

Refusing the Urge to Feud

The Grace Factor – Part VI

Romans 12:17-21

Introduction

Without a doubt, the most notorious family feud in American history was the bitter dispute between two families – the Hatfields and the McCoys. In fact, to this day, the expression “the Hatfields and the McCoys,” brings to most minds the idea of bad blood – squabbling and quarreling or carrying a grudge that will not die.

The feud between the Hatfields and the McCoys was real. They were two prominent, wealthy families with farms in Tug Valley. Their farms were on either side of a stream, named Tug Fork, that represented the border of Kentucky and West Virginia. The McCoys lived on the Kentucky side and the Hatfields lived on the West Virginia side.

Trouble began in 1878, when Randolph McCoy accused Floyd Hatfield of stealing one of his pigs. That offense was very serious back then, and it ended up in court. The McCoys, however, were unable to prove the crime. The bad feelings festered.

In 1882, one of the McCoy boys ran for public office. On election day, he was insulted by Ellison Hatfield. Three of McCoy’s sons retaliated by killing Hatfield’s son. The family patriarch, William Hatfield, took revenge by killing these three young McCoys.

The feud escalated at that point and was no longer a family matter. It spread along the border of Kentucky and West Virginia. In fact, both governors called in the National Guard to stop the fighting between the Hatfield supporters and those who supported the McCoys.

Finally, eight members of the Hatfield family were kidnapped in West Virginia and brought over the state line to stand trial in Kentucky. The states entered the legal battle, arguing for or against the right to try these men in Kentucky courts.

Eventually, the case went all the way to the United States Supreme Court, which ruled in favor of Kentucky. The trial went forward and eight Hatfield family members were found guilty of the death of Mr. McCoy’s daughter when they burned the McCoy’s farmhouse to the ground.

As a result of the verdict, one of the Hatfields was hung publicly, which is interesting, given the fact that public hangings were, by then, illegal. The other seven Hatfields were sentenced to life in prison.

The legendary feud between the Hatfields and McCoys is more than fiction – it is true. It began with an accusation and then, there were hurt feelings, followed by a violation of property rights, and finally, murder.

The Hatfields and the McCoys demonstrate, to this day, the ability of the human heart to add injury to insult – until the original issue is long forgotten. It all started with a stolen pig.

Mr. Hatfield could have said, “I’ll give Mr. McCoy one of my pigs in order to settle the matter;” or Mr. McCoy could have said, “I can live without one hog.” Neither thought a battle over a pig would cost the lives of some of their own children. In the end, twelve members of the Hatfield and McCoy families died, and a century of hatred became a part of Tug Valley.

How do you walk away from something before it gets out of hand? How do you stop a feud from ever starting?

Frankly, the answer to these questions will also protect you from bitterness and fragmented relationships. The answer happens to be God's design to protect us from our sinful nature, which finds it hard to resist retaliation.

In all of us, there is a yearning to get even. So, how do you refuse the urge to feud?

Beginning with verse 17 to the end of chapter 12 of Romans, Paul will start to answer that question, specifically from the vantage point of dealing with enemies – unkind people; people who insult you or ridicule you; people who are perhaps, even hostile. This is how the Hatfields should have treated the McCoy's and vice versa.

By the way, this medicine works both inside the church and outside the church.

How to Demonstrate Grace to a Graceless World

We could call the last few verses of Romans chapter 12, "How to Demonstrate Grace, in a Graceless World." The first thing Paul writes has to do with the very foundation of our resolve to be people of grace. Let me give six principles.

1. The first principle is: determine a non-negotiable position in life.

Notice the first part of **verse 17**.

Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. . .

The first word in this verse, translated "never," is a fascinating word. It has a deep meaning that could be lost without extensive etymological research, which I have attempted. The best Greek translation I could find of this word is the word "never"!

This is nonnegotiable. There are no loopholes in this. Grace *never* gets even. People of grace do not get even.

Wouldn't it be great if God had provided a loophole? Instead of "never," perhaps, "most of the time," or "if it doesn't involve physical pain or emotional duress". "I mean, c'mon, 'Never?'"

Ladies and gentlemen, if you ignore the resolution of Romans 12:17, if you make it anything other than nonnegotiable, and forget the rest of the chapter, then in fact, forget developing the grace factor in your own life. It will not happen! Looking

for opportunities to get back at someone immediately, stymies growth in grace.

To allow an insult or personal wrong to occupy your mind with revenge, is like putting a poisonous snake in your pocket and carrying it everywhere you go – to be bitten again and again. However, to ignore it or respond to it in grace, is to leave that snake on the ground where it belongs, while you move past it and become free of it.

Look at the grace of our Lord – who endured the cross. In truth, we would all like to be more like Jesus Christ. It might be the number one item on your prayer list – "Lord, I'd like to be more like You! Except for the nails . . . and the spear . . . and the betrayal . . . and the insults . . . and the loss."

