



Session 2 - Healing Not Hostility

Will You Let Christ Heal You?

For if you forgive men when they sin against you,
your heavenly Father will also forgive you.
But if you do not forgive men their sins,
your Father will not forgive your sins.

—*Jesus of Nazareth*

As my friend opened the Bible and read aloud Romans 12:14–21, I listened quietly and I shook my head back and forth. The words did not make any sense to me. They certainly weren't anything that I wanted to do or thought would be of any help. Where is the justice? Where is the part where God swoops in and protects me and saves me from this evil man? What does it mean to bless those who persecute you, to bless and curse not? To be honest, I didn't want to curse Jimmy, I wanted to kill him.

Many of you may feel the same way right now. For others, this whole discussion may seem a lot like someone ripping a scab off an old wound. But let me assure you that God's solution is powerful and effective. When you begin to understand and act on this truth, you will experience firsthand the power of good for evil.

So let's take a look at this passage together and learn the first steps toward overcoming evil with good. I've written out this passage in a way that helps you see the structure and the meaning of

the text:

Two Commands and a Warning

Positive Command (vv. 14–16)

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep. Be of the same mind toward one another; do not be haughty in mind, but associate with the lowly. Do not be wise in your own estimation.

Negative Command (vv. 17–20)

Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men. If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men. 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. “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.”

Warning (v. 21)

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Notice that this passage is divided into two major commands—a positive command (verses 14–16) followed by a negative command (verses 17–20). Then verse 21 summarizes it all in the form of a final warning and application of this entire passage.

The positive command—“*Bless those who persecute you*”—is the overarching theme of the entire section. In verse 14, we will learn what it means to “bless and not curse.” In verse 15, we will learn specifically how to bless those who’ve done evil to us. And in verse 16, we are warned to guard our perception of ourselves when we are dealing with evil people who do evil things. Under the right

circumstances, we can also become the authors of evil in the lives of others if we are not careful. Evil has an amazing ability to latch on to even innocent parties, when our hurt and wounds cry out for “payback” and justice.

When my friend read this passage out loud, I didn’t know what it meant. I don’t use the word *bless* or *curse* very often, so I was unclear on what it meant to bless or curse someone. Since that time, I’ve done some research that will help us understand exactly what God is saying in this passage. “To bless” someone literally means to wish someone well, to desire God’s favor and blessing upon their lives. By contrast, “to curse” means to pray against, to call down doom, to wish for their disaster, failure, and misfortune. This passage was commanding just the opposite of what I was doing. I was cursing the one who was persecuting me.

I have to admit (being a new Christian at that time) that this command made no sense to me at all. Why should I bless someone who had been so mean and unkind to me? Why should I care, let alone be kind to someone who verbally abused me, embarrassed me, and even threatened my life? How does this command “to bless” overcome evil, and why should I even consider doing it?

It was then that I was directed to the most radical words ever uttered on the face of the earth. They were uttered by a rabbi who is considered to be the greatest teacher of all time and by all accounts the greatest revolutionary in human history. And what he said to his first group of followers who were at the time being persecuted by the Roman government as well as by the religious leaders of their time stopped me in my tracks:

You have heard that it was said, “Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.” But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

—Jesus of Nazareth in Matthew 5:43–48 NIV

It was then that I realized that the Apostle Paul was merely applying for the church in Rome the very words of Jesus. Jesus taught His followers exactly how to respond to the evil aimed at them. And contrary to the popular teaching of his day, Jesus gave radical instructions that He would not

only teach, but later model for them by dying for His enemies on the cross—conquering evil, sin, and death once and for all.

Jesus is calling us to respond to the evil aimed at us in the same way that He did. Look at the two verbs in the passage above in Matthew 5:44—*love* your enemies, *pray* for those who persecute you, so that you will be “sons of the Most High.” “Sons of the Most High” translates a Hebrew expression that denotes likeness. In other words, when we love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us, we take on family likeness. We mimic God and imitate the action of Jesus when we do to our enemies what Jesus did to His. He solidifies this argument with the next phrase, reminding us that God acts this way all the time. He causes it to rain on both the evil and the good. Jesus then challenges His followers and us today to live differently from the pagans and the unbelievers, who befriend one another and love only those who love them.

How Do We Really “Bless” Our Enemies?

But how does this work? What is the first step in blessing those who have persecuted or are persecuting us? Inherent in the word *bless* is the desire for the salvation of that person. No matter what they’ve done or how badly they have hurt or abused us, we are commanded to bless them. This begins with an honest desire for God to forgive their sins. Before we can ever hope to love our enemies, we must start by willfully choosing to forgive them. We must forgive them in the same way that God has forgiven us. Jesus’ final command in Matthew 5:48 is that we “be perfect” (the word means spiritually mature—it’s the Greek word *teleos*, meaning to fulfill your God-given design) even as our heavenly Father is perfect.

