

## **8-30-2020 SERMON CCI Romans 12: 9-21 Let God Settle the Score**

Am I crazy, or is everyone in America angry right now? I learned this morning that 600 cars and trucks descended on Portland yesterday to disrupt the protesting. You can hear the anger in the videos, the yelling, name-calling from both sides. One young man was shot to death. In Kenosha, members of Riot Kitchen, a Seattle group who provides vegan food to protesters, were taken from their vehicles and driven away in unmarked vans. Two young men were killed in Kenosha last week by another young man angry at the protesting. Anger everywhere. I have friends on who have been unfriended on FB over disagreements about current events. I've been told that all Democrats are going to hell! It's tempting to respond in kind. I was involved in a Facebook conversation last week. There was disagreement but it was fairly neutral in tone. But then came the insulting comment, then another one that I just had to answer. And I wrote back something snide, a real "Gotcha" response. Responding in kind when we know we're right can feel so righteous. So how is a Christian to respond?

Scruples is a word we don't use as much anymore, "I have my scruples and I'm going to stand on them." People use such a phrase when they're getting ready to stand against someone. I've always assumed "scruples" meant "principles." To be scrupulous is to be concerned with what is honest and right. Interestingly, the word, scruple, comes from a Latin word meaning "a small, sharp stone." The phrase "to stand on your scruples" comes from the idea of being bothered by the nuisance of a small, sharp stone in your shoe.

That small stone in your shoe may feel uncomfortable, but you stand there anyway. "Standing on your scruples" means to stand firm. It also implies--because of that little stone--that we are going to stand with the sensitivity of tender feet that makes us cautious about being so sure we're right. Jesus taught a kind of tender-feet way of walking... not just stubbornly tromping through life believing that ours is the only view that counts. We explored some of Jesus' tender feet teachings recently in the Sermon on the Mount with its eye-opening teachings on anger, divorce,

adultery, making oaths, and more; Jesus' teachings run counter to our normal impulses and encourage us to look deeper.

The apostle Paul laid out a whole set of scruples in today's scripture reading --little sharp stones in the shoes of Christian people that encourage us to walk with sensitivity.

- Let love be genuine.
- Hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good.
- Love one another with mutual affection.
- Outdo one another in showing honor.
- Do not lag (or be lazy) in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord.
- Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer.
- Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

Each scruple comes with a small stone in the shoes, because loving and hating the right things takes sensitivity and can bring pain, especially inside families. Honoring others means we may have to look past some stuff to see what's honorable, even when no one honors us. Rejoicing in hope, that's not too hard, but being patient when we're suffering, there's a sharp humbling stone, and persevering in prayer over a long time, that stone can make us limp and even want to kick our shoes of faith off. These small stones make us more sensitive to others and bring a balance to how we speak and act.

Then Paul adds the hardest scruple about blessing our enemies. Listen to it again:

*<sup>14</sup> Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. <sup>15</sup> Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. <sup>16</sup> Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. <sup>17</sup> Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. <sup>18</sup> If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.*

*<sup>19</sup> Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." <sup>20</sup> No, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them*

*something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.”*<sup>21</sup> *Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*

Paul effectively rules out any kind of personal vengeance. It's forbidden. Paul doesn't even allow us to just have nothing more to do with such a person again, to write them off. Instead, Paul says to actively bless our enemies with kindness.

Bless our enemies? Is Paul just naïve? No, Paul just places the burden of who is allowed to carry out revenge exclusively in the hands of God- not ours. Both the Old Testament prophets and Jesus agree. "Vengeance is mine," says the Lord. All of them say God will settle scores on the day when all things will be made right. The score is not to be settled by human beings screaming for revenge. Only God has that responsibility- and the wisdom to distinguish revenge from justice.

Rev. Peter Marty adds an interesting kicker to letting God settle the score. He writes, "If everything about you and me and our lives belongs to Christ... then not only is revenge not our right or our possession to keep ... but even the wrongs we suffer do not belong to us. We don't get to hold onto hurts and wrongs.... They are not ours to keep."<sup>1</sup> Wow. All those wrongs we cling to while we stand on our scruples- they belong to Christ, not us, because he already paid for them on the cross.

So how are we to respond to an enemy, someone who makes our lives miserable? Last week Rob and I took some homemade blueberry bread as a thank you to a neighbor who watered our garden while we were in California. He was good to us and we returned the favor. Paul is essentially saying to do the same for those who aren't good to us. Do unto them as we would have them do unto us. Why? Because giving back the evil or hate we have received never stops evil or hate; it just adds to the evil or hate and stirs up more. Only the goodness of love overcomes evil. Our love is to be genuine- not partial to only those who always treat us right. Overcoming evil may require us to separate from an enemy to prevent real harm, but that still doesn't allow us to hate them.

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<sup>1</sup> Rev. Peter Marty, [https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cdf2002e2d/trusting\\_god\\_to\\_settle\\_scores](https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cdf2002e2d/trusting_god_to_settle_scores). Downloaded 8-29-2020.

And what's up with heaping hot coals on their heads? At first look, it sounds like we do get a little vengeance. "How do you like them coals, you creep!" Whatever this proverb means, Paul makes it very clear that it's not vengeance. Some commentators believe the hot coals mean letting enemies feel guilty, feel a little heat from our kindness so they regret what they've done and repent. Another way to look at it is to recognize how important coals were in that day for cooking and heat. People didn't put their coals out like we do when camping; they kept some coals burning for the next meal. When people needed to transport hot coals from one place to another, they would carry them in baskets on their heads. So heaping hot coals on an enemy's head was providing something your enemy needed. Overcoming their evil with good behavior back.

So how do we respond in a world where political differences turn into hate, protests against injustice turn into looting and violence, and then you add a weapon, and lives are destroyed? Paul began saying let genuine love be our guide. Even for people who treat us as enemies. It's time for Republicans and Democrats who are Christians to act like it. To hate evil, not the other party. And even when we're right, to resist the desire to play "Gotcha!" You should be wondering about my snide Facebook post right now. It wasn't 5 minutes after I posted it that Paul's words began to eat at me. I had used words like burning hot coals to insult, not serve. And I quickly posted my apology because as a Christian, I gave up the right to play, "Gotcha!" Friends, we are called to hate what is evil without hating the person who said, did, or wrote the evil. Hard as it is, to do whatever is within our power to live at peace with everyone- even enemies- even when those small stones in our shoes really hurt. Paul understood that peace is not always within our power. But that's not the time to just clam up as though silence ever kept peace; nor is it the time to retaliate even if it is our right. Imagine the difference in Portland yesterday if the protesters had chosen to stand aside and just let the trucks roll past in peace, had refused to give them the fight the truckers came for? It's time to be examples of genuine love and tender feet, and leave it to God to settle the score in God's time and God's way. Our nation needs us.