

Romans 12:14-21

Righteousness in Conduct, Focused on the World

A. Notes on the Text

Verses 14ff.

In vv. 14-21 the apostle also includes people outside the church in his admonitions to the church members. (For v. 14, cf. Matthew 5:43,44; Luke 6:27,28).

Verse 18

"If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone." Here one is often referred to Matthew 5:9; 1 Thessalonians 5:15; 1 Peter 3:9; Hebrews 12:14a. A better translation of the latter text ("Make every effort to live in peace with all men") is: "Strive together with all (believers) for peace (with God)."

In our text, however, it does not refer to all believers, but to all men, believers and unbelievers. The point is that we must live, in a peace-loving disposition, where possible, on good terms with all. A believer may not be quarrelsome and contentious. There will be fights with other, unbelieving, people where Christ is concerned. Of course the apostle does not want to deny that. The verb means: to live in peace.

Verse 19

In fact, we do not always manage to live in peace with everyone! But even then the Christian may not avenge himself (Matthew 5:38-42). In taking revenge there is always self-vindication.

"But leave room for God's wrath." God will execute justice (cf. Hebrews 10:30; Deuteronomy 32:35,36).

Verse 20

By doing good to your enemy, the apostle says, you will heap burning coals upon his head. (See Proverbs 25:21). Originally, this expression had a negative meaning (likewise the related expressions in Psalm 18:12,13; 78:48; and 140:10). In his commentary on the Psalms, Prof. Dr. B. Gemser refers to an Assyrian law which ordained that such a punishment was meted out to a prostitute who appeared in public as if she were a married or chaste daughter, with veiled face. Asphalt had to be poured upon her head. That was a terrible torture!

However, in Romans 12:20 this expression has a positive meaning: "by doing well to your enemy you will make him feel ashamed and bring him to repentance." How is it possible for an originally negative expression to be turned into a positive one? That can happen this way: when someone has wronged us we want to take revenge, get even with him, heap burning coals upon his head. The apostle says: all right, do that, but take your revenge in such a way that it is pleasing to the LORD. Christians "take revenge" in their own way: they do good to their enemies! That is Christian "revenge!" And the "enemy" feels this Christian treatment as a punishment; he becomes ashamed! Thus evil is overcome with good (v. 21).

B. Main Thoughts

1. All commentators agree that 12:1 introduces a new part of the letter. This is important to the division of the letter. Those who divide the letter into three parts, in accordance with Lord's Day 1 of the Heidelberg Catechism (misery - deliverance - thankfulness), say that the third part starts with chapter 12.

In any event, it is clear that the part we are now discussing (chapter 12ff.) contains concrete admonitions, warnings, advice and rules regarding the Christian conduct of life. The sinner who is justified through Christ's mediating work will show the righteousness given to him in his lifestyle, both within and outside the church. See Glossary #8b, which states concisely that the imputation and gift of Christ's mediating work of atonement and redemption (together the righteousness of Christ for sinners), when accepted in faith, make men appear righteous before God. And as a righteous man (or woman) he then shows righteousness in good works and in his conduct. He does so out of thankfulness for the salvation he has received. (See Heidelberg Catechism, A. 2,59,60,61,64,86; Belgic Confession, Article 22-24.) To this justification is coupled sanctification (Romans 6:1ff.). Then the true believers begin to live not just according to some, but to all of God's commandments (Heidelberg Catechism, A. 114). (The proclamation of God's grace demands the response of faith to that grace in the second part of the covenant: the promise always comes with the obligation to repent and believe. Thus, ethics automatically follows dogmatics. Dogmatics [doctrine of faith] and ethics [doctrine of life] belong together.)

2. It is quite difficult to discover a line of thought in this letter of Paul's, also here in chapter 12.

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