To be quite honest, this is where many of us get stuck. The thought of forgiving the person who has done such evil against us seems repulsive and impossible. We confuse the *feeling* of forgiving with the *action* of forgiving someone. We unwisely and wrongly believe that to forgive someone is to “let them off the hook” and therefore justice will never be served. Someone has pointed out that those who refuse to forgive are like those drinking the poison of their own vengeance, hoping it will make the other person sick.²

But bitterness and hatred are like a cancer to our soul. When we refuse to forgive a person,

the one we are hurting the most is ourselves. Yet no matter how many verses we hear about forgiveness or how many appeals are made to our logic, many of us simply refuse to let go of the wounds of the past by forgiving the one who inflicted them. I know, I've been there and I've done it! I believe much of our reluctance is rooted in a warped understanding of what it means to forgive someone and a lack of knowledge of exactly how to do it.

So let me explain to you what the Bible means when it says we are to forgive. Forgiveness is a three-stage process. Or for you language lovers out there, there are three verb forms of forgiveness.

Stage 1—"to forgive"—is a choice; an act of the will. You do not need to feel like forgiving someone to do it. You do need to choose to release any desire for retribution and to ask God to treat the offending person in the same way God has treated you—with mercy.

Stage 2—"forgiving"—is a process whereby your choice to forgive begins over time to align with your emotions. This process sometimes takes months or even years. On one particular occasion when I was severely betrayed, I chose to forgive the person in a deliberate act of will and wrote the date and time in my journal. However, a few days later I heard more information about this person's false accusations and my emotions began to spin out of control. I had already forgiven him of his sin, but this new information ripped off the scab of healing that had begun in my heart. There was no new sin, but the issue was brought again to my conscious mind and stirred up emotions of anger and bitterness.

This is where many Christians get caught in a vicious cycle. They either assume they have never really forgiven the person because the same emotions rise to the surface on occasion, or the repeated surfacing of such issues causes so much pain that they go into denial and bury their bitterness. Unconsciously they assume that genuine forgiveness is not possible in their particular situation and no final resolution ever occurs.

So how does this process of "forgiving" actually work? Did you notice that Jesus tells us to love our enemies and to pray for those who persecute us, while Paul tells us twice in Romans 12:14 to *bless* those who persecute us and to *bless* and not curse. "To bless" someone can be likened to a type of prayer, and Jesus commands us directly to pray for those who have persecuted us.

The key to stage two—"forgiving"—is prayer. In the situation I alluded to earlier of being betrayed, I vowed in my heart to begin praying for this person daily. My early prayers were ones of asking God to give him what he deserved, show him the error of his ways, and cause him to repent.

As time went on, the Spirit of God began to remind me of how merciful and kind He has been with me despite the evil in my heart and the things I have done. Although it was slow in coming, I eventually began to pray that God would bless the person's life, his marriage, his children, and his ministry. I made it a habit never to take the Lord's Supper until I had thoroughly and from the heart sought God's blessing on behalf of this brother.

About a year later a mutual friend visited this particular person in another state and brought back a positive report. Not knowing the depth of the betrayal that I had endured, he assumed I would be happy about the encouraging news. The initial reaction in my heart was anything but joy, but I quickly put a "Christian smile on my face" and told him how good it was to hear that this man was doing well. My first reaction told me that I was still in stage two—"forgiving." My reaction revealed that I still had subtle desires for his downfall and for justice to be meted out to him. I had forgiven him—stage one, "the choice"—but the "forgiving process" was not yet complete.

It wasn't until another eighteen months had passed (and I continued praying through this time) that through a different set of circumstances, I heard yet another positive report about this brother just minutes before I was about to preach a message at my home church. Without hesitation and without thinking, my immediate response was joy. After praying for over two years, stage two had been completed and stage three had begun!

Stage 3—"forgiven"—the Spirit of God aligns your choice to obey God in forgiving with the emotional experience of feeling genuine joy when blessings occur in that person's life. It was not an easy process and I must confess that this was certainly not a onetime experience. I have had to practice these three stages of forgiveness in many situations over the years. But through this experience, I learned the three verb forms of forgiveness and experienced the peace and freedom that comes when we understand and apply genuine forgiveness.

I learned to bless my persecutor by praying for him and the person set free was *me*. So, how about you? Would you be willing to take a few minutes right now to ask yourself a few questions so you can begin your journey to freedom and peace?

- Who in your life do you need to forgive?
- What stage of the forgiveness process are you in?

- What lie have you believed about how forgiveness works that has held you captive?

IT'S YOUR MOVE—Become a Romans 12 Christian

I know these are very heavy questions. I encourage you to talk with a trusted friend or counselor (especially in cases of abuse) in order to start the journey of blessing those who have persecuted you. Don't let their evil infiltrate your heart.

Think—What does it mean to bless your enemy in this passage?

Reflect—Why is forgiveness the first step in blessing the one who has hurt you?

Understand—What stage of forgiveness are you in?

- Stage 1—the choice?
- Stage 2—the process?
- Stage 3—the completion?

Surrender—What is the most difficult aspect of forgiving the one who has or is aiming evil at you? Ask God to remove any bitterness and give you the strength to begin the forgiveness journey.

Take Action—Choose today to forgive the person if you have not already done so. Write it down in your Bible with -today's date.

Motivation—Jot down Matthew 5:43–48 on a 3×5 card or half sheet of paper. Read over it prayerfully each day for the next week.

Encourage Someone—Pray today for the one who is your enemy. Choose to obey God whether you feel like it or not.