

## ROMANS XLVIII: COALS OF FIRE ON THE HEAD

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### INTRODUCTION:

Having discussed some of the gifts of the body, Paul moves on to exhort the Roman Christians in how the parts of the body should function together. What does it look like when the saints are being knit together in love, as they ought to be? Paul gives us a distinctively Pauline expression of a Sermon on the Mount ethic, but with a surprising twist.

### THE TEXT:

“Let love be without dissimulation. Abhor that which is evil; cleave to that which is good . . .” (Rom. 12:9-21).

### SUMMARY OF THE TEXT:

Love must not be hypocritical (v. 9). We should hate what is evil and cling to what is good (v. 9). We should be affectionately loyal to one another (v. 10), honoring others before ourselves (v. 10). We should work hard (v. 11), and we should serve the Lord with a fervent zeal (v. 11). We should rejoice in hope, be patient in affliction, and constant in prayer (v. 12). We should be quick with a helping hand for the saints (v. 13), and given to hospitality (v. 13). If people persecute you, bless them. Do not curse them (v. 14). The duty of empathy is next; rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep (v. 15). We should think of one another in the same way (v. 16). We should not be snobs, but rather be willing to associate with the lowly (v. 16). With a look back at v. 3, we are told not to be wise in our own conceits (v. 16). We are not retaliate against others (v. 17). We are to live honestly in the sight of all (v. 17). To the extent it is up to you, you are to live in peace with all men (v. 18). Then comes the twist. We are not to avenge ourselves, not because vengeance is wrong, but because it is the Lord's (v. 19). We are not to avenge, but leave room for wrath. The Lord will repay (v. 19). As far as you are concerned, feed your hungry enemy, give a drink to your hungry enemy, and in doing this you will heap coals of fire on his head (v. 20). Do not be overcome by evil (v. 21). But it is not enough to fight off attacks. Go on the offensive; overcome evil with good (v. 21).

### IN CONCENTRATED FORM:

Love sincerely. Hate sin. Hold the good. Like each other. Defer to one another. Work hard. Stay zealous. Rejoice. Endure. Pray constantly. Give to others. Open your home. Bless enemies, bless and do not curse. Identify in empathy. Stoop low. Drop your conceits. Don't retaliate. Live honestly. Keep the peace. Live the Jesus way.

### NOT A LIST OF RULES:

Now this is a description of character. This is a description of what it looks like when the Spirit is at work in a community of saints, building what is called *koinonia*, true and living fellowship. This is not an invitation to you to labor for six months on having your love be without hypocrisy, after which you can move on to abhorring what is evil. Check that box, and on to the next thing. In contrast, the fruit of the Spirit hangs together in one cluster, like the grapes of Eschol (Num. 13:23). When we live together in triune community, this is what it is like. When it is not like this, we are doing something else—however religious we think we might be.

### THE GLORY OF VENGEANCE:

God does not tell us that “vengeance is wrong,” but rather He says that “vengeance is mine.” This statement comes from Deut. 32:35, a chapter in which God details the future history of the Jews, and how He was going to use the Gentiles to provoke the Jews to jealousy (Dt. 32:21; Rom. 10:19). In this same context, God promised that He was going to bring vengeance on the Jews (Dt. 32:34-35; Rom. 12:19; Heb. 10:30). In the next breath, Moses says that God will judge His people (Dt. 32:36; Heb. 10:30; Ps. 135:14), in the sense of vindicating them. As Paul taught in the previous chapter, the Jews will be brought back. At the end of Moses' song, he (and Paul) invite the nations to rejoice together with the Jews (Dt. 32:43; Rom. 15:10).

This means that the archtypical vengeance has already happened. The first century Christians, who lived through this, established a pattern for us to imitate if we live through anything that is comparable—as many generations of Christians have. The persecutors in the first century were the Jews; in subsequent centuries they adopted many other names, including names ransacked from the Bible, but kept the same spirit.

#### LEAVE ROOM FOR WRATH:

Remember that the chapter markings were not in the letter as Paul wrote it. When he says here that we are not to avenge ourselves, he says that we should step aside to make room for wrath. This is just a few verses before (12:19) Paul tells us how that wrath comes. The God to whom vengeance belongs has deputized rulers to act in His stead (13:4), in this case, the Romans. The Romans were the appointed instrument in the hand of the Lord of all vengeance, and they were the ones who were to destroy Jerusalem, as the Song of Moses had promised would happen.

Does this not apply to us then? Of course it does, once the necessary adjustments have been made. But we must remember the context here. When Paul cautions against rebellion (13:2), he is not giving us an abstract classroom lecture in rarified civics. He is writing just a few years before an actual rebellion broke out, one that concluded with the fulfillment of the prophecies that he, Paul, has just been citing. So we must read this on the alert for Paul's premises.

#### COALS OF FIRE:

Verse 20 is a quotation from Proverbs 25:21-22. But the question of what those “coals of fire” has been much discussed. Is this a kind act, a helping hand that puts starter coals in somebody's basin that they carry home on their head? That has the feel of a Bible handbook answer. Are these coals of fire an image of judgment (Ps. 18:12-13)? Or perhaps conviction of sin? That is possible, but given what is said about overcoming evil in the next verse, I would take it as an act of consecration. Treat your enemy like he was an altar (Lev. 16:12).



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