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Title: Surprising People
Text: Romans 13

Introduction

One of things I like to do when I have some time off is to play some golf. And what you do when you play golf is you go to the first hole, get out your golf ball and a little plastic tee and you look down that long fair way to the flag somewhere in the distance and your brain says to itself I have to bash this ball with my golf club as hard as I possibly can.

But anyone who has ever played any golf knows, that's about the worse thing you can do. You actually have to take the club back quite slowly and bring it forward with rhythm and co-ordination to get it to go a long way. You have to do the opposite of what you brain is telling you is logical.

Likewise when you hitch up your caravan to a car and head off on holidays. When you get there and you have to reverse, you brain says to get the caravan to go left you have turn left, but the reality is you have to go the opposite way. You have turn your steering wheel right. The opposite of what you brain is telling you is logical.

And similarly when you become a Christian, sometimes you have to do the opposite of what you brain is saying. Because we have to offer ourselves to God as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to Him. And this can only happen when you conform no longer to the pattern of this world but *when you become transformed by the renewing of your mind*. We can't always do what our minds tell us to do, we need to keep reminding ourselves of our natural tendency to sin, to be selfish. We have to keep recalling how God has been gracious and loving and merciful to us. And we have to start behaving how God wants us to behave, not how our minds make us think.

1. Not revenge but do good (Romans 12:17-21)

So Paul now turns to the question of relationships with our enemies and he says in verses 17 -21 that when our brain tells us to take revenge we should instead do good. In fact when we look at these verses we see four striking negatives. Just before it in verse 14 we have the command, *do not curse*. In verse 17, *do not repay anyone evil for evil*. In verse 19, *do not take revenge*. And in verse 21 *do not be overcome by evil*.

All four prohibitions say the same thing in different words. That is retaliation and revenge are absolutely forbidden for the followers of Jesus. He himself never hit back in word or in deed. And in spite of our inbuilt tendency for retribution, whether that be a child's tit for tat or an adults determination to get even, Jesus calls us to do the opposite of what our brains say, and instead be like Him.

I was reading recently a true story about a soldier fighting over in Iraq who received a letter from his girl friend that said she was breaking up with him. She also asked him to send the picture she had given him when he left because she needed it for her bridal announcement.

The soldier was heart broken and told his friends of his terrible situation. So his whole platoon got together and brought all their pictures of their girlfriends, and put them in a box and gave them to him. So he put her picture in the box with the rest, along with a note that said, "I'm sending back your picture to you. Please remove it and send back the rest. For the life of me I can't remember which one you are."

Now there is something satisfying about that sort of response isn't there, she's getting what she deserved. But the Christian is not to act like that, not to behave like that.

But what Paul is saying is not just negative, but positive. So in verse 14, we are not to curse but *to bless*. And in verses 17 and 18 we are not to retaliate, but *to do what is right and to live at peace*. According to verses 19 and 20 we are not to take revenge *but to leave this to God and in meantime we are to serve our enemies*. And in verse 21 we are not to be overcome by evil, but *to overcome evil with good*.

You see to refuse to repay evil for evil is to refuse to inflame the quarrel. But that is not enough. We also have to take the initiative in positive peacemaking, even though at times, Paul readily admits it won't always be possible. For sometimes other people are not willing to live at peace with you, but we must always look for reconciliation with them, unless it involves unacceptable moral compromise. We need to act in a way that turns our enemies into our friends.

Now Paul knows that this is hard. He himself has been bashed and beaten and whipped by people who have acted as his enemies. But this teaching should stop us in our tracks and make us think hard about our own behaviour. So before we blame others, we should try and respond rightly ourselves. And instead of looking for loopholes, we should seek to hear and obey.

And in our thinking and living it is important to keep these negatives and positives together. It is good not to retaliate, because if we repay evil for evil, we double it, adding a second evil to the first, and so increasing the tally of evil in our world. It is even better to be positive, to bless, to do good, to seek peace and to serve and convert our enemy, because if we repay evil with good, we actually reduce the tally of evil in the world, while at the same increasing the tally of good. This is the way of the cross.

When the first missionaries came to Alberta, Canada, they were savagely opposed by a young chief of the Cree Indians named Maskepetoon. But after a number of years he responded to the gospel and accepted Christ. Shortly afterwards though, a member of the Blackfoot tribe killed his father.

Maskepetoon rode into the village where the murderer lived and demanded that he be brought before him. Confronting the guilty man, he said, "You have killed my father, so now you must be my father. You shall ride my best horse and wear my best clothes. Tell your people that this is the way Maskepetoon takes revenge."

