



Marks of the Christian 5: Seeking Peace (Part 1)

Romans 12:14-16

Rev. Fred Greco

If you have your Bibles with you, I would invite you to turn once again to Romans, chapter 12. We have been camped out in Romans, chapter 12, for some time now, going slowly and steadily through Paul's description of the Christian life. Paul's commands to the Christian to live in a certain way are also a description of what it means to be a Christian.

We have specifically been looking at the practical results in the Christian of the great truths that were expressed in chapters 1-11. We have gone very slowly through verses 9-13, and we're going to pick up now in verse 14 with a fifth mark of the Christian. We have seen four previous marks of the Christian: *love, hopefulness, generosity*. We are now looking at a fifth mark, which is *seeking peace*. We're going to look at it over the next two weeks, including this week, in two parts.

Please give attention to the reading of God's Holy Word. We will look at verses 14-21 this morning, focusing on verses 14-16. Hear now the very Word of God. For the Word of the Lord is completely inerrant, the Word of the Lord is completely sufficient, and the Word of the Lord is completely authoritative. Romans, chapter 12, beginning at verse 14:

“Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. 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. Never be wise in your own sight. Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.' To the contrary, '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.' Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”

Thus far the reading of God's Holy Word. Let's pray for his blessing upon it.

Heavenly Father, we come to you this morning and ask that you open up your Word to us, that by the power of your Spirit you would illuminate our minds, that in your Word we might see your truth, that in your Word we might see the Lord Jesus Christ, that in your Word we might find our hope. This we ask in Christ's precious name, amen.

We have seen over and over again in this chapter that the Christian life is the result of the work of God. It's the result of God's work redeeming the sinner and making him more and more like Jesus. In particular, we have seen over the past few weeks the marks of a Christian, what a Christian looks like by his actions. It started in verse 9 with the most important mark: *love*.

In the next two weeks, we will conclude chapter 12 with a larger section. Paul moves on from his brief couplets of a noun and a verb to a longer discussion about peace. He shows us that to be a Christian is to be one who seeks peace, and he shows us this in four ways. He shows us that the Christian is one who *faces persecution*, the Christian is one who *seeks unity*, the Christian is one who *repays evil with good*, and finally, the Christian is one who *trusts the Lord*.

Facing Persecution

This is an important practical subject, and we want to make sure we understand what Paul is saying. So we will look at this in two parts. Today, focusing on our response to persecution and how we are to think about others. Next week, we will look more specifically at how we respond when wrongs are done to us. This entire subject of the Christian being one who seeks peace brings us to an important consideration.

Paul is giving us these marks of a Christian for more than just classification. It is not as if we are trying to write a treatise on what a Christian is. No. Paul is doing this to show us the reality of faith in Christ. A theoretical Christian is a contradiction in terms. If someone claims to be a Christian and does not live like one, then that points out the falsehood of the claim to be a Christian.

We have indeed seen over and over again that these marks of a Christian do not come first. They are not requirements *for* salvation. Rather, they are evidences *of* salvation. They show the reality of the change the Lord has made in the believer. We also need to remember that, often, the best form of evangelism is the manifestation of the Christian life. People see the difference in our lives, and they wonder what has happened, what causes the difference.

All of this is to say that these marks are not optional, but rather they are necessary evidence of a change the Lord has wrought. So, as we come to the Scriptures, it's important for us to understand that the Bible is very honest with us. If the Bible were only concerned with getting a commitment from you to God, regardless of anything else, it would be written very differently. It would be like the so-called preachers who only talk about how your life will be so great, how rich you can be, how healthy and popular you can be if only you follow Jesus.

Instead, the Bible is realistic about the Christian life. It tells you about the worst that is to come, and it tells you how you can face that worst. Now, can you imagine this pitch for Christianity? "Come, follow Jesus and get your persecution. Have you been hankering for persecution? Well, all you need to do is follow Jesus, and you'll be sure to get some." That's not exactly a good sales pitch for anything, but that's exactly what the Bible tells us.

