

**Loving Jerks**  
Romans 12:14-21

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August 3, 2014

Last year Tom began to take us through the book of Romans, and today I am picking up where he left off at the end of Romans 12.

You have played 'Follow the Leader' as a kid right? Or "Simon Says", you know where the leader does something and then you do it too. It's a fairly simple game and yet sometimes it can get a little tricky right? Let's try a simple follow the leader to see how well you are paying attention. You need to do what I do. Start by putting your arms out in front of you with your palms down, thumbs out so they are pointing towards each other. Then turn your wrists so your palms are out and your thumbs are down. Put your right arm over the left and lock your fingers together – keeping your thumbs pointed down (make sure it's right over left). Then on three, everyone rotate your hands so that your thumbs are now pointing up.

With a simple do as I do demonstration, it can be difficult to follow along. (And I admit that was a little bit sneaky because it was a "do-as-I-do" exercise, not a "do-as-I-say" exercise. But as a Christian, it is our job to follow Jesus. Our life should look like his. We should be emulators of Jesus. And unlike the demonstration with the hands, Jesus is clear on what he wants from his followers. He's clear, but it's really hard.

The youth have been doing a video study over the summer, and in one lesson, it brought together passages about the wide and narrow road- that wide is the path that leads to destruction and narrow is the path that leads to life, and others that talk about the difficult path of following Jesus. It talked about how being a Christian means being a follower of Christ, doing what he did. Yet many who hold profess the title Christian, consider the following part optional. Many feel they don't need to actually do the things Christ said to do. It's too hard, and why would someone do hard things to be like Jesus, when they could just pick out some simple life truths to live out. I've been hearing the phrase a lot lately "are you a fan or follower of Jesus?" I think it's a well worded question. Meaning a fan is someone who looks up to and respects and admires another. Like when you are a fan of a celebrity, you may think they have some valuable things to say, you may wish you were more like them, you may just simply appreciate what they do. This in contrast to a follower who strives to become like the one they follow. Their life is a reflection. So as Christians, we want to keep growing to become more like Jesus by learning to do the things that the Scriptures teach us to do.

Some of those things can be easier to do. Worshipping God, fellowshiping, and loving one another can seem very easy compared to some of the more difficult things. And today's passage in Romans 12 is talking about one of those more difficult things to do – loving your enemies. As we will read in a moment, the command is clear and simple, but it can be difficult to actually live that out in our lives –it can also be difficult to even want to do it!

**The simple truth is that followers of Jesus strive to love their enemies.**

But why is that important? Well to Christians who love Jesus and are learning how to better follow Jesus, this is an essential ingredient in being like Christ. Jesus prayed for those who hung him on the

cross. Jesus had eyes that saw the bigger picture, that God want's all men to come to him and be saved because we are made in his image. We need to care for others like He does. If we fail to do so, we are fail to be like Christ in this area of our lives. And for those who are not Christians, loving your enemies may seep profoundly different than anything that you have heard outside of Christianity. Yet the principal of loving your enemies, when lived out by people, gives a beautiful picture of the grace that God displayed through Jesus' death on a cross.

Loving your enemies has radical implications for anyone who strives to do this. If you are going to do this, then it means that you need to do hard things. And it's difficult to even want to do this. To begin, you need to define what an enemy is. Is your enemy your neighbour? Does it need to be someone that you would wish harm upon, or one that wishes harm upon you? Or can it simply be someone that you would not normally seek to help or vice versa? John Piper's doctoral dissertation was on the topic of loving your enemy and he points out that this question was debated among ancient Jewish Rabbis as well. For instance Exodus 23 4 and 5 say: "" Well Rabbis would argue that the enemy was another Jew – Not a gentile. Because Gentiles were so unclean that you wouldn't ever help them. So enemies that you had to care for were actually other Jews, not gentiles. You didn't have to love them. ///And on a side note, Piper pointed out in his paper that there are many places in the Old Testament where God himself is loving towards his enemies and encouraged his people to do the same – even in times of war; they were instructed to treat prisoners with dignity. /// But who does Jesus mean when he says your enemy? I love the way Andrea put it when we were discussing this earlier. She said Jesus tells us to love each other in the church, to love our neighbours, and to love our enemies, so really we are told to just love everyone. And that's exactly it. If you think of someone who is your enemy and you think "well, it's not like I would wish harm on that person, but I just really don't like them. So they are not my enemy" Then you are thinking the wrong way. The lines between neighbour and enemy may be blurred, but it doesn't matter because we are told to love everyone. So think of those people who don't like you, who you don't like, even if you feel justified to not like them, these are the people this passage is telling us that we need to love.

