

Love Rules: Romans 12:14-21, "Let's Be Peacemakers", 1/31/21

Title Slide Recap: Chapter 12 is a pivot point in Paul's letter. Paul tells us that in view of the gospel our only reasonable response is whole life surrender in worship to God. And the immediate application of this spills over into our relationships with others. The rest of chapter 12 is about loving others as an act of worship to God- we serve one another v.3-8, there is a unique love displayed in the body of Christ- Verses 9-13, and now we get to verses 14-21- We are called to love even those we perceive to be our enemies. Oh how we need this truth today as a balm for our souls. Today we live and breath in a **culture of contempt**. While COVID may be the physical pandemic infecting our bodies, contempt is the spiritual pandemic infecting our souls.

Contempt is the toxic mix of hatred and superiority. Of hostility and degradation. Contempt has been on full display in 2020. But it's not just out there, it dwells among the people of God today. Contempt for those who don't agree with our political views, or our understanding of social problems. Contempt for those who don't share our theology and convictions. Contempt for the poor or the rich. Contempt toward the young or the old. Contempt for minority culture or majority culture. Contempt causes us to dismiss entire segments of society and destroys the social fabric of our lives. The pandemic of contempt can destroy long-held friendships, workplaces, parental and sibling relationships and yes, relationships in the church. As one pastor said recently, **"America was founded on the slogan: *e pluribus unum*, 'out of many one', but that fragile union seems to be collapsing before our eyes and replaced with another Latin phrase: *ex uno plures*, 'out of one, many.'"**

Contempt feasts on our souls. It is insidious. We justify our contempt because we deem the object of our contempt to be evil, but in the process we ourselves become evil. Like the ring in the Lord of the ring, contempt corrupts anyone who wears it. But in Romans 12, Paul speaks of another way to overcome evil, with something good. There is a vaccine for this virus of contempt- summed up in the ancient virtue- HONOR. **Romans 12:10- Honor one another above yourselves.** I want to give you a vision this morning- **what if we replaced a culture of contempt with a culture of honor in our sphere of influence?** Honor is one of the most beautiful and neglected virtues in the world today. Honor has the power to transform relationships, churches, communities...and our country as a whole. Now we typically think of honor as something reserved for our tribe, those who we deem worthy. But as we will see this morning, Christian honor extends even to the other tribes, to those we believe to be our enemies. Christian honor is the call to recognize the inherent value of every individual as an image bearer of God, embody the love of Christ toward sinners, and to order our interactions around it. Honor is the operating system of the kingdom of Jesus that he preached in the Sermon on the Mount which Paul echoes powerfully in these verses.

Here in Romans 12:14-21 Paul is going to show us **3 Vital Practices to Replace Contempt Culture with Honor Culture**. I'm going to organize the passage not necessarily in order of the verses, but theme.

Practice #1 Dignify NOT Demonize

Romans 12:10 *Honor one another above yourselves. ^{16b} Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.*

Contempt sees classes to be defeated or dismissed not people. Contempt devalues and demonizes people by labeling and putting them into lower classes. And when we do that it becomes easier and easier to see them as less than human, less than made in the image of God. **Jon Tyson, Beautiful Resistance [Picture]** “All atrocities including the holocaust and the Rwandan genocide started by lowering the value of others and justifying the right to dismiss and ultimately destroy them. Bonhoeffer faced this exact challenge with the Jews of his day. The German church treated the Jews with contempt, and in devaluing and dehumanizing them, they were complicit in the deaths of over 6 million people made in the image of God. Though we may reassure ourselves that we would never have taken part in genocide like that, we may murder in our hearts, something Scripture decries as unacceptable in hearts designed for love.”¹

How does Dignity Defeat Contempt?