It's not just that we will have tribulation, as Paul speaks about in verse 12 of chapter 12. It's not just that we'll have bad circumstances, trials, difficulties. No. To be a Christian is to come under attack from those who despise Jesus Christ and, therefore, despise his followers. The Christian must be ready to face persecution, because persecution is real. Paul says that very plainly here.

Do you see what he says in verse 14? "Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them." Do you notice what word is missing there? It's the word *if*. Paul doesn't say, "*If* you face persecution, you must take this course of action." Instead, he just states matter-of-factly that persecution *will* come to the Christian, and when it comes, *this*

is how you are to act. It's not a possibility for Paul. He takes it for granted. It is a fact. In this, Paul is simply repeating a basic biblical truth.

He does this for a reason: to teach us how to react to that fact, because it *is* a fact. He knows it's coming to us; therefore, he wants us to be prepared to be ready to act. He doesn't want us to be surprised by persecution and how we should respond to it. The Bible is full of this truth. Our Lord Jesus Christ said exactly this in John, chapter 15. He said, "Remember the word that I said to you: 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you."

Stop and think about that for a moment. If I were to ask you, apart from anything else, "Do you want to be persecuted?" I imagine that all of you, perhaps to a person, would say, "Well, no, Pastor. I don't know what you're thinking. I don't enjoy pain. I don't enjoy misery. I don't enjoy being unfairly treated. Why would I *want* persecution?"

When we consider persecution apart from everything else, that would be true, but when I tell you that Jesus says, "I am persecuted, and if you follow me you *will* be persecuted," then your view may change, because what that means is if you never experience persecution, if you are never persecuted, perhaps you are not following Jesus, because persecution comes to those who follow the Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul puts it *this* way at the end of his long life of ministry. In the book of 2 Timothy, chapter 3, he says, "Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus *will* be persecuted." A statement of fact. He doesn't pull any punches at all. You must understand that persecution is real and that you have to face it. So, how are we then to face this reality? Well, what we need is instruction, because, after all, persecution is hard to deal with. By definition, it is undeserved hardship. It is evil directed toward us.

The man who robs a bank and who is convicted and put in jail is not being persecuted. He's receiving justice. Persecution is undeserved hardship and misery. So we have to understand how we are to deal with this, and Paul tells us, "Bless and do not curse." Now, there are two natural reactions to persecution. We might think of them as the reactions we commonly have to great stress in our lives. We talk about the "fight or flight" reflex.

One natural reaction is to fight. It is to be angry and to strike back at those who are hurting us. We are hurt by others, and our initial reaction is to push back at them, to get them away from us, to fight back. This is a part of who we are as human beings. One thing that's interesting is that as a child grows from an infant to a toddler, as they're able to get control of their arms and legs, stand up, pull themselves up on furniture, walk a bit... If that toddler has a toy and a sibling comes up and takes the toy away or if a sibling comes up and knocks the toddler down, it's very interesting that you don't need to teach the toddler to strike back.

I bet there's not a parent who has had to say to a toddler, "This is what you need to do, honey. Take your hand and ball it up in a fist, and then strike out and whack your sibling." No one has ever done that, yet that's exactly what people do. It's because it's our natural reaction. We strike back. Now you may say to me, "But, Pastor, I don't strike back at people who hurt me. I don't fight. I don't like conflict." Well, that's true, because there's a second natural reaction.

Some people aren't fighters; they're flee-ers. They don't want conflict, so when conflict comes to them, when persecution comes to them, what they do is they run away and hide. They try to pretend persecution isn't really happening, that if they just get away it'll stop, it'll be out of sight out of mind. They will go to incredible lengths to get away from the source of that persecution, to pretend it's not going on, to escape it. These are two natural reactions we have. Paul calls us, instead, to be active in facing persecution.

Now let me be clear here. Persecution is scary. It can mean losing a job. It can mean violence and danger. It can mean losing friends and being lonely. It is no small matter to be easily handled. That's why we need this inspired instruction from the apostle Paul in God's Word. He tells us God's will for us in persecution. God's call upon us is twofold: bless and do not curse.

