just, and in a fallen world even good people do some things to you that make you scratch your head. So, let me encourage you, "Let the little stuff go." Let God handle it. Pass the ball of injustice to Him and let Him play it out as He sees fit.

But, please don't take the above advice as a membership card to become a "Christian doormat." In fact, God gives us ground rules that govern our pursuit of peace in relationships. The first is the phrase *if possible*. It's not always possible when righteousness or ethics or the welfare of others is at stake. We are not to compromise our testimony or the Lord's reputation for the sake of peace. There are times in legal situations or in family relationships when peace simply is not possible. Scripture is not advocating a "peace at any price" mentality. But it does command us to make every effort to bring about peace in our relational sphere of influence.

So the goal even in a crooked, unjust world is to seek to live in peace and harmony with those who live contrary to the truth. But there is another ground rule to consider as we seek to be agents of peace: "As far as it depends on you." It's our responsibility to ensure that antagonism and the fueling of conflict do not come from us for the sake of the Gospel. In some cases conflict is unavoidable, but

make sure you're not the one inciting it. In a world of personal retaliation (road rage and domestic violence) over small things that grow into larger things, God calls us to be peacemakers whenever possible.

As I write this in my office at home, I wonder how many of us know or have relatives who no longer talk to one another because of a quarrel that started many years ago. How many workplace environments have been shattered or business relationships destroyed because evil was returned for evil. How many churches have been wrought with conflict and division rooted in personal retaliation and politics?

It is one thing to intellectually agree that “payback” is wrong, and even ungodly; but it's quite another not to do it. Even if we don't overtly seek to harm the other person, there are lots of ways that we “seek to make them pay” for how they've hurt us.

## Don't Worry—God's Got You Covered

You may be much further along than I am in the faith, but I have a real problem with not retaliating when people deserve it. Few things disturb me more than injustice or evil that is willfully directed my way or toward someone I love. Everything in me wants to make it right and to pay them back now!

What has helped me most in this area are verses 19 and 20 of Romans 12. In verses 19 and 20, God provides us with two compelling reasons why we shouldn't pursue personal retaliation. First, because *you usurp God's authority and role as judge when you take retaliation into your own hands*. “Vengeance is mine,” says the Lord (verse 19). “I am the judge. I will handle this situation.” When you take matters into your own hands, you are taking on a job that God has already committed to do. Notice what it says: “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.” This means God is a God of justice and will judge all men fairly and justly either in this life or in the life to come. He commands us to stay out of the boxing ring of retaliation. He's the One to carry on that fight. Once I realized that God was taking personal responsibility to make sure everyone will get exactly what they deserve—that's when I learned to “let it go.”

The second reason is found in verse 20: *personal retaliation is an ineffective means to accomplish peace*. In other words, it doesn't work. At the end of the day, when I give evil for evil, it's like bad spiritual math—evil simply multiplies! Doing evil to those who have done evil to us always makes matters worse. There is only one remedy to stop evil: “If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.” This is a picture of what King David did with Saul in 2 Kings 6 and in 1 Samuel 24:12 when he spared Saul's life in repayment for Saul seeking to kill him.

Even evil people understand when they're not getting what they deserve. Saul, in this case, was shamed and said to David, “You are more righteous than I . . . you have treated me well, but I have treated you badly” (1 Samuel 24:17).

Saul lifted up his voice and wept. This is a picture of a man who was given good for his evil, and as a result he became aware of his own motives and felt a godly sorrow and shame. In this case, Saul's sorrow was short-lived, but it's clear from the text that God spoke in a powerful way to him through David's compassion and refusal to personally retaliate or give evil for evil.

One of the most misunderstood phrases in Romans 12 is “In doing this [giving good for evil], *you will heap burning coals on his head.*” This is not a picture of being nice to people who were mean to you so God will boil their brains out. The origin of this phrase goes back to an Egyptian ritual in which a man purged his offense by carrying on his head a dish containing burning charcoal on a bed of ashes. When someone realized they were in error, they would take coals from a fire, put them in a pan, put a towel upon their head, and carry the pan throughout the village, declaring they were burning out the bad thinking of the past. In essence, this was an act admitting their wrong and repenting of their past failure.

Loving our enemies—feeding them when they're hungry and giving them a drink when they're thirsty—is the most powerful apologetic on the face of the earth. Loving people who don't deserve to be loved in a way they don't deserve or expect can break through the hardest hearts and demonstrate the reality of the living God like few other things in the entire world.

So let me encourage you to refuse to take matters into your own hands. Refuse to give back evil for evil. Refuse to gossip about the one who has gossiped about you. Refuse to use unethical practices to pay back those who have lied to you or cheated you. Do not take your own revenge, leave room for the wrath of God. The choice is simple: either you decide that you'll handle the

situation and bring about justice or you pass the ball to God and say to Him, “I’m going to let you determine what this person deserves. I’m going to treat them the way that you have treated me even though every fiber in my being wants to pay them back.” Is it easy? Of course not! Does God use this to bring about peace in relationships that have been at odds for years? Absolutely!

I would like you to do some very specific thinking about how this passage applies to you. Think about some ways (even subtle ones) that you have returned evil for evil and need to repent. Ask God to give you creative ideas to express some specific acts of kindness and love to those who absolutely do not deserve it. Like David with Saul, I’d like you to honor the Word of God above your emotional feelings of betrayal and woundedness. As you do, you will experience a grace and a freedom like you have never known. The bitterness and the desire for revenge will dissipate. You can trust that full justice will occur because you have passed the responsibility of vengeance to the One True Judge who knows all aspects of the situation and by His very nature and character must be just.

If we are never to pay back others for what they did wrong, does this mean that we should reward bank robbers and buy steak dinners for felons? What about when we’ve been sold something fraudulently or someone has violated the law? Does this passage teach that we are to refrain from prosecuting them or reporting them to the government? Romans 12 makes it clear that we are never to personally retaliate in our individual relationships; but Romans 13 is equally clear that *God has indeed placed the government and law enforcement to execute justice*. The key difference is Romans 12 addresses personal disputes, while Romans 13 addresses civil disputes and criminal behavior.

The other question that may come to your mind is simply one of practicality. Does this really work? Won’t I become a doormat if I don’t stand up for myself? How in the world can we be both strong and Christ-like when it comes to dealing with the evil aimed at us?

If we feed our enemies when they are hungry and give them something to drink when they are thirsty, good is released in even the vilest of relationships and has great power to transform.

## IT’S YOUR MOVE—Become a Romans 12 Christian

Think—Why does God prohibit personal retaliation or revenge?

**R**eflect—What happens when we pay back evil for evil? When have you done that? What were the results?

**U**nderstand—How can you afford to let “people off the hook”? What is God’s role? His promise?

**S**urrender—Ask God to help you turn over “justice” to Him. Pray this week, fully releasing any desire for “payback” and turn the person who has wronged you and all outcomes over to God.

**T**ake Action—Stop saying, thinking, or hoping bad things about your enemy. Don’t let these words come out of your mouth and refuse to let them linger when they come into your mind.

**M**otivation—Consider memorizing Romans 12:19–21. Read it or say it aloud every time you’re tempted to let vengeful thoughts linger or you catch yourself saying something negative about the person.

**E**ncourage Someone—Think of someone at church, work, or in the neighborhood who has been treated even more unfairly or harshly than you. Ask God to show you a tangible way to provide support to them—a note, a gift, a dinner, or a listening ear.