

Christian Birthmarks – Part 6

Romans 12:19-21

May 12, 2019

Introduction:

As you can see from the title, this is the sixth part of what could be considered a sermon mini-series from Romans 12 regarding what I've been referring to as "Christian birthmarks." There's a section that runs from v. 9-21 of Romans 12 where the apostle Paul rattles off in a machine-gun manner all kinds of short imperative commands. These serve as a way of fleshing out the specifics of what he was calling all believers to do in light of the gospel back in v. 1. At the beginning of the chapter Paul instructed us, saying, *"I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship."* So these verses in v. 9-21 are the specific application of what Paul said in v. 1.

But even though they're commands, I think it's also helpful to think of them as descriptions. They describe what Christian behavior looks like. If you've been born again by the power of the Holy Spirit, these are the thoughts, attitudes, and actions that should characterize you. Much like a birthmark on our skin can be used as a unique identifying marker, so also are these spiritual birthmarks that should identify us as followers of Christ.

We've covered numerous birthmarks over the past few weeks and now we've reached the last three in this highly applicable section of Romans. So I'd invite you to open your Bibles to the twelfth chapter of Paul's letter to the Romans, which can be found on pg. 948 of the pew Bibles should you need to use one of those. Our attention today will be on the last three verses, v. 19-21. Please follow along as I read. Paul writes there, **"Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.' To the contrary, 'if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.' Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."**

So let's dive right into it by considering the first Christian birthmark that comes out of v. 19...

1. Christians don't seek vengeance because they trust God's justice

Paul tells us one of the things we should never do as Christians is to avenge ourselves. When someone hurts us, our natural desire is to hurt them back. This can come about in all kinds of little ways. For example, someone makes a snide comment about you and you in turn reply with a snide comment of your own. Or maybe when you're driving you get cut off and in response you speed up, cut in front of them, and then slam on your brakes or make a less-than-kind gesture with your finger as you pass them. Or perhaps your spouse does something that annoys you and in a passive-aggressive response you quietly get back at him or her for it. It's those little ways we seek out vengeance against those who've wronged us, and I'm sure you can easily come up with dozens more examples.

But there's also the big things as well, where the hurts inflicted on us run far deeper than merely wounding our pride or causing a minor inconvenience. What about the boss who unfairly fired you? The uncle who sexually molested you? The father who was verbally abusive throughout your childhood? The ex-spouse who cheated on you? How are we to respond to those who've hurt us in ways that have wounded us ever-so deeply and scarred us for life?

Paul tells us how in v. 19. He says, "**Beloved, never avenge yourselves...**" Never. There are no exceptions given here. Whether it was a minor insult to your pride or an act of extreme violence committed against you, you're never to avenge yourself. It's not your job to take matters into your own hands. Even if you've suffered something as inexcusably horrible as rape, we're never to take vengeance upon the perpetrator who sinned against us.

But how can Paul say such a thing? The very fiber of our innermost being cries out for justice to be done, for the wrongdoer to be punished. Seriously Paul, are we to act as if nothing happened, and allow murder, rape, theft and countless other evils committed to go unanswered and unpunished? No, and here's why. Paul continues on in v. 19, saying, "**Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.'**" God says he will deal with all sin in his wrath. Sin will be judged by God and he will see to it that vengeance, that repayment for sin, is made. Ultimate justice is God's realm, not ours, and so we're to trust that God will serve justice against all evil.

This is why not seeking vengeance is a distinctly Christian birthmark, because it shows that we're trusting God rather than ourselves. It demonstrates faith. It shows you truly believe in the final justice of God, that all evil will be met with a just response by God and therefore you don't need to take matters into your own hands. We can be free from the need for vengeance because we're convinced that one day God will set all accounts right and punish sin in accordance with his perfect wisdom and justice.

So do to this, we need to always keep before us the perfect justice of God. God will punish all sin: no one is given a pass. Justice will be done because either Christ will have suffered for sin as a person's substitute on the cross or they will suffer for it in their own bodies as God casts them into hell, but either way, justice will be served. A person may evade the law of the land in terms of the police and our criminal justice system. Not every criminal is caught. Some who are guilty are acquitted in our courts. But in the heavenly courtroom of our omnipotent, all-knowing Judge, perfect justice will one day be served. Either the guilty will suffer it himself or the Son of God will have suffered it for him, but God will bring about final justice against all unrighteousness.

