

Romans 12:9–21 (NET)

Love must be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil, cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another with mutual love, showing eagerness in honoring one another. Do not lag in zeal, be enthusiastic in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, endure in suffering, persist in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints, pursue hospitality. Bless those who persecute you, bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty but associate with the lowly. Do not be conceited. Do not repay anyone evil for evil; consider what is good before all people. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all people. Do not avenge yourselves, dear friends, but give place to God's wrath, for it is written, "***Vengeance is mine, I will repay,***" says the Lord. Rather, ***if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in doing this you will be heaping burning coals on his head.*** Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

A Good Recipe

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union UCC, Medford, MA

Date: September 7, 2014 Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Scripture: Romans 12:9–21

Today we start the church year, at least that's how many of us think of it. Summer vacations are over. School has begun. Backpacks are packed. Worship has returned to 11:00. The liturgical calendar may say that the church year begins on the first Sunday of Advent. The calendar on the wall may say the year begins on January first. But we all know that the year truly begins on the Sunday after Labor Day.

And Paul has given us a great passage with which to start the year. In these few short verses from Romans Paul lays out a recipe for how we ought to live. It's good to begin cooking the feast of our church year by taking a look at the recipe.

Paul dives right in. "Love must be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil, cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another with mutual love.... Bless those who persecute you, bless and do not curse.... Live in harmony with one another; ... Do not repay anyone evil for evil; ... Do not avenge yourselves."

I have a bunch of recipes from my great-grandmother, or at least they're supposed to be recipes. They come from a different era—before measuring cups and scales. "Take a lump of lard the size of a small walnut, cut it into a goodly amount of flour until the crumbles are the size of a pea, add a small spoon of baking powder, baking soda (but not as much), a little salt and some buttermilk. Mix (not too much), knead, handling gently, form into rounds the size of your palm and cook in a hot oven until done." Valla, you've got biscuits. The measurements are a little imprecise. What's a hot oven, I once asked my mother. She said, "Stick your hand in the oven and if you have to take it out after ten seconds, it's hot enough. This advice seemed decidedly contrary to the previous advice she had given about staying away from a hot stove, and I thought how many seconds you could keep your hand in there would depend on your tolerance for pain to begin with. But an even more difficult feature of the recipe is that it seems contradictory, or at least a little ambivalent about what it wants you to do—mix, not too much; knead handling gently.

Paul's recipe seems a little like that. Love one another with mutual love, but don't be a hypocrite. Abhor what is evil. Do not avenge yourselves or repay evil for evil. It's a little confusing. Am I supposed to love or hate those who do evil?

Tom Wright states the obvious when he says, "This poses a problem for many people today. If I really don't like someone, they say, how can I love them? But if I'm commanded to love them, and try to act as if I do, doesn't that make me a hypocrite?"¹

The other side of the equation is just as confusing. Bless those who persecute you. If persecution is evil, and you're supposed to abhor evil, why are we supposed to bless those who persecute us? And what about justice? Wright tells a story that you can find a version of in the news just about any day in the year.

¹ Tom Wright, *Paul for Everyone: Romans, Part 2: Chapters 9-16* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2004), 76–82

The headline said one word, in thick black letters right across the top of the front page: REVENGE.

A woman whose husband had cheated on her and gone off with her best friend. The spurned wife bided her time. She waited for her opportunity, and she then killed them both, but not instantly. She made them pay. She tortured them, which allowed her to extract maximum satisfaction by giving them maximum terror.

It is nasty, sorry, sordid story of course. But the reason it made the front page was that deep down a lot of us know someone we would like, as we say, to 'get even with'. Someone has done something to us which we have allowed to fester. If we had the courage, or the folly, we would love to get back at them. More worrying still, at any given moment there is probably someone who would love to take revenge on us. The desire for revenge is like a deep itch somewhere right down inside. The newspapers know that if we can't scratch that itch ourselves we like reading about someone else that could and did.

This passage declares that we must find quite different ways of dealing with persecution. Paul rules out revenge.²

When I read Paul's recipe, I get the distinct feeling that he and my great-grandmother knew one another. But like her biscuit recipe, Paul's recipe can probably be sorted out, too.

Paul is clear that there is evil in the world, and that that evil is very often destructive. In an age in which tolerance is such a high value, we sometimes have a hard time with the idea of saying that something or someone is evil. On the other hand, if we allow ourselves to say someone or something is evil, we very often say it full of hatred and emotion, like the woman who murdered her husband and his lover.

