



When in Romans Do as the Righteous Do

“Avengers Don’t Resemble the Lord”

Romans 12:14-21

Some have likened the church to a hospital for those needing help and healing. A new, popular name for churches utilizes the word “refuge,” which promotes the idea that the church is a spiritual shelter from pursuit, danger, or trouble.

The church is those things, and more. But you can’t simply hole-up in the church. You have to leave it and go back out into the world, into the wilderness. Out there you encounter nonbelievers.

How are we to relate to nonbelievers? In other words, how does all the doctrine we’ve learned thus far in Romans make a difference?

Romans 12:14 Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse.

This presupposes your lot in life is to be persecuted. It will happen in one manner or another. It must happen if you are walking with the Lord. Jesus promised you would be treated by the world the way He was.

That’s why, when you are persecuted, you can rejoice. Someone has noticed you are a Christian!

It should, in fact, seem strange to you if you are not, in some way great or small, being persecuted for your faith.

“Bless” can mean one of two things:

1. It can mean that you give, or return, good words for their bad ones.

2. It can mean you are to pray for them.

One commentator illustrated it by saying,

The child of Adam by nature is a rock which, when struck, brings forth bitter water. But the child of God is a new rock, which, when struck, brings forth sweet water. Thus we will stand in our wilderness surroundings as fountains for Him.

It's a reference to the Old Testament story of the Rock that followed the children of Israel in their wilderness wanderings. When they were thirsty, God commanded Moses to strike the Rock. From it flowed a river of water - enough to satisfy the thirst of a million people and their livestock.

That Rock was Christ. Striking Him brings forth a fountain of compassion, forgiveness, grace and mercy.

Would to God that when struck out of us would flow rivers of living water to those who are desperate for it.

Romans 12:15 Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep.

This is certainly not restricted to nonbelievers, but I do think this section is more about life in the world than it is life in the church.

We can often be or become jealous of nonbelievers. They seem to prosper, undeservedly, while we struggle and suffer. It's hard to rejoice if we are jealous.

If they suffer, we think they deserve it. It's hard to weep for them. We need to overcome that kind of thinking.

Our rejoicing and our weeping with nonbelievers, of course, is to be tempered by what we know to be true. For example, if someone prospers, that's great; but what good does it do to gain the whole world and lose your soul?

Likewise, if someone is suffering, through my tears I can offer them the hope of a relationship with God through Jesus Christ. I have Good News for them.

Romans 12:16 Be of the same mind toward one another. Do not set your mind on high things, but associate with the humble. Do not be wise in your own opinion.

“Be of the same mind” doesn’t mean we must agree with nonbelievers. We must tolerate them but not agree.

Tolerance isn’t accepting everyone’s beliefs and lifestyle. It recognizing and, to an extent if possible, respecting them without accepting them.

There has been a change in the practical definition of tolerance. What some call the ‘new’ tolerance is to say that all beliefs, such as religious ones, and lifestyles must be accepted. The ‘new’ tolerance not only expects us to accept all behaviors, values, and beliefs, but also expects us to approve of them, and in some cases to celebrate them.

The only people who are not tolerated by the ‘new’ tolerance are those who won’t accept anything and everything. Thus Christians especially are expected to tolerate everyone’s beliefs and behaviors but no one need tolerate ours.

We can’t practice the ‘new’ tolerance as believers in the authority of God’s Word. So how are we to “be of the same mind toward one another?”

We do it by seeing the sinner in need of salvation; by going to the root of their problem rather than focusing on its bad fruit. They need to be saved! They need the power that only the Holy Spirit, indwelling them, can provide.

People need to be saved, not merely to change their minds or lifestyles.

“Do not set your mind on high things” means that you should not distinguish between nonbelievers based upon their status or wealth. You shouldn’t prefer the wealthy and powerful. Without ignoring anyone, “associate with the humble,” with the lowly, the overlooked.

Jesus "associated with the humble," and so should we.

"Wise in your own opinion" seems to mean in your own wisdom. As we grow in the Lord, it is typical to think we've figured out some things; that we know how to handle certain issues and situations. Notwithstanding that we *do* grow, it's important to continue to depend upon God, to always walk in the Spirit. It's too easy to become mechanical as we approach life. Too easy to leave our first love.

Romans 12:17 Repay no one evil for evil. Have regard for good things in the sight of all men.