But it's important to add that this doesn't mean that temporal justice is unnecessary. Although we're not to personally take vengeance, God has established a way for justice to be done here on earth through the governing authorities. I don't think it's an accident that the section immediately following this passage is Romans 13, which deals with the role of the government, where we're reminded that the government has been instituted by God, and bears the sword to punish the wrong-doer. God has given us a way to see

justice executed on the earth, but it's done not by own hands as an act of personal revenge, but rather by the governmentally established authorities in our society: our police, our judges, and our court system.

So for example, there was a man named Steve who was part of the church I served at in Chicago. His son was killed in a gang-related drive-by shooting. What was exceptional about Steve was that he regularly went to visit the young man who had killed his son. He forgave him and sought to befriend him and be a witness to him. That was an amazing act of forgiveness and grace that eventually got the attention of a reporter from the *Chicago Tribune* who ran a story about him. But it needs to be also stated that Steve actively pursued criminal prosecution against his son's murderer. He forgave him, but also wanted to see that this young man faced justice for his crime as administered by our criminal justice system. And Steve was right to do so. He did exactly what God would have him do: to forgive, to not seek vengeance, but to entrust his son's killer to the justice of our governmental authorities here in the present and to God's ultimate justice in the future.

So let me be clear: if someone has done something to you that's criminal, whether it's murdering a loved one, or rape, or sexual abuse, or theft, you must never avenge yourself. You need to leave that in the hands of God. God will deal with it in his wrath. You must forgive the perpetrators. Scripture is crystal-clear on how we're personally to respond to sins done against us. But that doesn't mean you shouldn't get the civil authorities involved. The government has been ordained by God to carry the sword to punish wrong-doers. If you have been raped or abused or someone has broken into your home, you should immediately call the police. This passage is a warning against taking vigilante justice upon yourself, not against seeking justice that is to be rightfully administered by the governmental authorities God has established for that purpose.

But putting significant crimes committed against us aside, let's remember this passage is also about the minor offences of life. Where the rubber meets the road for us is in all of those tiny slights we experience, at work and at school and within our families. This is extremely practical because we face the temptation to get vengeance multiple times a day. I see this with my girls: how easy it is for one sister to pay back another sister, with an unkind word met with one equally as mean-spirited in return. Think over the past week: how often did you fight fire with fire? Decide that what was good for the goose was just as good for the gander and repaid a harsh word or a careless action with one of your own? I know how easy it is for me to do this because of the sinful bent of my heart, so I need to be reminded again and again that vengeance isn't mine to take.

So that's what we shouldn't do: we're not to take vengeance. But there's a flip side to this coin that involves not just avoiding the negative but pursuing the positive. Obeying v. 19 is possible by simply not doing anything at all. Just walking away or being silent is enough to stop you from seeking vengeance. But we're told to go beyond that. There's more to this than merely the absence of vengeance; it's also a call for intentional deeds of love towards that individual who has hurt us. So then, the apostle Paul gives us the next Christian birthmark we need to see in ourselves, which is...

2. Christians instead love their enemies

Rather than seeking vengeance, Paul says we're to do the opposite. Look back in your Bibles now at v. 20. **“To the contrary, ‘if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.’”** Paul is quoting from the book of Proverbs and likely also alluding to what Jesus said on the Sermon on the Mount about loving our enemies. Rather than seeking vengeance by bringing harm upon those who have hurt us, we're to do quite the contrary: we're to show them kindness by feeding them if they're hungry and giving them something to drink if they're thirsty.

Now we mustn't think just because we never find our enemy hungry or thirsty because we live in a prosperous nation that we're off the hook. The idea is much broader than merely what we do with our food. Jesus reminded us that our response to our enemies includes turning the other cheek, giving him a coat when he's suing you for your shirt, and going two miles with the one who is forcing you to go one mile. So the point is for us to treat those who harm us, who oppose us, who are our enemies, not with vengeance but with love, expressed in concrete acts of kindness.