What we mean when we say we would "like to be more like Jesus" is that we would like to have His perfections, but not His sufferings.

Yet, Philippians, chapter 2, takes us right to the heart of the insults and the betrayals and the humility and the sufferings, when it says, in verse 5,

Have this attitude in yourselves which was also [you see evidenced] in Christ Jesus,

Never pay back evil for evil.

It is as simple and straightforward as that. It is never right to get even.

"Oh, but," as one author wrote to Christians two centuries ago,

Have you never tasted the luxury of indulging in hard thoughts against those who have injured you? Have you never known the fascination of brooding over their unkindnesses, prying into their malice, imagining all sorts of wrong and uncomfortable things about them? It has made you wretched, of course, but it is a wretchedness that you cannot easily give up.ⁱ

Do not make the mistake of believing that just because you are a Christian, grace comes naturally; that it should be easy to respond to everyone with graciousness! There are times when you will fail to act like a Christian. And you may not believe this, but it is true – there are times when you do not even feel like a Christian!

Read Romans, chapter 7, again.

Do not lose heart – your feeler happens to be fallen, too! If you live by your emotions, you will easily be led astray. Our emotions are in as much of a need of transformation as our minds. We really come

face to face with our fallen feeler when we are at the receiving end of evil.

A few months ago, someone in our church sent an email to me with the following story. It begins with the question, “Am I really a polar bear?”

One day, a young polar bear cub approached his mother as she swam up to the snow covered shore with a fish in her mouth for him. “Mom,” he asked, “am I a polar bear?”

“Of course you are,” she replied with a smile.

“Okay,” said the cub as he padded off. A little later, he found his dad by an iceberg.

“Dad, am I a polar bear?”

“Sure you are, son!” said his dad, though wondering a bit why his son would ask such a silly thing.

The next day, the cub was at it again, asking the same question again and again.

“Are you and mom polar bears? Are you? You are? Well, then, does that make me a polar bear? I mean, does it make me a pure, one hundred percent polar bear?”

Finally, his parents could not stand it any longer. “Son,” they growled, “you’re driving us crazy with this question. You are a polar bear. Why do you keep asking?”

The cub looked up at them and confessed, “Because – I’m freezing!”

The cub thought, “I must not be a polar bear because none of this suits me!”

Maybe you have gone to your heavenly Father, in real life, with a question like, “Am I really Your child? How can I be Your child while at the same time, feeling so unsuited to this life; this call of grace? How can I have feelings of cold resentment; desires to get even; anger welling up inside my heart?”

There are times when you would admit, “I feel more like a Hatfield than I do a Christian.”

Listen to Paul as he implies in verse 17, “Because you are a Christian, don’t pay attention to how you feel, pay attention to how you act.”

You might feel entirely unsuited to this thing called grace. You might feel like paying back evil for evil.

Paul says, “Act graciously, even when you don’t feel gracious at all.”

This is a non-negotiable,

Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. . . .

Period!

This is just the beginning.

2. The second act of grace in a graceless world is: develop a lifestyle of purity.

Paul writes further in **verse 17**,

. . . Respect what is right in the sight of all men.

The word translated “respect” is a compound verb, “pro,” meaning “first,” and “noeo,” meaning “to think”. This could literally be rendered,

Think first; think beforehand.

What are you thinking about? You are thinking about what is right, “kalos”; what is honorable and pure and good.

Paul used this word often.

Paul told Timothy to instruct wealthy people to, *. . . do good, to be rich in good works . . . (I Timothy 6:18)*

He told Titus to instruct the young men to, *in all things show [themselves] to be an example of good deeds . . . (Titus 2:7)*

Once, when Paul referred to the money he was handling, he said,

. . . we are taking pains to do what is right, not only in the eyes of the Lord, but also in the eyes of men. (II Corinthians 8:21 NIV)

In Romans 12:17, Paul is challenging the believer to think beforehand of what is the right way to live, while at the same time, living in a culture that no longer knows what is right.

In our culture, there is no applause for moral goodness. In fact, we are now condemning moral purity and applauding moral depravity.

Last year in our city, middle school and high school students were encouraged to spend a day in silence, in honor of those who have chosen a homosexual lifestyle.

We live in a state where gambling via the lottery is now acceptable and considered a virtue which will save our educational woes.

We live in a country where sexual acts before marriage and outside of marriage can be considered “safe”.

What is right? What is wrong?

We happen to live in a country that no longer believes the moral goodness of God's commandments.

In one study, over a broad cross section of the country, involving thousands of people, only 40% of the people interviewed even believed five of the commandments.ⁱⁱ

Long before the Ten Commandments were being rejected from our courtrooms, they had been rejected by our culture.