### **Followers of Jesus strive to love their enemies.**

Let's read Romans 12 together. Starting with verse 14 all the way to 21.

"<sup>14</sup>Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. <sup>15</sup>Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. <sup>16</sup>Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly.<sup>[h]</sup> Never be wise in your own sight. <sup>17</sup>Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. <sup>18</sup>If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. <sup>19</sup>Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it<sup>[i]</sup> to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." <sup>20</sup>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." <sup>21</sup>Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

So there is a lot in there, but the command is pretty clear: “Bless those who persecute you; repay no one evil for evil; if your enemy is hungry- feed them; overcome evil with good.”

### **Followers of Jesus strive to love their enemies.**

And why do I use the word strive? I say that for a few reasons. The first is that this is a very difficult command to follow, and just because you have done it once, doesn't mean that you have it mastered. Every single situation will require you to make hard choices. The second reason I use the word strive is because I want to highlight our responsibility that God puts on us to do this. It doesn't happen passively, instead love is a choice we must make. And the third reason that I chose strive is because I think it is a good word to capture the desire to reach for or to press on in following this command. We must strive to run this race or to reach our goal to be enemy lovers.

And we can't be judgemental about this. It's so difficult to do and every situation is so different. Enemies can cause a vast array of hurt in our lives. Situations can be complex, like cycles of verbal, mental, and physical abuse, all the way to simple name calling. So you can't just say, “Well Suzy, you're not doing a very good job loving your enemy, are you?” No, instead we must encourage each other in this. We help each other move forward through loving discussion and accountability. And we must study the scriptures together to learn how we can be better at loving our enemies. And this passage is a great one to look at, because it's packed with things we must do. Today we have time to be encouraged by a few of these ways.

And before we get any further, it needs to be stressed that even though the passage doesn't explicitly say this, the single most important factor for us to be able to do this, or even have a desire to love our enemies, is that we need to be new creations in Jesus Christ and have the Holy Spirit's power flowing through us. Without that we would in most cases have no desire to even try in the first place. In fact this is good evidence of God's existence and presence in someone's life. Without Christ we are pretty helpless to love our enemies. So if we are going to look at what he says about how to do this we must rely on His great power to give us strength. From this passage these are three things that can help us strive to love our enemies. Bless them, Relate to them, and Stop seeking revenge.

So the first thing is to bless them. Look at verse 14 and verse 20. “<sup>14</sup>Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. And 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.” ” The command here is simple. Bless those people who hurt you. This is more than just wishing them well, avoiding hating them, or ignoring the hurt like water under the bridge. This is going out of your way to bless them. Like the verse says, if your enemy is hungry, feed him. Thirsty; give him a drink. Now why on Earth would we do that? Well the passage says that by doing so it would be like heaping burning coals on their head. So what does that mean? Well, many Bible footnotes and a few commentaries will claim that back in these times, when a neighbour's fire went out, that they would carry burning coals over in a basket on their heads to help them out, indicating that this passage would be suggesting that it is a blessing to heap burning coals on your enemies head. However, John Piper,

who I mentioned has done some quite extensive research on these verses and this topic, says that he cannot find any evidence that that was an actual custom at all. And I certainly couldn't find any indication that this was an actual practice. More likely it refers to the Justice that God will bring: mercy and blessing if they repent. And justice and wrath if they don't. " Piper actually puts it very well when he says "Our first and most urgent longing for our enemies is that they be blessed—that they repent and that they trust Christ and that his ransom pay all their debts and give them salvation. Yes, that is the goal. It's the goal of this whole chapter. Live so as to lead people into an enjoyment of the mercy of God." Consider how your enemies might be blessed by you and what reactions that might create with them. Do you have an annoying neighbour that won't keep their music down even after you have asked them repeatedly? Try blessing them. Do you have a spouse who has a growing disdain for you? Try blessing them. Do you have a person at school who is being a real jerk? Try blessing them. They may just respond well to that. If they don't, evil still doesn't win, but God's justice will always win.