It takes the transforming power of the Holy Spirit for this to happen, which is why loving your enemies is a Christian birthmark. People don't do this kind of thing to those they dislike. They will show kindness and hospitality to those they get along with, but that's nothing noteworthy. Jesus himself said it wasn't anything special if we treated well those who treat us well. Everyone does that. The most militant atheist is kind to those who are kind to him. But to love your enemies, to feed him if he's hungry and give him something to drink when he's thirsty, *that* is something noteworthy. Do that and people will take notice. To love your enemies instead of seeking to harm them is evidence that God truly has done something in your heart to transform you into a child of God.

So this is a challenging place for us to stop and examine ourselves. How do you respond to your enemies? How do you treat them? And let's remember that our enemy isn't just someone who persecutes us for our faith. An enemy is anyone who opposes you, who's not doing what you want or who doesn't think like you do. It can be family members on the other side of the political fence, who vote differently than you. It can be a co-worker who is highly critical of you and your ideas. It can be a spouse who refuses to play his or her part in doing the household chores. It can be a sibling who won't do a simple task for you, even though you've done it for her when she needed it a thousand times before.

Have you been loving them like Paul instructs you to do so here? Or have you been seeking vengeance, getting back at them in what you say and what you do? Remember that the only reason you're saved right now is because Christ did this for you. You were his enemy once, a rebel against God, a lover of the darkness instead of the light, a man or woman consumed by sin, dead to God without spiritual life in you. Yet while we were still his enemies, he loved us to the fullest by giving his life for us. To do this, to treat our enemies with lovingkindness, is simply doing for them what Christ first did for us. We reflect the glorious mercy and grace of our Savior when we love our enemies rather than seeking revenge.

My friends, you need to be intentional about this. This kind of love does not come easily or naturally. It won't just happen. To do this is to offer your body as a living sacrifice by killing the pride and anger and bitterness that swirls inside of us and instead channeling those emotions into acts of love and service towards those who oppose you. You must fight for this! You won't accidentally give food and water to your enemy. This will only happen with intentionality on your part, as you put to death the sinful response of your flesh and replace it with the loving power of the Spirit.

Now look back in your Bibles at the result that comes from doing this. It says at the end of v. 20, **“for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.”** Usually in the OT this was used as a metaphor for divine judgment. So initially one might conclude that Paul is encouraging us to give food and drink to our enemy in order to increase the level of God's wrath against them if they still refuse to repent. The idea would be that we're in fact making matters worse for them because they will be judged even more harshly for their sins against those who were treating them with kindness. The problem with that interpretation is it would imply the very opposite of what Paul has been advocating: he would be telling us not to seek vengeance, but then instructing us to be kind to our enemies so they'll be punished more severely! Clearly that doesn't make any sense and so a better way of understanding this has been given throughout church history.

The idea is not to understand **“burning coals”** as divine judgment but rather to see it as a metaphor for the burning pangs of shame. Because our response to their evil behavior towards us has been kindness rather than vengeance, they've become ashamed of their conduct. Maybe you've experienced this yourself. Have you ever treated someone poorly only to have them respond with kindness? How did that make you feel? Didn't it make you feel ashamed of yourself?

I think this is what empowered Martin Luther King's success in the Civil Rights Movement. He didn't respond to violence with violence. Taunting was not met with taunting but with silence and with prayer. Anger was met with love. Instead of responding to pit bulls and firehoses and imprisonment with a vicious furious rage, it was met with patient endurance. And as a result, it pricked the conscience of our nation. Martin Luther King Jr. and those who followed his call to non-violence heaped burning coals on our collective heads, and so transformed our nation.

I think that's the idea here; it's a call to love our enemies so God's wrath doesn't need to eventually fall on them. We know the terrible vengeance of God will come, but we love our enemies such that we desire for them to escape such a fate. So we love them in hopes their heads might be heaped with the burning coals of shame so they might see their sin for what it is, repent, and find salvation in Jesus. It's a love not geared towards increasing their guilt, but towards helping them wake-up from their sin-stupor so they might escape God's vengeance by turning from wickedness and trusting in Christ.

So moving on now to the third and final Christian birthmark we want to look at this morning, which is...