In utter amazement and remorse his enemy exclaimed, "My son, now you have killed me!" He meant, of course, that the hate in his own heart had been completely erased by the forgiveness and kindness of the Indian chief. He continued "Never in the history of my people has such a thing as this been known. My people and all men will

say 'The young Chief is brave and strong and good. He stands alone.'

Now why should we behave like this? Because it is God's role to avenge evil. It is God's role to bring about justice. And he will do it without pride, or rage, or bias. And surprisingly one of the ways he does do it, is through government authorities. And so Paul starts talking about our response to the government of the day. And he says when it comes to the government, surprisingly

2. We should not rebel but submit to their authority. (verses 1-7)

Why? Because God has placed that very government in power. He established it. He instituted it. He gave it the power to wield the sword. That means the Labor governments in NSW & Qld are in power only because God has given that position to them. That means the federal government in Canberra is in power only because God has given that position to them. Now depending on your political persuasion - that might be a bit hard to swallow.

But just to make it even more radical than that, let me put it this way. Every king and queen is in power only because God has given that position to them. Every dictator is in power only because God has given that position to them. We see something of this in Jesus words where he's before Pilate & Pilate's about to do the unjust and cowardly thing of handing Jesus over to execution. Now Pilate is not a model leader. But Jesus says - "You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above"

That is why we need to pay our taxes. Sure we can claim legitimate deductions, but we can't forget about those cash payments, we can't fudge the books. Because we are then robbing God's servants. That is why we need to give them respect & honour. Sure the people themselves may not always deserve our honour & respect, but the position is that of God's servant & so if we fail to respect them we are not respecting God Himself. And if the authorities fail to do the right thing then they will be answerable to God but if we fail to do the right thing, we too will be answerable to God.

So what if our governments do the wrong thing, if they exceed their authority, if they enact laws that go against God's laws? Well we are to submit right up to the point where obedience to the state would entail disobedience to God. So if the state commands what God forbids or forbids what God commands, then our plain Christian duty is to resist not submit, to disobey the government in order to obey God. As Peter & the other apostles put it to the Sanhedrin in Acts 5, "We must obey God not men."

But I would think that the way that Christian's rebel may be unique also. We might organise a sit in or stop work meeting or obstruct the police but it should be a civil protest not civil disobedience. Like Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego when asked to worship the statue of Nebuchadnezzar, their protest was a quiet one, not a violent one. Like when the apostles continued to preach when the Sanhedrin banned their preaching. Like when Daniel continued to pray despite the edict against prayer.

All these were at great personal cost and great personal risk and even possible risk of their life. But their actions showed their submission to God, more than their defiance

of the government.

As John Piper has put it, *“As long as authorities punish only what is evil and praise only what is good, submission to God will always conform to submission to the authorities. But if the authorities ever begin to punish the good and reward the bad (as has repeatedly happened in church history) then submission to God will bring us into conflict with the authorities. So the command to be subject in verses 1 and 5 is not absolute, it depends on whether subjection will involve us in doing wrong.”*

So we Christians need to be good citizens. Sure we can be robust in the political arena. Sure we can write letters, stand for parliament, debate laws. We in our modern democratic state have every right, in fact an obligation even to be involved. Apathy is not an option. But unless a law directly goes against God’s law, we should obey it. And we should set an example of obedience. Out of our submission to God.

And this really is for a lot of the time going to be the only motivation. We all know there are times when if we don't submit to the authorities, there's no chance of getting caught. We drive over the speed limit through some back suburban streets, knowing that the police never bother setting up a speed camera around there. We don't declare some extra income on our tax return because it was cash in hand and no one's ever going to find out. We download music and get pirated DVD movies - understanding that it's a crime no one's ever going to police it.

In those situations - the fear of punishment is not very real. But how about doing what's right because the laws come from God's governing servants. And how about doing what's right - because we realise to rebel against these laws is to rebel against God?

So we are not to take revenge, we are not judge, instead we are to leave it in the hands of the authorities. We need to be a bit like Anita Coby’s (not Corby!) Dad, Gary. If you remember that horrendous murder of Anita Coby a few years back in Sydney. Well after the trial and subsequent sentencing of those involved, Gary was quoted as saying, that every day he prays for those men. But he went on to say they are also in the right spot, in prison, and are getting what they deserve, punishment. Do you see the balance? Leave it to the state to do the judgement, for he wont do it himself.

As Christians we are to be surprising people. Not revenge but good. Not rebellious but submissive. And lastly **3. Not harm but love.**

For it is not enough just to follow the commandments, do not murder, do not steal, do not covet. We need to fulfil these commandments & the way we do that is to love our neighbour *as we love ourselves*. **No** Jesus put this way, *love our neighbour as I have loved you*.

