

Because I Belong to God 2020  
Romans 12:1-2, 9-12, 14-18, 21 1 Peter 2:19-26

1 Peter 2:16-26 (NRSV)

<sup>16</sup>As servants of God, live as free people, yet do not use your freedom as a pretext for evil. <sup>17</sup>Honor everyone. Love the family of believers. Fear God. Honor the emperor. <sup>18</sup>Slaves, accept the authority of your masters with all deference, not only those who are kind and gentle but also those who are harsh. <sup>19</sup>For it is a credit to you if, being aware of God, you endure pain while suffering unjustly. <sup>20</sup>If you endure when you are beaten for doing wrong, what credit is that? But if you endure when you do right and suffer for it, you have God's approval. <sup>21</sup>For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps. <sup>22</sup>"He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth." <sup>23</sup>When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly. <sup>24</sup>He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. <sup>25</sup>For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls.

Romans 12:1-2, 9-12, 14-18, 21 (NRSV)

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect. Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

When I was a little boy, our cat was an avid hunter of field mice.

One time when he had caught one, it seemed very cruel to me  
as I watched the cat was batting the mouse between its paws,  
so I decided to intervene -- and I would rescue that mouse.

Not surprisingly,

**the cat did not enthusiastically embrace my heroic plan of rescue.**

But then, just as I reached past the cat's slashing claws and teeth,  
and grabbed the mouse in my daring and compassionate rescue,  
--- that little beast actually bit me **viciously.**

I couldn't believe how much it hurt and how much my finger bled,  
as through my tears I complained, sobbing to my mother,  
"But I was only trying to save him."  
And then, adding insult to my injury, it got worse,

in that, I also had to endure getting a painful tetanus shot.

Well, at six or seven years old,  
I found this whole chain of events to be terribly discouraging,  
that I should suffer such a painful and cruel injustice  
for making a kind and compassionate rescue attempt.

My world was shattered by **this obvious failure of justice to prevail**  
for how could a truly loving and all-powerful God  
allow me to suffer such a painful and unjust travesty.  
**My theology simply could not handle such a disturbing reality.**

Yes, we want the world we live in to make sense and be reasonable,  
and for it to be a fair and rational place of balance,  
of unfailing justice in which goodness reliably wins ...  
**-- but the truth is ---- it often isn't.**

**But that's not really much of a surprise to us these days, is it?**  
As far as I know, nobody in Las Cruces, or NM or our country  
did a thing to cause or bring about the Corona-virus,  
and yet we are all having to deal with its effects.

We will continue to pay a price as our struggles continue,  
and there doesn't seem to be much that we can do  
that will improve the situation we are in ---  
**--- which is very much inline with our Scripture passages today.**

When the Apostle Paul wrote to the Christians living in Rome,  
they were struggling with unjust persecution and suffering,  
and yet as a matter of faith, he urges them not to fight back...  
**... since we are the recipients of God's amazing grace.**

In the book of Romans,  
Paul uses the first 11 chapters to describe God's grace,  
focusing on the priority of God's love and compassion ...  
... which leads to chapter 12, where we find the word, "therefore",  
which is always a very important word in Paul's writings.

In this case Paul's "Therefore" is saying,  
because God's love, grace and forbearance are true and real,  
then in the practical of our life and living,  
**here is how that should affect and guide our behavior.**

Paul's point is, that once we begin to accept and walk with Jesus,  
then everything about us and how we live our lives **will change**,  
including or especially how we relate to other people, vs. 1.

I appeal to you **therefore**, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies  
as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.

Then, listen to the instructions that come after the 'therefore'

Let love be genuine; ... love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing  
honor... Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, ... Do not repay anyone evil for evil, ... If it

is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. ... Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

By God's grace, we are called to live uniquely Christian lives,  
 that bear witness to the truth, grace and promises of God,  
 by letting the light of Jesus shine in and through us,  
 as those who are **liberated & constrained** by God's love...

