

Relationships: Enemies and Me

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Following Jesus isn't a guarantee to an easy, comfortable life. Unfortunately for them, many people believe that; even some preachers proclaim that. But the Bible doesn't teach such things. Instead, life as a follower of Jesus is a mixture of blessings and obstacles, even opposition. Let me show you an example of this from the Apostle Paul (READ 2 Tim. 4:9-18). We don't follow Jesus with the expectation that life will be easy; we follow Jesus believing, trusting that (as Paul says in vs. 17) the Lord will be our strength to stand and, in fact, will stand with us. That's our hope. That the Lord will rescue us from every evil deed and bring us safely into his heavenly kingdom. But Paul's in prison! He's been abandoned and persecuted! Clearly, God has *not* rescued him from every evil deed. What gives, right? The evil God has promised to rescue us from, the evil we will never succumb to is the evil aimed at our hearts and souls. While we may lose every earthly treasure to the evil of this world, we will never lose our soul, we will never lose our future home if Christ truly lives inside of us; nothing will ever separate us from the love of God found in Christ Jesus our Lord. What we want and need the most, God himself, we will always have. No evil will ever take that away.

As you heard in 2 Tim. 4, much of Paul's pain came from the failure of others. He was deserted by some. He was forgotten by others. He painfully discovered he didn't have as many faithful partners in the work of ministry like he thought he did. But you see in vs. 14 and 15, Paul didn't just have people who let him down, he had people against him. Friends who let you down aren't your enemies; but Alexander the coppersmith is an enemy. Vs. 14 says, "Alexander the coppersmith did me great harm; the Lord will repay him according to his deeds. Beware of him yourself, for he strongly opposed our message." He harmed me. Timothy, he will harm you, too, so beware. He hates our message.

There are two other references to an Alexander in the NT. In Acts 19 we learn about an Alexander who stirred up a riot in Ephesus against Paul. He was a Jewish man who joined the choir of complainers about Christianity. In 1 Tim. 1, we learn about another Alexander who was a Christian and fellow worker of Paul's, but (as Paul puts it) made a shipwreck of his faith and walked away. These two men are not the same because of the way they are described. Most scholars believe that Alexander the coppersmith is the second one, the former follower of Jesus. If so, think of it: a man whom Paul used to worship with has now not only walked away from the faith, but has become a strong opponent of Christianity and the Apostle Paul. In fact, the way 2 Timothy reads, it sounds like the great harm done by Alexander was putting Paul in prison; maybe that's why he's there. Maybe Paul's in prison because of Alexander the coppersmith's opposition. Paul's very own Judas.

I know this is possible; to lose faith and even become an opponent of it: I had a seminary professor who taught me theology; who taught me and other classmates about the things of God and he is now an atheist and dedicated discrediting the faith he said he once believed. He

does so with a innocent smile on his face, but make no mistake about it: he's an enemy of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

So, Paul had enemies. You and I most likely have enemies, too. Let's define what an enemy is. An enemy is someone who actively works against your well being or mission; the aim of this person is to hurt you. The coworker on the line that constantly ridicules you, puts you down, telling you to go kill yourself is an enemy. Your fellow employee at the hospital that gossips about you in an attempt to malign your reputation and create divisions among your work friends. The classmate who bullies you or threatens you at school. The neighbor who steals from you every chance he gets. These could be called *enemies*. Sometimes, we have enemies because of our faith in God. Our convictions and beliefs can be easy ammunition used against us. Some of you might even live with an enemy. Maybe your spouse is hostile to the things of God and often ridicules you and your faith in Jesus. Maybe you are suffering from domestic abuse. Domestic challenges are often times the very hardest to deal with. We are so close in some ways, which makes the harm so much more sinister and difficult to deal with. So, an enemy isn't merely someone who might be unkind, but someone who opposes you and works against your well being for some reason.

It's incredibly difficult to know how we should relate to our enemies. On the one hand, we may be tempted to fight back. Don't just take it; hit back. Get even. But that seems to fall short of the way of Jesus. We might want to run. But that's not always so easy and it doesn't always work. We have to go back to work or school tomorrow; if your enemy is a family member or a next door neighbor, where do you run? Thankfully, we have God's word to guide us. Like many of things God tells us, they may not be hard to understand, but can be really hard to implement or practice (READ Romans 12:14-21).

This paragraph kind of weaves in and out of a few different topics, but the bulk of it concerns how we relate to enemies. Look at vs. 20; Paul's encouragement reads, "To the contrary, 'if your enemy is hungry...'" do this. Do you see? Paul is saying, "This is how you should relate to enemies." That's what he's talking about. Let's see what he says.

This paragraph is filled with wonderful insights, nuggets, and commands from God that I think provide us with practical help knowing how to relate to enemies. I want to draw your attention to a number of them. But let's start with what might be considered the big idea. While there are all kinds of factors to consider when we are dealing with such difficult relational challenges, the one thing you and I can be sure God wants us to do is found in vs. 21. Paul says, "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." There may be a number of factors to consider when relating to enemies, but above all, make sure you are not overcome by evil, but instead overcome evil with good.

What does that mean? How do you know if you are overcome by evil or if you are overcoming evil by doing good? I think we're told that answer from the other verses in this paragraph. Vs. 17 says don't repay evil for evil; when you do that (when you take revenge)

you're being overcome by evil. Vs. 19 - Avenging yourself rather than trusting God; that's being overcome by evil. Cursing others rather than blessing them as it says in vs. 14, again, is an example of being overcome by evil. If you give into the temptation and do what these verses say we should not do we are being overcome by evil.