How did Jesus love you? He left the comforts of heaven and took on flesh and dwelt among us. He served us as he taught, modelled, and lived a life of love. He died on the cross, for our sins. He went to hell to take our punishment, but he returned on the third day and right now he is as the right hand side of God pleading for us, interceding before the Father for you and me. And until he comes again to take us to the Father, he has sent us His Holy Spirit, so that we are never, ever alone.

God's love for us, is so great, that we have racked up a debt of love, that we can never, ever repay. So Paul tells us in verse 8, "*let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another.*"

Let no debt remain outstanding. Being in debt means that someone has a claim on you - it may be money, or time or a favour, but they have a claim, an obligation, over you. So be very careful about your debts. So if you borrow something from someone, pay it back quickly. Otherwise your hands may be tied when you want to serve Christ and you are stuck serving someone else. So don't live beyond your means. Be careful about your credit cards. Think seriously whether you want to go into debt by buying that new car, it may tie you down in the future. Don't be swamped with such a big mortgage that in the future you can't respond and do what God wants you to do.

There was a couple in our Church a few years ago that decided to buy an investment property because financially it made good sense. But it wasn't around here and the tenants they got in weren't the best. And so for the next couple of years they missed Church almost every week as they tried to deal with their investment, as they worked extra hours to pay of the debt, and during that time their faith went backwards.

"Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another."
Remember the debt you have to God and he wants you to pay it off to those who are around you that are created in his image. To the women in the nursing home. To your next door neighbour, to the young couple down the road. Show them God's love. Hold their hands. Mind their kids. Pray for them. Get involved in their lives. For God has loved you like that. And love is the defining characteristic for us Christians.

But notice we will never pay off that debt. I get my credit card account each month and I can always write a cheque and suddenly it is gone. But I can never say that I have loved enough. There are always more people and more circumstances to show God's love. And I am under an obligation from God, to love and to keep loving. To try and pay it off, even though I never will pay off my perpetual debt of love to God.

Why should I do this? Because I need to understand the present time. Jesus will soon return. He will come back and take his own to himself. So I need to get rid of my deeds of darkness and clothe myself in the armour of light. So I shouldn't repay evil for evil, they will get what they deserve on that last day. I should let the government of our day get on with the job of running our country, they will to answer to a higher authority. But I too will also come under God's judgement.

Its not just those who do evil to me. Its not just those corrupt government officials, but when Jesus comes back to this earth he will ask me, he will ask you, how did you go in paying off your debt to love? Did you respond any differently? Was I found with sin's clothes upon my body or with the Christ's righteousness all over me?

A couple of years ago the secret of life Ted Haggard, the head of US Coalition of Evangelical Churches was outed for all to see. But one day God will out our secret thoughts and actions and I don't think that is going to be very pleasant for any of us.

Friends we need to be surprising people. Doing good not revenge. Submissive not

rebellious. Loving not harming. For what we do will come back to us. Let me end with a story that Louis Mayer wrote about, from his childhood in New Brunswick, Canada. You see Louis had gotten into a fight at school when he was quite a small boy, and he was feeling bitter, filled with resentment and a desire for revenge. His body hurt, but his mind hurt more. And he lashed out with both fists and tongue.

The next day he was out in the country on a family picnic, and his Mum called Louis aside: "Louis, come here a moment. I want to show you something." She took him to a little clearing that faced a rugged, towering mountain on all sides. "Now, Louis," she told him, "say what I heard you say yesterday."

Louis began to feel embarrassed and he protested: "But I don't remember saying anything wrong." His mother persisted: "I do," she replied. "You said 'I curse you!'" "Yes, I remember now," he said.. She touched his arm gently. Say it now," she commanded. Louis repeated it as quietly as he could. His mother smiled patiently. "Louder, son, say it louder. Whatever you say, you must be willing to say it as loud as you can, to shout it for all to hear."

He didn't want to do it, but it never occurred to him to disobey his mother. So he faced the mountains and he shouted at the top of his lungs: " I curse you!" Right back it came, like thunder, "*I curse you*". Like a voice from heaven it denounced him. Now, said his mother. Try it another way. Say, "Bless you!" instead. Louis took a long breath and yelled, "Bless you!" Back it came at him, strong and clear "Bless you!" "Which do you prefer, son?" his mother asked. "It's entirely up to you. Whatever you say to others and to the world returns to you."

Friends God is a just God. He has freed you from law of sin and death. He has given you an incredible well full of love. So let us love. And see what God does in return.