Tit for tat is our natural reaction. BTW: Tit for tat was originally 'tip for tap,' meaning 'blow for blow.' *People began to misquote it and it stuck!*

When people treat you badly, don't return what they deserve. Instead "have regard for good things." The words mean you should consider in advance how you will react and how it will affect others who are watching you. Expect to be treated badly and be you will be ready to yield to the Spirit in your responses.

Romans 12:18 If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men.

You are to do your part to live peaceably. It is not always possible to be at peace with others, but it is always possible for you to do your part.

I'm glad it's qualified by "as much as depends on you." It's not peace at any price. Still, I must work hard at maintaining the peace with nonbelievers. If a person is offended, let it be by the Gospel rather than by my poor representation of it to them.

Romans 12:19 Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay," says the Lord.

The Avengers is in the theaters right now. I'm sure they must save the world from a threat to our survival.

That's not the kind of vengeance Paul was talking about. In chapter thirteen he will point out that governments have the power to wield the sword. We can defend ourselves; we can go to war.

This verse is about our personal relationships. It is about the desire to get even or more with someone who has wronged us. It's about your co-worker or classmate - not a nuclear Iran!

"'Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,' says the Lord." God is perfectly able to deal with your oppressors - and He will, in His own time.

Lenski writes,

God has long ago settled the whole matter about exacting justice from wrongdoers. Not one of them will escape. Perfect justice will be done in every case and will be done perfectly. If any of us interfered, it would be the height of presumption.

David's dealings with King Saul are a good example of this. On more than one occasion David could have killed or ordered the killing of Saul. He knew, however, that the fate of Israel's first king was not in his hands. That judgment belonged to God. David continued to flee, continued to love as a fugitive, until God stepped in and dealt with Saul.

"Give place to wrath" also means "yield to wrath." In other words, **stand by and let man's wrath work!** Endure with patience the wrath of those who do you wrong. God can make the wrath of man to praise Him!

Man's wrath gives God the opportunity to do great deeds. For example, the pharaoh of Egypt refused to free the Hebrew slaves and thus allowed God to work mighty miracles for his people.

Romans 12:20 Therefore "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; If he is thirsty, give him a drink. For in so doing you will heap coals of fire on his head."

While this can be literally true usually those who persecute you are not destitute of food and water. Donald Grey Barnhouse suggests a figurative meaning to this that makes more sense. He compares the feeding of your

enemy to the feeding of a sick child. A sick child, one whose stomach aches, needs a special diet of food and drink to stop the outflow. Just so, your enemy is all tied up in knots in his or her stomach, and is feeling upset in their bowels. Their attack upon you is an evil outflow from a corrupt system. They, too, need a special diet - love. *Only love can clean out their system!*

What's with heaping coals of fire on his head? Here are two possible interpretations of the what the "coals of fire" signify:

1. In ancient times, it was hard to start a fire. Hot embers could be carried from place to place in containers. In some instances, an insulated container may have been carried on the individual's head. (Then he would not be in danger of burns from the rising heat). According to this view, the emphasis would be on the good we are to do, especially when the other person is in need.
2. This statement could also be using the coals to represent pangs of conscience that trouble the evil doer when we do them good rather than harm..

Either way, the context shows us that our goal is to do good to the evildoer - in the hope that he will repent. We want him to become our friend, rather than our enemy.

Romans 12:21 Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

George Washington Carver, once said, "I will never let another man ruin my life by making me hate him." As a believer he would not allow evil to conquer him.

The greatest example I can think of regarding overcoming evil with good would have to be the Lord on the Cross. His words and actions there were such that the Roman Centurion declared, "Surely this was the son of God."

In his commentary on these verses, Dr. J. Vernon McGee wrote,

The non-Christian is not concerned about the doctrine you hold - whether you are a premillennialist or whether you believe in election or free will. However, he does want to know if you are truthful or not [if] you [are] a person that a man can depend upon. Let me illustrate this. Some years ago in Memphis, Tennessee, a Christian handed a man a tract. "What is this?" asked the man. The Christian replied, "It is a tract and I want you to read it." "I don't read," the man replied, "but I will tell you what I will do - I will watch your tracks!" Oh, how accurate that is! The world is watching the tracks that you make, not the tracts you give out.

Dr. McGee wasn't against giving out tracts. It's simply a different way of saying we must *walk the walk* and not just *talk the talk*.

I titled this, "*Avengers Don't Resemble the Lord.*" If we wish to represent Jesus, we must resemble Him.