You, as a believer, had better get out of bed in the morning and spend some time thinking ahead, "What is right?"

By the way, when Paul says to do what is right in the sight of all men, he does not mean to do what all men say is right. Paul means to do what is right in the sight of all men. No matter who is looking, do what is right!

Understand that the grace factor involves, "not only being spiritual, but being ethical."ⁱⁱⁱ

Do not fool yourself – a truly spiritual Christian is an ethical Christian.

If you are a Christian and you want to grow in Christ, accept no personal justification for cheating on an exam or pulling a term paper off the internet; make no allowances for fudging on a business expense form or on your taxes.

"Do what is right – in the sight of all men." That is another way that Paul is reminding us to, "Do what is right – people are watching."

Do not get even.

Do what is right.

3. The third principle is: display a desire for peace.

Paul writes in **verse 18**,

If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men.

I love the realism of the apostle Paul. He says, . . . *be at peace with all men.*

However, Paul then gives two real life conditions. Let me point them out to you.

- The first condition is, "*If possible*".

Why did Paul write this? Because it is not always possible!

I happen to know that every time I preach, I may make brand new enemies. In fact, I may have less peace with you now, than I did fifteen minutes ago.

Jesus Christ said that His truth would not bring peace all the time, but a sword. It would not create unity among everyone, in fact, it would bring division to many.

In nearly every city that the apostle Paul went to, he created a riot.

It might not be possible!

- The second condition that Paul adds is, "*so far as it depends on you*".

Why did Paul write this? Because it does not always depend on you!

You might be dealing with an ornery neighbor, or a stubborn relative, or an unreasonable co-worker. A peaceful relationship is a two-way street. Paul is simply telling us to make sure that our side of the street is open.

We should make sure that we are not the ones holding out with a grudge or bitterness or a refusal to forgive.^{iv}

Paul is saying, "If it's possible, and if the ball is in your court, don't hold back – offer peace!"

This is hard, isn't it? It is easy to hang on to hurt – to put the snake in your pocket. One author wrote it this way, "to put it in a pot on the stove so you can check on it every once in a while . . . so you can periodically stir it back up."

You only end up being the loser.

I read of one married couple who were having a quarrel and ended by giving each other the silent treatment. A week into their mute argument, the man realized he needed his wife's help. In order to catch a flight to Atlanta for a business meeting, he had to get up at 5:00 a.m. Not wanting to be the first to restore peace and break the silence, he wrote his wife a note and handed it to her. It said, "Please wake me up at 5:00 a.m."

The next morning, the man woke up to discover that his wife was already out of bed, it was 7:30 in the morning, and his flight had long since departed. He was about to find his wife and demand an explanation, when he noticed a piece of paper by his pillow which read, "It's 5:00 a.m. – wake up."

Do not get even.

Do what is right.

Do not wait to offer peace.

4. The fourth principle of grace in a graceless world is: do not forget future prophecy.

Paul writes in **verse 19**.

Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay,” says the Lord.

The judgment of God is coming on all unbelievers.

The apostle Paul has already taught us that the wrath of God is being stored up – literally stockpiling, sin upon sin.

God could judge man immediately, but, as Paul has already written in Romans 2:4, God is forbearing. The word “forbearance” means, “to hold back; to delay”.

One of the gifts of grace toward unbelieving mankind is that God does not strike him dead at the first word of blasphemy. However, mankind has made the mistaken calculation that because judgment has not come, judgment never will.

Peter wrote,

. . . mockers will come with their mocking, following after their own lusts, and saying, “Where is the promise of His coming? . . .” (II Peter 3:3-4)

Even today, the unbeliever says, “Surely God would never judge the world; surely God would never send anyone to hell. I can’t imagine God doing all those things you say the Bible says He’s going to do one day.”

In his arrogance, mankind believes they are wiser than God, that they know better than God. That is the reason Paul says that the unbelieving world “looks down on the forbearance of God.”

What does that have to do with Romans 12:19? Everything, according to Paul! He evidently thought the connection was significant between treating enemies with grace and the fact that God’s grace will one day end.

Paul writes in verse 19,

Never take . . . revenge . . . leave room for God [to deliver judgment].

The prophecy will be fulfilled; God will repay. That word translated “repay” is startling. It means to personally and accurately pay back.^v

By the way, God’s vengeance is not a personal vendetta – it is a judicial verdict. He will carefully and accurately judge the world.

There will be the judgment of the believers – at the judgment seat of Christ (II Corinthians 5). This is not to see if the believer is going to heaven, but to

reward the believer for the way he lived in the light of heaven.

There will be an entirely different judgment of the unbelievers at the great white throne judgment (Revelation 20). The books of their deeds will be opened; not to see if they are going to be cast into hell, but to understand why.