Now what does that mean? This is more than just resignation. It's more than just a commitment to endure persecution and not retaliate. That's *part* of what Paul is saying, but it is not *all* of what Paul is saying. That should make sense to us, because living the Christian life is not only about avoiding sin. It's about being more and more like Jesus in our lives. It is actively living a holy and godly life.

We might summarize verse 14 in *this* way: call down God's blessings on your persecutors instead of calling on God to curse them. What Paul is talking about here when he talks about *cursing* is not foul language. He's not saying, "Clean up your language in front of your persecutors." No. He is telling us not to desire God's curse to fall upon our persecutors.

This is extremely challenging. How can we be under persecution and not want our persecutors to be punished? How can we not want God to bring all his power to bear against them? Before we answer that, notice Paul's command is even greater than that. It's not just that we do not curse. We are also called to bless. We are to desire good for them.

Does that seem unbelievable to you? It should. Only Christians are able to do this. It is beyond the power of the natural person. How can we do this? How can we bless instead of curse? The way we are able to bless instead of curse is by remembering the facts of the gospel. First, remember God's reaction to *you*. You were an enemy of God. You persecuted God. You opposed him in all his ways, yet God did not curse *you*. He loved you.

As we look at our persecutors, we must look through the lens of grace. We must remember the grace we have found. Secondly, remember why the persecutor is acting this way. Look beyond the sin, which is indeed evil and wicked, and look to the sinner. The sinner is blind to spiritual truth. He is enslaved to sin. He sins because that is his nature. If you see a sinner in *this* light, it changes your viewpoint. Sinners sin against you because that's who they are. In their nature, they do wickedness. They do evil.

Thirdly, remember that they need salvation. Don't just feel sorry for them because they're trapped in sin. Sometimes this is our viewpoint of those who persecute. You may have seen a television show or a movie or read a book in which there was a bully, and inevitably, someone will say to the person who's being bullied, "You really should just feel sorry for the bully. He has probably had a bad life. Probably bad things have happened to him. You should pity him, feel sorry for him."

That's not what Paul is saying here. It's not just that we're to feel sorry for our persecutors. No. We are to desire that they would come to salvation, that God would have mercy on them just as he has had mercy on us, that God would change them, that he would remake them in the image of Jesus Christ, that he would give them new life. That is what our hope is for our persecutors. We are to bless and not curse.

Seeking Unity

Next, Paul turns in verse 15 to a mindset we are to have, that we are to seek unity with others around us. We do this by thinking of others, by focusing on others and not thinking of ourselves. This is not anything new. We have seen this over and over again in Paul's letter to the Romans. In verse 15, he writes, "Rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep." He is asking us to do two things: to rejoice and to weep with others around us.

Now, if we look at these, and if I were to ask you which of these seems easier to do, for the most part, I think you would say, "Well, the first." After all, when others are in joy, we want to join into their joy. We're tempted to think about this superficially. We think about it in terms of emotion, happiness, or sorrow. After all, who wouldn't rather be happy than to be sad. It's much easier to be happy.

There's actually more to it than that. This isn't just about emotion. If we only think about emotion, we think the first is easier than the second, but if we think about it in terms of our mindset about ourselves, then we see something different. To weep with someone who is going through a difficult or sorrowful time is natural. We see this all the time in the way people react during funerals, during wars, during times of pain or sickness.

When someone is weeping, they are humbled. At no point does our pride enter in. There is no competition here. No one walks up to someone who's in sorrow and says, "I'm sorry you don't feel well, that you're sorrowful. I sure hope I get more sorrowful than you, that I can outstrip you in sorrow and misery." No one ever says that, because it's a humbling experience. No one is trying to prove they're more sorrowful. That's not the case when someone is rejoicing. *Then* they're having success. They may even have something you want and can't have.

Think about this in a very practical way. What would it look like...? How would you react if someone came to you and told you that they or their children got into the college of their choice, and not only that, they got a full scholarship, and it was a college *you* wanted to go to, but you couldn't get in? How would you feel about that? Or how about someone getting a great job or a big raise and you're struggling in a miserable job, trying to just make ends meet?