3. Christians seek to overcome evil by doing good

Look now at the very last verse of Romans 12, at v. 21. “**Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.**” So what does Paul mean by this? Given the context of what he just said about not taking vengeance and instead loving our enemies, I think it carries this idea: “Don’t allow the evil things your enemy does to you determine how you will treat him, such that you return evil with evil.” It means we don’t allow his evil to overcome us and make us evil.

When we let someone’s sinful behavior towards us dictate how we in turn behave, then we’ve been overcome by evil. We become the victims. We allow our enemies to have the victory over us because they dictate our behavior, not Christ. Have you ever met a bitter, angry person harboring unforgiveness or a grudge against someone? Such a person has been overcome by evil because they’ve allowed a past wrong committed against them to continue to define them in the present. It reminds me of the character of Miss Habersham from the Charles Dickens’ novel *Great Expectations*. In her youth, Miss Habersham was jilted on her wedding day, left at the altar by her fiancé who defrauded her and broke her heart. Many years later, the old woman lives alone, still wearing the yellowed, ragged wedding dress, with all the clocks in her house stopped at the exact time of her betrayal, pouring her hatred and malice towards men into her young protégée Estella, who will toy with young Pip’s heart only to cruelly break it over and over, much to Miss Habersham’s bitter delight.

So Paul is saying, “Don be like that. Don’t let evil overpower you. You were once a slave to that kind of thinking, where you’d blame your sinful behavior on others, claiming it was their fault you behaved like you did. You don’t need to live like that any longer. You’ve been set free from your enslavement to sin. Christ is now your Lord. He has liberated you from being the victim of other’s people’s wrongdoing against you. You can now respond differently to those who’ve sinned against you. Christ didn’t respond to evil with evil, and he promises to empower you to follow in his footsteps.”

And what Christ did is what we’re to do. We’re to “**overcome evil with good.**” Isn’t that a beautiful way of summarizing how Christ was victorious? Our Lord faced the most vicious of evil – those he came to save rejected him, ridiculed him, betrayed him, spat upon him, and had him executed in the most painful and humiliating manner ever devised by man, and yet what does Jesus say as they pound the nails into his flesh? “Forgive them Father, for they know not what they do.” Jesus was not overcome by evil but rather overcame evil with good. He loved when others hated. He prayed with they mocked. He give his life for them all the while they were intent on taking his life.

My friends, you don’t have to live like the rest of the world, repaying evil with evil. You have been set free from the tyranny of the cycle of retaliation. God’s Spirit dwells in you so that you need not let the evil committed against you define you. You are not a victim of what others have done *to* you; you are more than conquerors because of what Christ has done *for* you. We can choose to have victory over evil not by returning it back on those who’ve hurt us, but by loving our enemies, overcoming their evil with good.

There is perhaps nothing more powerful to begin to soften a person's heart than to see their rude and hurtful behavior met with love and kindness. If you want to win the lost over to the truth of the gospel, then before they ever hear a word about the gospel, they need to see the power of the gospel at work in transforming your heart. It's the power of a transformed life that can overcome the resistance that people in our day so often have to the gospel. When they see Christians responding to evil like the rest of the world, by seeking vengeance upon those who've hurt you, then no wonder they call us hypocrites and want nothing to do with us. But if you refuse to reply to an insult with an insult, if you're willing to turn the other cheek, if you serve your enemy kindness instead of seeking revenge, then you may very well win them over. It's far easier to believe in the love of Christ for sinners if they first see it displayed in you.

Conclusion

So then, with this last set of Christian birthmarks, my hope and prayer is that each of these would be true of us in ever-increasing measure, not only in terms of what we talked about today but in everything Paul has commanded us to do, all the way back to v. 9 and even to the very beginning of the chapter. Romans 12 is the fitting response to the glorious mercies of God in Romans 1-11. This is what it looks like for someone to have experienced the saving love of Christ. This is how someone who's been forgiven, who has been justified by faith, who has been given peace with God, who has been adopted into God's family, who has his heart transformed by the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit – this is what a saved person looks like. These are the undeniable birthmarks of a Christian. And so if you're a Christian, these things should be true of you.

Let's close now with a time of prayer that we would be diligent to make these birthmarks ever more evident in our lives. We want to not only understand what Paul is expecting of us, but we want the Holy Spirit to be at work in us, convicting us and empowering us to live these out throughout our lives. Let's pray.