Every mouth, at that awful judgment, will be closed. There will be no excuses; no alibis; no defenses; not even a prayer.

Paul says, in verse 19, that they will one day be judged and condemned to an eternal hell, and in light of that awful prophecy, do not even try to make them pay for what they do to you. One day they will pay in a way you could never even imagine.

If anything, this should provoke an attitude, not of revenge, but pity.

It is no wonder that Paul moves to the next demonstration of grace.

5. The fifth principle is: demonstrate specific acts of pity.

Paul writes in verse 20,

But if your enemy is hungry, feed him, and if he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.

This sounds more like it! We are going to be able to enact a little revenge – heap burning coals of fire on his head.

However, this would not make sense. If you feed him and give him water to drink, how does that heap burning coals upon his head?

The first two actions are obviously understood – food and water for your enemies. The third phrase is more difficult to understand because we do not carry coals of fire on our heads – but they did.

Those, in fact, even of a generation or two ago, knew the value of hot coals. You never let your fire go out in days gone by, unless you wanted to work extra hard at starting a new fire and then, working it until you had a hot bed of coals that you could easily regulate in a stove to cook.

In Bible times, it was even more important because ready matches were not in the cupboard. If an individual did not keep his hearth fire going all the time, he could not cook or keep warm. He would be in a desperate situation. He would have to go to a neighbor for some live coals from their fire. His neighbor would put some in a container and, in

typical fashion, the man would balance it on his head and carry those coals back to his home.

Now neighbors did not necessarily live right next door. If the kind neighbor was not feeling too friendly, he might give him a few coals. Paul refers, in verse 20, to heaping coals of fire on his head, or in other words, to giving him a large pile to ensure that if the man had to travel any distance at all, he would be more likely to get home with the coals still burning.

So Paul is saying, if you feed your enemy and give him water to drink – you will be like a kind neighbor who gives his desperate friend heaping coals of fire so he can cook for himself and keep himself warm.^{vi}

Do not miss this. Paul is saying, in effect, to have pity on your enemy who will one day stand before God and be condemned. You are giving food to one who will one day be hungry; you are giving water to one who will thirst and never be able to drink again. You are showing grace to someone who will one day see the day of grace end forever.

6. The final act of grace in a graceless world is: depend daily upon God's power.

Paul writes in verse 21,

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

These imperatives could be translated, “Do not let the evil gain one victory after another over you, but in one battle after another, gain a victory over the evil.”^{vii}

It is one battle at a time. Overcoming is one victory at a time.

The word “overcome” is the Greek word that gives us our transliterated word “Nike,” which means, “to carry off in victory”.

To us, that word has become synonymous with sports. Paul says it is synonymous with grace.

This is how you win in life! Initiating an injury to your enemy causes you to lose; getting revenge for

what your enemy did to you causes you to tie; giving your enemy grace means you win.

Conclusion

You will need this grace to refuse the urge to feud – to not live in Tug Valley where a grudge lasted a generation; where everyone lost.

If you can believe it, one hundred twenty five years after that pig was missing in Kentucky, the descendants of the Hatfields and the McCoys called for an official peace treaty to be signed. They were frankly, tired of being a byword for feuding and fighting. Although the treaty was largely symbolic, the governor of Kentucky and the governor of West Virginia were there when the families met and the treaty was signed.

Listen to the words of this treaty, signed by the Hatfields and the McCoys on June 14, 2003,

We do hereby and formally declare an official end to all hostilities, implied, inferred, and real between the families, now and forevermore. We ask by God's grace and love

...

I found it interesting to read, tucked inside that peace treaty, a reference to the grace of God.

That is well said, too. The grace of God was the answer. The feud ended on that note.

If you never want to pitch your tent in Tug Valley, you not only need to receive the grace of God, but you need to dispense it, freely and repeatedly.

How?

- Do not get even.
- Do what is right.
- Do not avoid peace.
- Do not forget the future
- Demonstrate acts of pity.
- Daily rely upon God – one victory at a time.

These six decisions will keep you from ever joining up with the Hatfields and the McCoys.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 10/2/2005 by Stephen Davey.

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ⁱ Hannah Whitehall Smith, “The Christian’s Secret of a Happy Life,” *Christianity Today*, vol. 31, no. 4.

ⁱⁱ James Montgomery Boice, *Romans: Volume 4* (Baker Books, 1995), p. 1613.

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- iii Roy L. Laurin, Romans: Where Life Begins (Kregel, 1988), p. 431.
- iv John MacArthur, Romans: Volume Two (Moody Press, 1994), p. 202.
- v William R. Newell, Romans (Moody Press, 1938), p. 476.
- vi Woodrow Kroll, Romans: Righteousness in Christ (AMG Publishers, 2002), p. 204.
- vii R. C. H. Lenski, The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans (Augsburg, 1936), p. 782.