Or how about *this*? Someone comes to you and tells you they're getting married. They found a person to share the rest of their life with. You so greatly *want* to marry, but you don't have anyone in your life at this time. How do you respond and react in *these* instances? What would *you* be tempted to do? If you're honest, you would be tempted to envy that person, to wonder why *they* should get that blessing and not *you*. You might even be tempted to think they don't *deserve* that blessing, that it shouldn't come to them; they're not worthy of it.

I want you to see the force of Paul's command here, because what Paul says is not "Don't envy happy people." That's not what he says. That in and of itself would be hard. You are not to envy the success of others, but even that is hard. It's manageable. Paul tells you to do something even greater than that. He tells you to take positive joy

in their rejoicing. You are to enter into their happiness as if it were your own. You are to be pleased with their success and not begrudge them.

I want you to stop and think about that and think about instances where someone has received a blessing you have longed for, prayed for, and not received, and you wonder, "Lord, why is their family so well organized and behaved and mine is a mess? Why is their marriage so strong and loving and mine is so hard? Why are their finances so easy and mine such a struggle?"

You see, it is only possible by the power of the Holy Spirit to rejoice truly with those who rejoice, not just because the Spirit empowers you but because he changes you. You are able to enter into their joy as if it were your own. You are pleased with their success as if it was yours. You don't begrudge them anything. That's because the Christian's new birth solves the problem of self-centeredness. It makes you a part of a new body, of the body of Christ.

You are so identified with others that you see *their* blessing as *your* blessing. Nothing happens to other Christians, either bad or good, but that it also affects you. You are continually to be focused on others. We think of others. Paul continues his thought in verse 16. He tells us three things: that we are to live in harmony with one another, that we are not to be haughty but associate with the lowly, and then never be wise in your own sight.

He gives us these three admonitions that we should not be focused on ourselves, that we should think of others and not be thinking much of ourselves. In each instance, he tells us how to think. It's very interesting. In this verse, there is a verb used in each of the sentences, and it is a verb that means to think, but it goes beyond a bare mental activity.

It's to think about something in such a way that you set yourself on it, that it becomes an attitude for you that changes the whole disposition of your life. That's why it can be translated in these three sentences three different ways. "Live in harmony. Do not be haughty. Never be wise." It's the same word here in each of those instances. It's translated slightly differently even though it's the same word.

So, what does this mean? First, we are told to live in harmony. This requires you not to focus on yourself. Your goal should not be to have it your way. This is almost the exact phrase Paul uses in Philippians 2:2 where he tells us to "Be of the same mind." The way harmony is found is not by insisting on your own rights or way.

Perhaps you've been a part of an organization or a workplace or even a family where someone rules with an iron fist, that everything has to be their way all the time. Now, there may be unanimity in the family or the organization or the company, because no one dares deviate from that one person's way, but there is not harmony. No one enjoys that. That's not harmony.

We have to think about that for ourselves, that we do not get harmony by forcing our ways on others. We don't think of ourselves and that *we* are always right and what *we* want is the most important and everyone needs to come in line with us. No. Harmony is found by thinking as others think, by going to others. Instead, you are to think of others the same way you think of yourself. You are to put *them* first.

Secondly, we are told not to be haughty. This is an injunction not to set your mind on vain ambition or grasping for honor. What Paul is saying here is we are not to set ourselves above others, but instead, we are to seek the peace and the unity of the body of Christ. We're not to claim that we are above others or that our ambitions must be satisfied. No. Paul tells us how we can do this, and that is by associating with the lowly.

Now, this word *associated* means more than just to hang around. One of the things I've noticed in teens today is that they act, in a certain way, very much like I did when I was a teenager and like my father did when *he* was a teenager. They will get together, and you will ask your teen, "What did you do?" and they say, "Well, we just hung out."

"Hung out? What do you mean? Did you go see a movie?"

"No. We just hung out."

"Did you have any plan?"

"No. We were just hanging out."

"What does that mean?"

"We were just together. That's all. We didn't have any agenda or any plan. We were just together."

I think when we hear Paul say, "Associate with the lowly," we think what he means is just kind of hang out with people who are lowly, as if somehow, just by being in a proximity of space, some of their humility will rub off on us like it's a contagion, but that's not what this word means. We might also translate it *to be carried away with*. Almost the idea of being carried away with the flow of a river.

