



Catalog No. 1775  
Romans 12:14-16  
10th Message  
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September 15, 2013

## BLESSING THE WORLD

*SERIES: OVERCOMING WITH GOOD*

It has been an unusual week in politics. The news has been dominated by Syria and its chemical weapons. Ten days ago the President was poised to launch a military attack on Syria, but then agreed to consult Congress. Subsequent events were rather surreal. On Monday PBS broadcast an hour-long interview by Charlie Rose with the Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in Damascus. The interview had taken weeks to arrange, and by the time it was actually conducted last Sunday, the situation had become interesting, to say the least. It was surreal to watch Rose ask Assad how he would respond to a US military strike against his country. On Tuesday President Obama addressed the nation to present his case for intervention. The speech might have seemed a good idea when he announced it the previous Friday, but the situation was very different by the time he delivered the speech on Tuesday. Russian President Vladimir Putin responded with an Op-Ed in Thursday's *New York Times*, speaking "directly to the American people and their political leaders." Yesterday, after intense negotiations in Geneva, the US and Russia agreed a plan to deal with Syria's chemical weapons. The world breathed a sigh of relief and stepped back from the brink. An extraordinary week indeed!

I don't have a plan for Syria. I don't know what the solution is. I grieve over what is happening in that country, over the tremendous number of displaced people, over the refugees crowding into surrounding countries. I grieve particularly for the Christians. For several decades Syria had been one of the safest places in the Middle East for Christians. They flourished there, but in the last two years they have suffered greatly.

I was interested by some of the remarks that Obama made in his speech. He dealt with some of the objections people were raising to a military strike on Syria: "Why should we get involved at all? ... Why not leave this to other countries?" He answered these objections by stating that, though "America is not the world's policeman...the world is a better place" because the US has borne the burden of enforcing international agreements. Of course there are many who now wonder if the world is indeed a better place because of US intervention over the last decade. But in the end the basis for his appeal to action was to "make our own children safer." He ended with these words: "That's what makes America different. That's what makes us exceptional. With humility, but with resolve, let us never lose sight of that essential truth."<sup>1</sup> In his Op-Ed Putin called him on this appeal to American exceptionalism: "It is extremely dangerous to encourage people to see themselves as exceptional, whatever the motivation."<sup>2</sup> It was again surreal to read Putin speaking to this country about respect for democracy and international law, and about the dangers of nationalism!

These comments by Obama and Putin about exceptionalism set me thinking. The Bible makes just this claim for God's people. The Old Testament claims that Israel was exceptional. As God told them at Sinai:

**you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. (Exod 19:5-6 ESV)**

Thereafter the world would be divided into two peoples: us and them; Israel in covenant with God, and all other nations outside that covenant. The great divide between Jews and Gentiles runs also through much of the New Testament. But the same New Testament applies the language of exceptionality to the church, deliberately echoing God's language at Sinai:

**But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession. (1 Pet 2:9)**

The world is still divided into two peoples: us and them. But the lines have been redrawn, or perhaps better, refocused. Inside is the church, Jew and Gentile together by faith. Paul's favorite term for this is "in Christ." Those "in Christ" are the new humanity, who have entered into the age to come—an exceptional people indeed. Outside are those who are still dead, who are still in the old age, still "in Adam."

What are the responsibilities of this exceptional people toward the rest of the world? How should "we" behave towards "them"? We explored this topic a little in February when going through Luke 6.<sup>3</sup> We return to it now as we make our way through Romans 12. We will dwell on this topic for the last three weeks of this series entitled "Overcoming with Good."

So far Romans 12 has addressed life within the Christian community. Most versions introduce a paragraph break at verse 14 as Paul turns his attention to behavior towards outsiders. He does so with a word play that is not evident in English. The last in a list of ten commands (vv 10-13) is "seek to show hospitality," which could be rendered "pursue hospitality." The first command of the new paragraph is "Bless those who persecute you," where persecute is the same verb "pursue." We are to pursue hospitality, but how are we to respond to those who pursue us inhospitably, with evil intent? This new paragraph is not just about how we should relate to Christians, but about how we should react to those who are hostile to us. Paul's instructions are still under the rubric of verses 9-10, "Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good." How do we show true, genuine, non-hypocritical love and goodness in reacting to those who are negative towards us in word and deed? This is Paul's concern for the rest of the chapter (vv 14-21). Today we look at verses 14-16.