Sin can master us. And our sin is more likely to master us in stressful situations. Stressful situations are tests; they are trials. And in the trial when we are feeling vulnerable or angry we're more likely to respond in fear and self-preservation than faith and worship to God. You gossip about your neighbors from a fearful or anxious heart because your neighbor gossiped about you first is being overcome by evil. You angrily cursing at your coworker in a fit of rage is being overcome by evil in a time of testing. These are examples of failing to walk by faith in an admittedly stressful moment.

Now, you might be thinking, "Ok, Brian, that's nice. But, come on! How? How do I live this way? How do I avoid giving in with such a difficult situation?" That's a really good question. It's one thing to know what to do. But it's another thing knowing how to do it. What I'm about to share with you is how you do this. But you need to see something: these steps aren't my steps. I'm not coming up with these. God is giving you this wisdom and commands. Let me show you.

Our actions of faith always start from what we believe to be true; it always starts with God's word. So, let me show you some things God says is true for you to believe.

Firstly, notice how God says you are limited in your ability affect change. Look at vs. 18, "If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all." Did you notice all those qualifications to that command? He didn't just say, "Live peaceably with all." Do you know why? You are not completely in control of that. Living at peace with someone requires some sort of agreement. Sometimes, we can't find that agreement. So, if possible, as far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

Do you know why this is helpful to see and believe? Typically, we tend to think we have more power to control a situation than we do. And then, when that situation becomes a little more tense, we try and exert a little more power. But do you know what happens when I do that? I tend to make the problem messier. Living at peace isn't totally up to you. You can do everything the way you're supposed to do it and you might still have an enemy.

If you know and believe this, I think you will do at least one thing more: you'll pray more. I say that because you'll recognize the need is greater than your ability. The lightbulb will turn on and you'll say to yourself, "I really don't have the strength to find peace with this person." And that should make us prayerful in a difficult situation.

The second truth you need to embrace and believe is this: God will fix this. Now, let me tell you how specifically God will fix this (sometimes, we'll have these pithy little sayings like, "God's got this" or "Let go and let God" but we really don't know how God has got this or what

God will do when we let go. Those vague notions don't build faith; faith is more firmly established when we know what God will do or how he will fix this.)

God will fix this by executing the kind of judgment and wrath that this evil requires. Do you see that there in vs. 19-20 (READ)? God will repay. Vengeance is the Lord's; it's not yours. I think deep down in the recesses of our souls, when we see evil or experience evil, our heart cries out something like, "Does anyone see this? Is anyone going to do anything?" God made us with a conscience and when our conscience is working as designed, when we see or experience evil a right sense of justice bubbles in our souls looking for righteousness. It's why we feel angry when we hear stories of child abuse. It's why we are disgusted when the rich, the powerful, get away with crimes. When we don't see anyone doing anything, we want to take matters into our own hands.

Paul is telling us, "God will fix this. God will punish the evil doer. This sin will not be ignored." But there's a problem with this: it seems like evil does get ignored. I bet some of you here today have tried to do the right thing when it comes to a bully at work, school, or in the neighborhood. You've prayed. You've waited. You've tried to be kind. You've tried to turn the other cheek and just ignore the insults. And nothing happens. And you're left wondering, "God, where are you? Don't you care? Are you watching this?" And it leaves us hurt, confused, and doubtful. That's when we take matters into our own hands.

That's why we need to hear this today: God will do something. God will not let evil prevail. I know it's not happening soon enough for you. But God promised it will happen. In fact, he's given you a picture of the future (in the book of Revelation) of what this will look like. It is a guarantee. You can trust God to right the wrongs we are going through.

Did you notice how this helps Paul when he thinks of Alexander the coppersmith? Paul said (2 Tim. 4:14), "Alexander the coppersmith did me great harm; the Lord will repay him according to his deeds." Now, maybe there's a part of you that's thinking, "Wow, that doesn't sound too loving! We're supposed to pray, 'God, get him!'" I know what you're saying; there are a ton of confusing thoughts and emotions in such a difficult situation. But knowing God will take care of this problem frees us to obey him. If we can get freed from our internal sense that something must be done, we can do what God tells us to do. Basically, believing God will execute the necessary justice we are free to do what he tells us to.

And vs. 20 tells us what that is (READ vs. 20). Here's the call: do good to your enemy. Serve them. Bless them. It sounds a lot like Jesus, right, from Luke 6 (READ vs. 27-31).

Friends, you can do this. Not because of your strength, but because of the strength of the one who lives inside of you... Jesus. You've got to change some of your expectations and you need to stop thinking you have the power to change the situation or change the person who is mistreating you. You need to believe, also, that God will take care of what's wrong. If someone needs to be punished, God will do it. And he will. Let your confidence in God's

promises to always do the right thing release you from your desire to do what you think needs to be done. Instead, remember how Jesus saved you when you were an enemy of God's. Remember how he satisfied you with water that never runs dry when you hated him. Remember how he fed your soul with spiritual food when your heart was far from him. And let that joy turn into care for others, even for your enemies.

Key vs. Romans 12:21

Questions for the week

- Do you have enemies? Who are they?
- Can you trust God to execute the right justice against your enemies? What keeps you from having faith in God to do this?
- Pray to God for help to offer kindness to enemies. Read Romans 12:14-21 looking for truth to hold onto in this challenging act of faith.