... which creates new possibilities and options **for grace**  
**to be our guide in how we live our lives in this world...**  
**... and for life itself to become more and more**  
**a foretaste and our preparation for God's eternal kingdom.**

Because we do know that God is trustworthy, steadfast and faithful,  
 we can be fully secure in the certainty of God's love and promises,  
 and so as those of faith we are called to forgo  
 our right to hate, to retaliate or strike back,  
 to have a critical spirit or a snarky attitude...  
 ... but, be patient amid struggle even when we're treated unfairly  
**because we are a temple in which God has chosen to dwell.**  
**Yes, at temple, in which God has chosen to dwell.**

As followers of Christ, we are called  
**to allow the Lord to love and bless other people through us,**  
 and so, **we become living vessels of God's grace**  
**as we refuse to react with anger and bitterness.**

Paul is saying that if we are truly motivated by gratitude  
 for the grace and mercy and blessings that we have received,  
**then to be faithful, obedient and righteousness before God,**  
 that becomes our motivating life-priority and desire,  
 as God's Spirit guides & inspires how we live & behave...  
 ... which Paul describes as, a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God.

The logic flow is that since God has already done all of this for us,  
therefore, this is how we appropriately respond to that grace,  
 by letting Christ' light shine in and through us,  
 as those who are liberated & upheld by **that gracious love.**

That is also the message and call of the 1<sup>st</sup> Peter passage we read,  
 which was addressed specifically to slaves,  
 who also happened to be Christians,  
 and who were living in the first century Roman Empire.

This is a very specific and particular context in which  
 they had absolutely no power or influence over their situation,  
 for any slaves who became troublesome or tried to escape  
 would generally be killed along with their family.

A Roman slave had no power or means of changing their circumstance,  
 and no possible escape from their abused position in life,  
 so Paul does not address or deal with that injustice  
 or how to how to change their situation within that society.

Instead, speaking to slaves within their harsh situation,  
his point and focus is on how their Christian faith  
**redefines, redirects and guides how they live & respond  
within their context of slavery and unjust suffering.**

Regrettably in the history of biblical interpretation, this passage  
has been wrongly used and applied in the past to justify slavery,  
or to remain in a destructive, violent or abusive relationship.

This text is not a call to voluntarily acquiesce **as a victim**  
in a situation of abuse, oppression, brutality or injustice  
**when there are other choices and other options available.**

And rather than a call to accept a situation **that we could change,**  
this passage is about **how to have**  
**a faithful godly attitude and hopeful perspective,**  
we are powerless and unable to escape  
**from an unjust situation of struggle & suffering.**

even when

This passage is about, how to live well and faithfully in hope,  
within our context, within the struggle of our circumstance.

It doesn't mean that God approves of our pain and suffering,  
but, that God can use it to transform and make new possibilities  
**so that our loss and hard situation can become redemptive  
as a place of healing and hope, of growth and blessing.**

**Our Christian reality is centered and anchored by God's loving mercy  
and that redefines who we are, what we should do, and our future...**  
... which isn't about trying harder to be nicer,  
but it's **connecting deeper and closer to Jesus--**  
**-- for there is nothing more difficult or demanding  
than to let God love those against us through us.**

This is a very basic, simple and practical theology.  
**God, who knows you entirely, everything there is to know about you,  
including every deed, word, and thought you've ever had,  
is absolutely committed and irrevocably in love with you...**

... therefore, we can be as we are called and commanded to be  
so secure in our faith and certain of God's love and promises,  
**that we will forgo our right to hatred and retaliation.**

What Jesus asks of us, is that when we are wronged and mistreated,  
that we willingly restrain our human inclination to get even...  
... and instead **reflect the unconditional love of God,**  
thereby not feeding into an endless cycle of anger  
and not escalate into a spiral of growing hostility.

And by refusing to react with anger, bitterness or to take revenge,  
we are allowing God to open up the possibility of reconciliation  
through our faithful obedience toward mercy and forbearance.

As Christians, as the children of God, our purpose for life itself  
is to receive God's gracious love, **and then to share it with others**,  
even with the ones who would harm or hurt us or who offend us,  
**for even evildoers are loved by our Father in Heaven.**

**That's not an easy message to hear, and it's even more difficult live.  
It is a command, and it's God's wisdom and truth toward healing  
that our world, our nation, our community desperately needs to hear.**

We are called to love one another as Jesus loves each of us,  
and to serve as **givers of God's grace** and blessing to the world ...  
... as Jesus said, (Matthew 5)

You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven.

And as Paul wrote,

Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but if it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

So we come to the Lord's Table today,  
as the recipients of wonderful, amazing and unwarranted grace.  
Jesus commands us to show that same love to our neighbors,  
and to reflect that same grace that we have received.