-Dignity Teaches us Humility. Paul says “do not be proud and conceited.” A Christian worldview teaches us that there is no room for superiority and pride because we are all equals- we are all a “glorious mess”- made in God’s image with inherent dignity and capable of great glory. And at the very same time sinful, dysfunctional and capable of great evil.² We cannot demonize anyone without demonizing ourselves because the line between good and evil runs down the center of every human heart.³

-Dignity teaches us to Empathize

¹⁴ *Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. ¹⁵ Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. ¹⁶ Be willing to associate with those of low position.*

Notice the placement of this command to rejoice and mourn...right after saying bless those who persecute you. This isn’t only rejoicing with the wins of your tribe and mourning with our own losses, that’s easy and no one needs a command to do that. But can you empathize with those of another “tribe?” Can you empathize with some older white men who have this feeling that they have been unjustly labeled as racist, sexist and unworthy of having an opinion on social matters simply because others have put them in a category? Can you empathize with many people of color whose lived experience is that there are inequalities and that they don’t matter, or matter less? Dignity makes room in our hearts for empathy.

-Dignity teaches us to listen. Everyone has a backstory. No one comes to their beliefs, attitudes and convictions in a vacuum. We have all been shaped by pain and wounds and beauty and grace that informs our view of the world.

¹ Jon Tyson, *Beautiful Resistance*, pg.99

² Christian Counselor and Author Dan Allender coined this term and idea.

³ First heard this from Tim Keller

Let me illustrate this with a fictional exchange on **social media [Picture]** that could be real because it happened thousands of times a day last year. Janelle posts a collage of pictures of black men and women who have been killed by police over the last few years with the caption “Enough is Enough. #blacklivesmatter #defundthepolice #biden2020”. This post somehow shows up in the feed of David who quickly fires back a collage of police officers who have been shot and killed by black men over the past few years with the caption- “Enough is enough. #bluelivesmatter #lawandorder #trump2020.” What happens over the next few hours is a barrage of carefully curated statistics and articles supporting their views, devolves into an ugly clash of demeaning, sarcastic and biting memes, insults and accusations of being racist, bigoted, ignorant, uninformed, socialist, America hating... and a host of other awful names. Meanwhile a multitude of others on the periphery voyeuristically look on to this fight with thumbs up and thumbs down to their posts like the posse in a school yard brawl, who won’t enter but will happily cheer and egg them on. At the end of the brawl they both block the other and retreat into the accepting and encouraging arms of their fellow social media tribes who are all too quick to applaud them for standing up and getting the better of the exchange and putting the other into their place. Sound familiar? This is the way of contempt culture not honor culture.

Do you think Janelle and David know or care to know anything about the other’s lived experience? Do you think that they know the other goes to church on Sunday on opposite ends of town? Do you think David knows that Janelle grew up in a part of town where her experience with law enforcement has been generationally one of fear and distrust? Growing up, she mostly saw police when they were handcuffing her neighbors or family members or driving by in their SUVs, tinted windows up. She lost 2 cousins before the age of 17 from police shoot outs. She had several experiences of being pulled over for nothing more than what she perceived to be “DWB” driving while black. Just to share a few of her experiences.

Do you believe that Janelle has any knowledge of David’s lived experience? That David came to America as a child with his parents from an Eastern European country whose corruption and abuse of power paled in comparison to the US. The proudest day in his family’s life was when they became US citizens. He was raised to honor the flag, to love democracy, to respect law enforcement and to serve His country. He knows many police officers personally and they are great people. David also loved to give back to disenfranchised communities. He worked with Habitat for Humanity building and repairing houses in the same neighborhood that Janelle grew up in. But recently he stopped because of a number of disillusioning experiences. Having tools stolen from him and houses that he worked hard to fix being abused by the tenants who didn’t seem to care about all the hard work he was doing for the community. The only people that seemed to care were the police who always stopped by to thank him for his work in such a tough part of town and would share their horror stories of violence against them.

Do you think their lived experience has something to do with their views today? But, what if instead of responding the way he did he, he did this **[Slide]**. David reached out to Janelle and said, “I’d like to hear where your perspective and your pain comes from. Would you be willing to share your story with me and I’d like to share my story with you over Zoom?” Now, this is not

me saying that truth is relative and only experiential. Our perception of experience can lie to us. There is an absolute truth, but often in these situations it is difficult to know. They may still come to different conclusions but guess what, honor would defeat contempt that day. The Christian call is one of dignity over demonization.

