

### Guidelines on How to Relate to Unbelievers

#### Romans 12:14-21

Romans 12:14-21 - *"Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. <sup>15</sup> Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep. <sup>16</sup> Be of the same mind toward one another. Do not set your mind on high things, but associate with the humble. Do not be wise in your own opinion.*

*<sup>17</sup> Repay no one evil for evil. Have regard for good things in the sight of all men. <sup>18</sup> If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men. <sup>19</sup> Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay," says the Lord. <sup>20</sup> Therefore "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in so doing you will heap coals of fire on his head." <sup>21</sup> Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."*

#### Background Notes

In Romans 12 the apostle Paul, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, urged believers to **be what we believe** -- to do in practice what we **believe** in doctrine. The chapter begins with our responsibility to live a godly life on a personal and individual level (v1-2). Then we move on to our responsibility to use our spiritual gifts in the body of Christ (v3-8). In verses 9-13, we moved on to our responsibility to relate to fellow believers in a positive way, so that peace and harmony are maintained in our churches and fellowships.

Now, in verses 14-21, we learn of our responsibilities in reference to unbelievers. Remember that when Paul wrote this letter to the Roman Christians in the 1st century, Christians were already beginning experience persecution from the pagan Roman authorities and the Roman populace. However, at the same time, slaves who were Christians were bringing higher prices, and the pagan world could not deny that the Christians showed love for one another -- and for their enemies as well! It's against this background that Paul wrote to the Roman Christians to instruct them on how to relate to unbelievers in all of these situations.

This is a letter by Paul written only to the Roman Christians in the 1st century, but it's also the Word of God to us today. We live in a real world and we shouldn't try to escape it. We must relate to unbelievers. How do we do it? Romans 12:14-21 gives us the answer with eight guidelines, which we'll put in a "dos and don'ts" format.

## Doctrinal Point

The biblical guidelines for peace with fellow men that the godly believer should practice are:

### 1. Don't bad-mouth people.

v14 *"Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse..." (v14)*. Do you bad-mouth a difficult colleague at work? Do you get back at a non-Christian neighbor who antagonizes you? Or do you bless these people? In Matthew 5:44 the Lord Jesus said, *"But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you..."* Think of what our Lord Jesus said from the cross at His crucifixion: *"Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do"* (Luke 23:34). Think of what Stephen said as he was stoned to death as a martyr: *"Lord, lay not this sin to their charge"* (Acts 7:60). It was Stephen's prayer of forgiveness that became a link in the apostle Paul's salvation! So don't bad-mouth people.

### 2. Do identify with people.

*"Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep. <sup>16</sup> Be of the same mind toward one another"* (v15). This guideline emphasizes how we're to identify with people. Not all non-Christians are out to persecute us -- in fact, the average non-believer is willing to be your friend. We're all going through life together, we all have similar problems, and we all have similar experiences, so when unbelievers experience sorrow, such as a death in the family, we should weep with them. When unbelievers experience something good, such as a raise in salary or a better job, we should rejoice with them. Did you know that it's often easier to weep with a person than to rejoice with them? When things are going well for our unbelieving friends and neighbors, there's a tendency for us to feel just a little bit jealous, right? But we are to rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep.

Could this be a form of evangelism? In fact it is: it is called relationship evangelism! You can build relationships with others by rejoicing with them and weeping with them. You can "walk across the bridge" right there and evangelize. Do identify with people.

### 3. Don't think you're better than other people.

*"Do not set your mind on high things, but associate with the humble. Do not be wise in your own opinion"* (v16). Let me ask you a question. Do you **have** to live on the "right side of the tracks," and does your home **have** to be in the most "select" neighborhood? If so, why? What's the real reason? Does the social status of your friends mean a lot to you? Do you really think that you're better than people who are on a "lower rung" of the socio-economic ladder? The phrase, "do not be wise in your own opinion" means, "don't be conceited!" Don't have too high an opinion of yourself. It's God's opinion that counts. Don't think that you're better than other people!