Next in verse 15-16 it says <sup>15</sup>Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. <sup>16</sup>Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight" It is easy to rejoice with friends. It is easy to have empathy for and weep with friends. It is not so easy to do these with your enemy. Imagine a co-worker who teases you, disrespects you, or maybe backstabbed you at some point. Imagine that they get that promotion that they have been working hard for. Sure they may have done a good job for it, but it is difficult to rejoice with them. Or the bully at school who fails another math test. It is really difficult to feel any empathy – after all, they should have been studying instead of giving you swirlies. There's a lot we could unpack here, but I'd like to highlight the idea of relating to your enemies. Building solidarity between you. Exercising empathy towards them and perhaps even trying to imagine what they may be going through. I mean that bully could be going home to a family who doesn't show love well, or worse. That grumpy co-worker could be struggling with an out of control marriage at home and feels the need to have control at work. Or even scowling store clerk who treats you poorly could have layers and layers of reasons why they are so upset. By building solidarity between you and your enemies, you will better understand how to approach them, what their needs are so that you can bless them, and it will help change your heart towards them, which will make it easier to stop holding a grudge, stop hating them, and to better love them. We may never understand or learn their situation, but we can still withhold our judgement and anger towards them and choose to be empathetic. Ultimately this will help you do better and help stop cycles and patterns of abuse that may be going back and forth. And parents this is also important with your kids too. Just because you live with them, doesn't mean you know all that they are going through. There are lots of things they may not be telling you that is causing them to be extra argumentative towards you. And you may just never know what those things are. But you can still find ways to relate to them and live in harmony with them. And verse 16 points out that we should never think we are better than others. We should never think that we would be above such behavior. Everyone is so different and life has so many complicating factors, that we just can't judge someone unless we have walked a mile in their shoes. Because even if we would act differently in one situation doesn't mean we would make nice choices in the next. We have to trust that God will have his hand on the situation and we need to pray that God would reveal himself in and through the situation.

And that's kind of the final encouragement from these verses. Ultimately - God is in control and his Justice, Mercy, and Wrath will be perfectly executed. We don't need to judge for God. We don't need to extract revenge for God. Verses 17-19 say: <sup>17</sup>Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. <sup>18</sup>If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. <sup>19</sup>Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it<sup>[1]</sup> to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." But Ahh vengeance! Vengeance can feel so good! So many good movies are based around the good guys getting justice and vengeance over the bad guy. It's such a good movie plot! But in real life vengeance and revenge actually harms you. It leads you away from trusting in God's perfect righteousness and Justice, and your actions reveal doubt in His ability to take care of that person. It feels natural to seek our own revenge, but as a follower of Jesus who is striving to love their enemies, we are told that instead we need meet their needs: "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." <sup>21</sup>Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." If we seek revenge, we are trying to overcome evil with evil. We are fighting the wrong fight. That's not how we are called to live. I love the way Paul puts it in Ephesians. In the armor of God passage. He spends the chapters prior talking about various relationships that can be difficult, husband and wife, parents and kids, work relationships, and then in Chapter 6 verses 11 and 12 say: "Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. <sup>12</sup>For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places." In other words he is saying, there will be many difficult relationships and challenges, but our fight is not against flesh and blood. It's against the spiritual forces of evil. If you are trying to get revenge on your enemy, you have shown up on the wrong battlefield. You are missing it.

So to recap, Followers of Jesus Strive to love their enemies, and three encouragements that we can get from this passage on how we can actually do this is to: Bless our enemies, relate to them, and stop seeking revenge. When we do this we will put our trust fully into the deliverer of mercy, judgement, and justice. As you love your enemies, as you bless them, and find solidarity with them, you remove some of the harshness from the pain they have caused. And you become more like Jesus. **Because followers of Jesus strive to love their enemies.**

One quick story. The first one is me in grade 7. I began to be bullied by two individuals. This continued for years. At first I would try teasing them back, trying to bush back. But it just got worse. Grade 9 I became a Christian, and by grade 10 or 11 I had learned this idea of loving my enemies, so I began to lavish on the kindness. By the end of grade 12, one of them was still trying to be a tough guy and mean to me. I remember walking on the road and seeing him in the back of his pickup truck with some friends, and he was yelling some obscenities at me. I remember being so sad for him. The other person though, had actually begun to not only stop bullying and be civil to me, but even have conversations with one another. Last I heard, he had accepted Christ as his savior. It's weird to think that we have enemies. It's odd to think of people with that label. We sometimes try to re-categorize people to reduce the

harshness of words like hate and enemy. Yet even in the church we make enemies and struggle through difficult relationships. Yet imagine what your difficult relationships will look like when you start blessing and building empathy towards one another. Imagine the potential for healed relationships, for freedom from anger and bitterness, and for our God to be so glorified and magnified. This is what we must strive for: as far as it depends on us, to live at peace with everyone.

Let's pray.