

Text: Romans 12:19-21 (NIV)

¹⁴Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. ¹⁵Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. ¹⁶Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited. ¹⁷Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. ¹⁸If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. ¹⁹Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. ²⁰On the contrary: "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head." ²¹Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Theme: The Christian Attitude toward our Enemies

This past year I have been writing my newsletter articles on the life of CFW Walther. This October will be the 200th anniversary of his birth. I hope that they have been at least a little interesting for you. I have learned a lot from them. In September the theme of my article is how he dealt with his enemies and those who opposed him. There were many people who respected Walther, but he also had a lot of enemies, and some of them were fierce and vicious.

My guess is that we all have people whom we might consider our enemies. They try to make our lives miserable. They oppose us every step of the way. They lie and gossip about us. The question for us as Christians is, "How do we respond to them?" There is a distinctly Christian attitude toward those who oppose us.

I. We are tempted to deal with our opponents in some unloving ways.

It is tempting to seek revenge. If they use harsh words against us, we find an even better comeback at them. If they hit me, I'll give twice as hard back. If they take something of mine, I'll find a way to get something of their's. Revenge seems so sweet at first.

So when mom or dad asks why you hit your brother, the answer is, "He hit me first." One of our most common excuses even as adults is that we are just giving them what they deserve. But that is far from the Christian attitude. The Bible states, "*Vengeance is mine says the Lord, I will repay.*" That is even shown in the imprecatory psalms. They call for God's wrath on His enemies, but those who pray the psalm simply pray for justice. They do not take it into their own hands. Revenge is not a Christian attitude.

Neither is burning bridges. This was an issue for Walther when he was a young pastor. In his ministry in Germany he charged anyone who disagreed with him as godless and unchristian. When he preached his farewell sermon before emigrating to America, it was so legalistic that many of the people ran out of the church in terror and tears. Later when he was sent to confront Pastor Stephan with charges of sexual misconduct, he didn't discuss the actual situation. He just antagonized Stephan until he and other pastors excommunicated Stephan and sent him across the Mississippi River to Illinois. It appears as though he never had a relationship with any of these people again.

Isn't that how we often deal with those who oppose us. We burn the bridges. We will say something or do something that make it impossible for the relationship to ever be mended. It might even feel

good when we give them a piece of our mind, and they are out of our lives forever. But again this is not the Christian attitude. As Christians our aim is always reconciliation not alienation from each other.

III. These verses teach specific ways in which we are to deal with our enemies.

Verse 14 says to **ble**ss those who persecute you. The Greek word for bless literally means “to speak well” of someone. It reminds me of Luther’s explanation to the 8th commandment in the Small Catechism, in which he writes that **we speak well of our neighbor, and explain everything in the kindest possible way**. The old translation said to put the best construction on everything. That is often hard to do. It is tempting to slander our opponents, but as Christians we are called to find good things to say about them.

Verse 18 says to **live peaceably** with them. It says, *“If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.”* The words, “If possible,” and “as it depends on you,” show just how hard this is. There are some people who annoy us and make our lives miserable. As much as we can, we are called to live in peace with them. This is hard, but it often bears fruit. For instance, Dr. Walther soon learned that it is better to make peace with your enemies than to burn the bridges. He debated with a lawyer named Franz Marbach on the question of whether they should return to Germany. While they didn’t agree, they remained friends in Christ until the end of their lives. It is a blessing of God when we make peace with our enemies, and they become our dear friends in Christ.

We want to **do good** to those who have hurt us. Verse 19 says, *“If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.”* This is the hardest thing of all, doing good to those who have hurt us. Sometimes this turns them to be reconciled to us. Other times it drives them crazy.

There is a good example of this in the life of Walther too. The pastor who led the Buffalo Synod was named Johann Grabau. He viciously accused Walther and the Missouri Synod of all kinds of things. He wrote them many threatening letters and even traveled to Germany to try to turn the friends of the Missouri Synod against them. The minutes of the 1853 synodical convention have both the letters of Grabau and the Missouri Synod replies. They are a stark contrast. Grabau’s letters are full of accusations and threats. The responses are very calm, that we would like to get together and discuss these matters. In the end the Buffalo Synod broke apart, and most of the congregations joined the Missouri Synod. But that is a good example of how we respond to those who threaten us. We offer our good will. We even help them and are kind and forgiving.

III. But where do we find the strength to have this attitude toward our enemies?

The key is in verse 21, *“Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”* That is how God has dealt with us. It was while we were God’s enemies that God reconciled us to Himself through the death of His Son. (Rom 5:9) It was while we were still sinners that Christ died for us. We rebelled against God and His love for us, and He responded by giving us His only Son as our Savior. Even when we fail Him as Christians, we confess those sins, and He forgives them all for Christ’s sake. He has overcome our evil deeds with good.

The forgiveness that we have in Christ, and God’s help for His people in every situation give us the

strength to be good and loving to those who oppose us. It is our hope that as God's sacrifice brought reconciliation with us, that the sacrifices that we make for our enemies will also bring about reconciliation with them.

IV. There is one more important point, which is that opposition often builds character.

When I consider many of the greatest things that people have done through the centuries, they were accomplished in the face of opposition. Had the Catholic Church at the time of the Reformation left Luther alone, no one would have probably ever heard of Luther's 95 theses. He would have simply remained an obscure professor in Wittenberg. One of Walther's contributions to the church is his writings on church and ministry. This came about because of many of the struggles which he had with pastors who were too authoritarian. This weekend a monument will be dedicated to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in Washington. It was the struggle to help many oppressed peoples in our country that led King to be one of the greatest leaders in our nation in the last century.

Opposition to us often builds our own character. It helps us take a good look at ourselves to weed out anything that is causing us to sin. It helps us to refine our own ideas and get rid of those things that make no sense. There is nothing worse than "yes men" who say that our ideas are great when everyone knows that they make no sense. Many of the struggles that we have with people end up being a blessing in the end.

We all have enemies or at least people who don't like us. The question is how do we respond to them? The Christian attitude is to share our Christian love and concern for them in our thoughts, words, and deeds. Our aim is to be reconciled with them as brothers and sisters in Christ. May God's Spirit give each one of us that attitude through our faith that God has reconciled us sinners to Himself in our Savior Jesus Christ.

Amen.

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August 28, 2011***