What Paul is telling us is that we are to be around the humble, around the lowly, and we are to have *their* spirit be *our* spirit. We are not to swim *against* the current but *with* it. We are to be humble as *they* are humble. We are to emulate their humility. We are to think of others before ourselves, because that is the definition of humility: to put others first.

Instead of trying to show how much better or greater you are, you are to try to be as humble as possible. After all, isn't this what Jesus did? Jesus was accused of hanging out with sinners, that he was with the humble people of the world. Wasn't it Jesus who washed the feet of the disciples? Jesus was humble, and he showed us that humility in the way he lived. He thought of others before himself.

The third thing we see Paul tell us in this verse is that we are not to be wise in our own sight. Now what does this mean? Often, this takes the form of intellectual pride. If I were to send out a survey and give a list of a dozen or so sins and ask you to rank the most heinous or worst sin, I doubt many of you would check the box next to "intellectual pride." You might pick something with violence or adultery or some other kind of harm, but we don't tend to think of intellectual pride as the worst of sins.

As a matter of fact, this is a sin that has had center its temptation in the Reformed community, because, after all, don't we know more than other people? Don't we know more about the Bible than other Christians? Don't we know more about theology than other Christians? Aren't our libraries bigger than other Christians? I mean, of course. Other Christians' job is to listen to us tell them what they don't know. That's our job.

If we think about it, intellectual pride is a great sin. That's the sin of Satan. That's the sin of Adam and Eve in the garden: thinking they knew better than God, that their intellect was so gigantic they didn't need to listen to and obey God, that somehow they were smarter than God and they understood how their lives should be lived. There is a good reason for us not to dwell on our own wisdom.

First, our wisdom is nothing to be proud of. After all, there is so much we don't know. Right? As a matter of fact, there's so much we don't know we don't even know the things we don't know. There are three great categories of thought. There are the things we know, there are certain things we *know* we don't know, and then there's a whole host of other things we're not even aware we don't know. So how great can our intellect be?

Secondly, whatever knowledge or wisdom you have, it doesn't come from your own efforts. It comes as a gift from God. It's a result of the Lord's blessing and of his gifting. How can we claim to be much when we are nothing without the Lord? Thirdly, this kind of thinking is harmful. It necessarily destroys unity. That's why Paul prohibits this kind of thinking. We cannot live in peace if we are determined to be wise in our own sight. Paul tells us this in 1 Corinthians, chapter 8, that knowledge puffs up but love builds up.

The knowledge you have doesn't sound so great when I tell you your knowledge makes you a great windbag. It's unstable. It's out of sorts. But love builds up. It lays a firm foundation. Love by definition is self-sacrifice. It is putting others first, and that is how we build up not only the people of God but ourselves. We're called to build up the body of Christ, not to overinflate ourselves. We should not be thinking much of self.

What, then, does it mean to seek peace? Paul tells us several important things in these verses 14-16. He tells us it will be hard to seek peace. He tells us to expect the reality of the world to come down on us and to make it difficult to live a life of peace. That is because living a life of peace requires us to think about others. It requires us to think about those who are out to harm us, those who are out for our destruction, those who hate us.

That is not easy, but that is what we are called to do, because that's how Jesus lived. As a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ, you are called to be more and more like him every day. That call does not come to you in your own strength. It comes in the context of the work of the Holy Spirit, who by his miraculous power allows you to do things you never would have been able to do otherwise.

If we start by seeking unity with other Christians, we will be able to live in harmony with others around us, even non-Christians. The more you focus on others, the more you have a gospel-directed view of life, you will be able to ask God even to bless those who persecute you. You will find a peace that passes all understanding as you follow the Prince of Peace.

Next week, we'll look specifically at how to respond to the evil that others bring against us, but for now, as you go home, focus on others...*their* hurts, *their* needs, *their* need of Jesus. One thing you can be sure of: the worse you are treated by someone, the more they need Jesus. Are you praying for them? Do you long for them to experience the grace you have? Ask God to give you that grace, that you might desire grace even for those who persecute you.