Practice #2 Pursue Peace NOT Avoidance

¹⁶ Live in harmony with one another. ¹⁸ If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.

Our culture tells us that the way of dealing with someone who offends you is just to cut them off...your dead to me. Someone said something offensive to you on Facebook? Block them. Someone at work doesn't understand or respect your faith? Avoid them. Your spouse disrespects you? Well maybe you can't unfriend them easily, but you can punish them with silence, withholding intimacy, retreating to your phone. What may feel like peaceful avoidance may actually be contempt. I'm so angry with you that I am going to act as if you don't exist.

But the way of Christian honor is to pursue peace "as far as it depends on you, when possible". It's active and intentional. This means we are called to go out of our way to be peacemakers and not simply retreat into our comfort zone of others just like us.

There have been instances when I have been hurt by someone that I thought was a friend...and my instinct was to cut that person off, fake peace, act like it didn't bother me and avoid that person. But it's passages like this that make me say, "No. God, you are not honored by that. You call me to pursue peace- which means that I don't sweep it under the rug but I confront, in humility and love, quick to forgive and seek restoration."

Now a caveat- this does not mean there is no place for cutting someone off in a relationship. There are instances of ongoing, unrepentant sin against someone or violence and abuse where the most loving and honoring thing you can do for yourself and that person is an act of discipline through distancing yourself from that person. Your motive is what is at heart- honor or contempt? Honor pursues peace.

Practice #3 Give Grace DON'T Take Vengeance

¹⁴ Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. ¹⁹ Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord.

Paul is saying stay out of the judge's chair.⁴ Someone cuts you off while driving, someone spreads a rumor about you, someone says something offensive about Christians on social media. Somebody calls you a racial slur. We don't exact vengeance. You are not the judge, jury and executioner. Why? That's God's job. God will bring into account every sin ever committed. Every single one, he says. Either paid for by the sinner in eternity or Jesus on the cross.

⁴ J.D. Greear's image from Romans 12 sermon.

Vengeance is not your job, it's God's job. Your job is to give grace- Bless instead of curse. This doctrine is so powerful to break the cycle of contempt.

One of the most beautiful displays we've seen of this in modern times came in the aftermath of the terrible shooting at Emanuel A.M.E. Church in Charleston, SC. **Anthony Thompson**, one of the men whose wife was killed by Dylann Roof, the young man filled with racism and hatred, told him in the courtroom that day, "I forgive you, son. And my family forgives you. But we would like you to take this opportunity to repent. Repent. Confess. Give your life to the One who matters the most: Jesus Christ, so that He can change it and change your attitude."

Do you know that Anthony was asked if, four years later, he had any second thoughts. He said, "I always get asked that. And people want to know why, even if he did repent, why I would ever forgive the man who murdered my wife?" He said "My answer to them is always the same. I choose to forgive the racist killer because I believe and trust God's word when he tells me that vengeance is his to repay, not mine. "I need not revenge the vile deeds of Dylann Roof myself. It is mine to avenge I will repay" Scripture says."⁵

3 Vital Practices to Replace Contempt Culture with Honor Culture

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Practice #2 Pursue Peace NOT Avoidance

Practice #3 Give Grace DON'T Take Vengeance

How in the world can anyone actually live this way? Paul has already told us that we can only do it if we really do live in view of God's mercy. The gospel alone makes each aspect of love and honor in these verses possible. Apart from whole life surrender in worship to God and the power of the Spirit, you won't, indeed you can't live this way.

MLK famously said "Darkness cannot drive out darkness only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate only love can do that."

What can you start or stop doing to cultivate a culture of honor? What might change in your social media habits? In whom you pursue? In the tone of your conversations? May Brandywine be known as a house of honor, not contempt to display the unity in diversity we have in Jesus Christ.

Facebook Tomorrow- Heaping Coals...

⁵ <https://www.foxnews.com/opinion/thompson-george-forgiveness-change>