### 1. Bless Your Enemies (12:14)

**Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.**

Paul surely has in mind the teaching of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount:

**'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 sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have?" (Matt 5:43-46)

Or, as we encountered it in February in Luke's Sermon on the Plain:

**"But I say to you who hear, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you." (Luke 6:27-28)**

Peter gives similar instruction, as we heard in our Scripture reading:

**Do not repay evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary, bless, for to this you were called, that you may obtain a blessing. (1 Pet 3:9)**

What does it mean to bless and to curse? The Greek word translated "bless" literally means "to speak well," used in our English words "eulogy" and "eulogize." But that is not how the word is used in the New Testament. We are not being called to eulogize our enemies, to simply say nice things about them. Behind this word lies the Old Testament understanding of blessing. God is the fount of every blessing. When he blesses someone or something he is endowing an abundant and fruitful life. "Flourishing" is now a popular way of describing such life. When we bless God we thank him for giving us flourishing life. When we bless someone else we invoke God's blessing on them; we petition God to give them a flourishing life. So, blessing our enemies is a form of prayer, as the parallelism of Luke 6:28 makes clear: "bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you." What do we pray? We don't pray that God would judge them, which is our natural inclination. We pray that God would save them and give them a flourishing life. Such prayer, difficult though it may be, allows us to acknowledge that what they have done is evil, but not respond in evil ourselves. It allows us to overcome evil with good. But does the blessing stop there, with petition to God that he intervene in the lives of our enemies and save them? Many Christians have sought to go beyond prayer, responding with goodness: with acts of kindness, generosity, hospitality and love, and thus themselves be God's instruments of blessing into the world, into the realm of "them."

Why should we bless them? Because God does so: "he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust" (Matt 5:45). God cares not just for his own exclusive people, but for all the people he has made. He cares for them with his common grace which is non-exclusive. When we do likewise, we are acting like God and are his children: "so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven."

The opposite of "bless" is "curse," in which we invoke God's judgment on the one who has wronged us. This is our natural response, our default mode. James writes about the unruly nature of our tongue:

**With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so. (Jas 3:9-10)**

In our better moments we know this; we recognize the contradiction between blessing God on a Sunday morning, and cursing another driver on the way home. We resolve not to react

negatively to people, but then we're cut off again on the freeway and we can't help ourselves.

So, we are called to bless not curse. We are called to have kind intentions towards those who are outside the realm of "us"; to have kind intentions to those who do not have kind intentions to us. Our example is Jesus:

**When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. (1 Pet 2:23)**

We see this behavior particularly upon the cross when he prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). Paul and his companions lived this way:

**When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; when slandered, we entreat. (1 Cor 4:12-13)**

The world interprets such behavior as weakness. Gentleness and meekness were not virtues in the ancient world, but character flaws. Paul elaborates, "We are fools for Christ's sake... We are weak... We have become...like the scum of the world, the refuse of all things" (1 Cor 4:10-13).

Such is the life we are called to. Refusal to respond in kind—not just non-violent resistance but actively seeking the welfare of the enemy—may be viewed as weakness. But Christ-like behavior pleases God, and God has great power to change hearts.

## 2. Compassion (12:15)

**Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.**

In verse 15 it is usually assumed that Paul returns to discussing behavior within the Christian community. Solidarity in joy and sorrow is certainly part of Christian community, of *koinonia*, of fellowship, of participation with one another. But might Paul not still be referring to our attitude towards non-Christians? Might he not have in mind a verse from Proverbs?

**Do not rejoice when your enemy falls,  
and let not your heart be glad when he stumbles,  
lest the Lord see it and be displeased. (Prov 24:7-8)**

There is no place for *schadenfreude*, rejoicing over the misfortune of others. It is an offense to attribute natural disasters such as Hurricane Katrina or the Haiti earthquake, or other calamities such as the AIDS epidemic, to divine retribution for specific sins, the usual bogey men being abortion, gays and lesbians, or policy on Israel. Pat Robertson has been the most prone to making such statements but he is by no means alone. We interpret such events as evidence of the general brokenness of the world groaning in travail. Into this travail we are called to weep with those who weep. So we weep for the Syrian Christians who are suffering greatly in that country's civil war; they are our brothers and sisters. But we also weep for the millions of displaced people, no matter their creed, and ask what we can do for them.