It's just here that the recipe needs a little explaining. Like the mystery of mixing, but not too much, or kneading and handling gently, we need a little clarification.

I, like I suspect many of you, have watched the news reports on the atrocities that ISIS is perpetrating in the Middle East, especially the brutal and inflaming videos of the beheading of two Western journalists, which were meant to infuriate, ridicule and incite us in the United States. I am willing to say that these and the other atrocities that ISIS has committed are without question evil acts. These repulsive deeds have certainly angered me. I confess that I have had phantasies of brutal and pain-inflicting revenge.

But here's where the recipe helps. Calling something evil is not the same thing as the emotional response to the evil. It's one thing to say that ISIS is evil. It's another to have the fired up desire to visit bloodlust on them. These two often go together, especially in the first moments of passion when we are confronted by unspeakable evil or hurt. That something is evil may well be an accurate assessment. But we should not, according to the recipe, seek revenge.

Does that mean we must passively accept their butcheries in the name of love? Well, that would be to make a similar mistake in the other direction. Paul says we should not love hypocritically. That would seem to leave us two choices. The first is that we suppress our anger and try to think of ISIS as beautiful people we want to hug. The second is to recognize that love isn't the same thing as feeling warm and fuzzy toward someone. Maybe we may dislike even abhor those we love. It's one thing to love. It's another to like or approve or accept someone or their actions. Love has to do with a commitment to value another. We may dislike and even abhor, and in some cases, take strong actions against another, even if we have made a commitment to love them.

These are perhaps subtle distinctions, but they make all the difference.

² Ibid, adapted

Let's take ISIS. I believe they are evil. I believe that their evil will not go away just by loving them. I am convinced that in one way or another they will have to be stopped with force. But on my best days, I can love them, too. I can imagine, on my best days, doing what is necessary to stop evil without blood thirst. These actions might be motivated by the need to stop an evil force for love of those ISIS may harm, and even in the hope that eventually members of ISIS will repent of their evil. At my best, my thoughts and actions are not motivated by the emotion of hatred and the desire for revenge.

Why does that make a difference? Tom Wright rightly says, "Revenge keeps evil in circulation. Whether in a family or a town, or in an entire community like the Middle East or Northern Ireland, the culture of revenge, unless broken, is never-ending."³ Revenge is corrosive. It inflames ever greater atrocities. It justifies ever greater hatreds. The fight against evil, at its best and most effective, is not accompanied by glee at death and destruction. It is done soberly with restraint and even regret.

I still have the image ingrained in my memory after the "shock and awe" attack on Iraq in the second Gulf War. George W. Bush appeared on the deck of an aircraft, clothed in full military battle gear, and smugly and giddily declared, "Mission accomplished." Of course within days it was clear the mission was far from accomplished. And what came clearer later was that the President and his advisors were so eager to pursue war in Iraq that they misinterpreted the intelligence information and grossly overestimated the welcome we would receive. At the time Bush admitted that he was driven, in part, by Saddam Hussein's desire to kill his father, the elder Bush, during the first Gulf War. With vision clouded by emotional desires for revenge and for demonstrating America's power to triumph on the world stage, the actions led anything but the defeat of evil.

And then there is the impact that the desire for revenge has on those who desire it. Wright argues, "part of the point is that when we refuse to take revenge, and deliberately rid ourselves even of the desire for it, we are taking responsibility at least for our own mental and emotional health. We are refusing to allow our own future lives to be determined by the evil that someone else has done. It's bad enough that they've done whatever it was; why should they then have the right to keep us in a bitter and twisted state? That's what Paul means by 'letting evil conquer you'."⁴ In the story of the woman who murdered her husband and his lover, we can be sure that whatever satisfaction she got, if any, was momentary and that the rest of her life was negatively affected. Today we are still reaping what we sowed years ago in Iraq.

Thank goodness we have a good recipe. All we have to do is figure it out and try to follow it. Abhor what is evil, cling to what is good. Abhorring evil is not the same as visceral hatred and a desire for revenge. To love without hypocrisy is to realize that loving is not principally an emotional response. It's quite possible to dislike someone you love. It's quite possible to love someone and try to stop their evil. Love is a commitment to value another. Love rules out revenge, for revenge does not value another. In the process, if we live by this love, we will also love ourselves. We will be less bitter. We'll have better mental health. And we won't make choices that cause us great personal pain and regret. So, put a little love and abhorrence for evil in a bowl, leave out the desire for vengeance, mix together, spread it out on the world and let it cook. I think you'll like the meal. Amen.

³ Ibid

⁴ Ibid