

Presented by Bert Woodall to College Hill Presbyterian Church, September 3, 2017

How to Abhor Evil Without Hating the “Haters”

Romans 12: 9-13

My comments on the epistle reading today will cover the first portion of a passage in which the Apostle Paul gives a series of exhortations to the believers in Rome on how to live in harmony within the community of faith, and also how to deal with opposition from the outside world in accordance with the teachings of Jesus. Chapter 12, verses 9 through 13 in the Scholars Version read,

(9) Make sure that your love is without pretense; abhor what is evil; stick closely to what is good. (10) Be devoted to one another as members of the same family. Take the initiative in honoring one another. (11) Don't let your enthusiasm fade; radiate the presence of God's power; serve our lord. (12) Be joyful in your hope; be patient in adversity; be persistent in prayer. (13) Treat the needs of the Anointed's people as your own; take hospitality seriously.

The emperor Claudius had expelled the Jews from Rome around 49 CE, which included many Jewish believers in Christ. When Nero allowed the Jews to return, this change may have created tension within the household churches where Gentile believers had become predominant. There was also the ongoing conflict between Jewish followers of Christ who retained their observance of the law and Gentiles who did not. Added to this, Paul might have feared, in view of growing animosity toward Jews throughout the empire, the repetition of something like the anti-Jewish pogrom in Alexandria (38-41 CE). Gentile believers had to reject anti-Semitism, and all of Jesus'

followers had to be prepared to confront a hostile pagan society dominated by emperor worship. There would be “haters,” but Jesus commanded the love of one’s enemies.

Paul wrote to the believers in Rome from Corinth sometime between 55 and 57 CE.

Paul stresses that love should be genuine, without pretense (v. 9a). Love is above all an action, not merely words or a warm, fuzzy feeling. When he urges the believers to “be devoted to one another as members of the same family” (v. 10a), this includes concrete support. Jewish believers might have returned to the city with few of their possessions, and their Gentile brothers and sisters would have to accept their responsibility, all the while “honoring one another” (v. 10b), giving freely while respecting the dignity of the one in need. By treating “the needs of the Anointed’s people as your own” (v. 13a), they would overcome any perceived rivalry through acts of compassion. To “take hospitality seriously” (v. 13b) is to fulfill the moral imperative of kindness to the stranger, the one seen as *the other*, a deep tradition in the Hebrew scriptures.

Paul expresses the heart of his message by opening and closing with two forceful admonitions: “abhor what is evil; stick closely to what is good” (v. 9b, c); furthermore, he urges, “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (v. 21, NRSV). But what evil or evils does the Apostle have in mind? Surely there was idolatry, robbery, murder, and sexual immorality of every kind, and Paul has provided, in Chapter 1, a long list of pagan transgressions. But he is speaking to God’s people, the assembly of the Anointed One. What evil was most likely to tempt them or even overcome them, surrounded as they were by opposition and hostility in that restless capital of the

empire? Could the evil be hatred and potential violence from their pagan neighbors? Certainly. Yet couldn't the evil also be the hatred in their own hearts toward those pagan *others*, a people they feared, and whose wickedness they had been taught to despise? The old truism says, "God loves the sinner but hates the sin." But *could* the Roman believers separate the sinner from the sin? Can we progressive Christians make such a distinction—not just intellectually, but honestly, wholeheartedly?

The legendary twentieth century psychologist, C. G. Jung, actually acknowledged the essential truth of the Christian doctrine of original sin, but the adversary Paul called "the flesh" or the "sinful human nature" Jung labeled "the Shadow." The Shadow is a hidden, dynamic, and often shocking component of every person's unconscious mind—it is the dark side. Though very much a part of our psyche and ourselves, we rarely acknowledge its existence. The Shadow assumes many shapes and personas in our dreams, but when it goes unrecognized and denied, it sometimes manifests itself in our conscious life by impulsive words and actions that are embarrassing or harmful. The most important aspect of this theory for human relations is what Jung called *projection*: The negative qualities in our own Shadow-self, unknown to us, are the very faults and moral defects we easily recognize and judge in others. They are the speck we see in another's eye while standing with a log in our own eye. But the Shadow, though inscrutable and having a capacity for evil, is not a monster but shares our humanity—a Shadow lives in the other person but also in ourselves.

Jung, agreeing with Jesus, warned that we must not judge. To demonize the Shadow in another person is to judge and condemn ourselves; to hate the darkness in another we must despise the wretchedness that is part of ourselves. Jung *does not* say that we should not discriminate between moral right and wrong; however, we must accept, even embrace, the Shadow in ourselves and others, for understanding is the way to psychological and spiritual wholeness. This is to overcome the evil with good by seeing the sinner and the sin as inseparable, yet nonetheless, not an object of hatred and condemnation but a potential vessel of grace.

The ones who hate, all the “haters,” remain: racists, white nationalists, Neo-Nazis, Islamist and homegrown terrorists, and people with every imaginable warped and violent ideology. There are the hate-possessed young men who drive their cars over the bodies of innocent people. We are entitled to outrage at what the “haters” have done and what they would do if they had their way, but we cannot afford the dubious luxury of hating the “haters.” The Apostle Paul calls us to the spiritual high road, the path of sanctity and sanity: “Abhor what is evil” but, in these times, “stick closely to what is good.”

Sources:

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Arthur J. Dewey, et al., *The Authentic Letters of Paul*. Polebridge Press, 2010.

C. G. Jung, *Man and His Symbols*. Dell Publishing, 1968.