#### 4. Don't try to get back at people.

*“Repay no one evil for evil” (v17).* Do you try to get back at people? When someone at work or a neighbor says something or does something to hurt you, do you look for an opportunity to “return the favor”? Don't repay evil for evil, because do you know what will happen? You will be **overcome with evil!** That's the point of verse 21: *“Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”* If you continue the vicious cycle of trying to get back at people, you will be consumed and overcome by evil. You will die a bitter and sorry Christian. Don't try to get back at people.

#### 5. Do avoid suspicion.

*“Have regard for good things in the sight of all men” (v17).* The idea here is that we not only abstain from wrongdoing, but we do everything we can to avoid even the suspicion of wrongdoing. Here's how the New International Version translates this verse: *“Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody.”*

Our actions before others are important. You might think it doesn't matter how your actions appear to others as long as you feel you're right in your own heart before the Lord in what you're doing. Well, appearances **do** matter. Don't even borrow tools from the workshop or office supplies from the office if it looks like you're taking advantage of your employer. I can guarantee you that the unbeliever who sees you will surely be suspicious -- and may even accuse you. Do avoid suspicion.

#### 6. Do strive for peace.

*“If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men” (v18).* As much as possible, we should try to live at peace with our unbelieving neighbors and colleagues and contacts – even if it means getting stepped on a few times.

When I was a boy, one of our neighbors put up a split rail fence between our yard and his. He actually placed the fence about six inches over on our property so that a particularly nice lilac bush would be included on his side of the fence. My mother was upset, but I'll never forget my father's reaction. I overheard him tell my mother, “It's OK, dear -- we can still enjoy the flowers!” Amazing! My father was a great witness to this man as a result. He was great example of this verse. Do strive for peace.

#### 7. Do let God “zap” people!

*“Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, “Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,” says the Lord.” (v19).* Did you ever wish that God would “zap” a certain person -- maybe a really nasty boss, or a crabby teacher, or a difficult neighbor? Maybe they really did hurt you! Well, God may do just that -- but **we** are not to do the zapping! **Never take your own revenge.** We leave all of that in the hands of God. Instead of revenge, we follow guideline #8 – don't be overcome by the evil that other people do to you, but overcome their evil with good.

## 8. Overcome the evil that people do with good.

*“Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (v21).* Notice that this verse is written in a “people” context. How do we deal with the evil that unbelievers do to hurt us? We overcome it with good!

Last Thanksgiving Margie and I put on a dinner in our apartment. (When I say Margie and I, actually she did all the work!) We invited all our new neighbors in our apartment complex. One young man was totally surprised that we invited him because in the conversations that I had had with him up to this point, he had mocked Christianity. He had said he thought that all Christians were hypocrites (etc., etc.), so he was totally amazed that we invited him. Why did we do that, anyway? We were practicing Romans 12:20-21, *“If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in so doing you will heap coals of fire on his head.”* <sup>21</sup> *Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”*

Since that time, this neighbor has shown a completely different attitude. Overcome the evil in people with good.

### Practical Application

#### Your kindness will have an effect on the unbeliever.

*“Therefore if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in so doing you will heap coals of fire on his head.”* (v20).

What does “heaping coals of fire on a person’s head” mean, anyway? Well, it certainly doesn’t mean adding fuel to the fire of the person’s eternal punishment! No -- it means that our acts of kindness will bring a burning shame to the unbeliever.

Notice that it doesn’t say **maybe** our kindness will have this effect on an unbeliever’s conscience -- the verse says that our acts of kindness **will** have this kind of effect on the unbeliever! So if we show kindness to the unbeliever and do our best to overcome evil with good, then we can be sure that our kindness will have an effect on the unbeliever. So don’t say that your kindness doesn’t have an effect -- it **does** have an effect!

When an unbeliever’s conscience is affected, the unbeliever will experience either a negative response and a hardening of the heart, or a positive response and a softening of the heart. As Romans 2:4 indicates, *“Or do you despise the riches of His goodness, forbearance, and longsuffering, not knowing that the goodness of God leads you to repentance?”* Remember, your kindness **will** have an effect on the conscience of the unbeliever.