As the Roman Empire fell into decay, the Christians cared not only for their own but also for their pagan neighbors. In the fourth century the Roman Emperor Julian the Apostate complained, "These impious Galileans [impious because they didn't believe in all the Roman gods] not only feed their own poor, but ours also."<sup>4</sup> He tried in vain to introduce a pagan philanthropy. Rodney Stark writes,

the apostate emperor Julian agreed that Christians 'devoted themselves to philanthropy' and urged pagan priests to compete. Julian

soon found that the means for reform were lacking. Paganism had failed to develop the kind of voluntary system of good works that Christians had been constructing for more than three centuries; moreover, paganism lacked the religious ideas that would have made such organized efforts plausible.<sup>5</sup>

Paganism lacked the engine for philanthropy, for caring for others, because classical philosophy regarded mercy and pity not as virtues but as weaknesses. The early church had this remarkable testimony; they were the only people who had it within them to care for those who were in hardship.

### 3. A Mind for the Lowly (12:16)

**Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight.**

Like verse 15, verse 16 is also usually applied to life within the Christian community. But might we not apply this outside the community as well? It is a verse about how we think. How do we think about ourselves, and how do we think about other people? The temptation, if you are the special people, is to think of yourselves as special, to be proud, haughty, arrogant. We are not to think this way. Instead, we should associate with the lowly. Paul uses an unusual verb here, which the lexicon defines as “to adjust to a condition or circumstance.”<sup>6</sup> The proud need to adjust themselves, accustom themselves, to relating to those of low status. High-fliers are called to adjust themselves to the lowly. Once one has made this adjustment it is then easier to bless and to extend care beyond one’s own.

God calls his people to be the new humanity, to be the exceptional people, not just for our own sakes but so that we might be a blessing to the world. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus uses three metaphors: the salt of the earth, the light of the world, and a city on a hill.

**“You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people’s feet.**

**“You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.”**  
(Matt 5:13-16)

Jesus was addressing Jews. This had been God’s intention for Israel, but it had failed in that calling, as indeed God knew it would. Israel lacked the inner transformation to live life this way, as a light to the nations. But God still intends this for his people, for those who are now “in Christ.” Furthermore, he has put the right engine inside us, transforming us so that we can actually live this way.

How are we to live life this way so as to be a blessing to the world? Where can we find the strength to extend our love beyond our comfort zone? We can rely on human resolve, on our own good intentions, but that will not get us very far—a week, or a day, or just a few hours.

The way that Romans 12 is organized shows us how to live this way. We begin with God’s mercies (v 1). Paul has taken the first eleven chapters to expound these mercies. We were once like those outside of Christ, estranged from him, dead in our trespasses and sin. But God has had mercy on us and has brought us into his people. Secondly, in light of God’s mercy to us, we present our bodies as a sacrifice, living, holy and acceptable to God (v 1). We are then priests in his service, available for him to use as he wills. We are his instruments for him to use in blessing the world. Thirdly, we act with genuine love (v 9). With our hearts filled with the *agapē* love that can come only from God, we seek to extend his love into the world.

On Thursday NASA announced that the Voyager I spacecraft launched in 1977 had finally left the solar system for interstellar space. It actually crossed the boundary just over a year ago but it took a while to determine exactly where the boundary had been crossed, where the influence of the sun at the center had ceased.

At the center of our universe is the Lord Jesus Christ. Around him are gathered those who are “in Christ.” Beyond there is a boundary between “us” and “them,” between those “in Christ” and those not. Unlike most churches, PBCC does not have formal membership. Membership draws a clear line between those who are in and those who are not. Much attention is focused on drawing that line in the right place and ensuring its security. But inside the boundary, individual members can be moving closer to Christ at the center, or staying still, or drifting further away, while those beyond the boundary may be moving inwards towards Christ. God’s desire is surely that the boundary be permeable so that those beyond the boundary be attracted in towards the one who is at the center, the Lord Jesus Christ. We are to be a blessing to those beyond the boundary.

1. Barack Obama, “Address to the Nation on Syria,” September 10, 2013.

2. Vladimir V. Putin, “A Plea for Caution from Russia,” *The New York Times*, September 11, 2013.

3. Bernard Bell, “Loving Them (Luke 6:27-38),” February 10, 2013, Cat. No. 1918.

4. Charles Schmidt, *The Social Results of Early Christianity* (2d ed.; London: Isbister, 1889), 328.

5. Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1996), 189.

6. “συναπάγω,” *BDAG*.