

# “Curing Resentment”

Romans 8:31-39

July 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2001 – Maryvale Drive Presbyterian Church, Philip Siddons

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When Paul writes “what shall we say to all of this” we realize that we have walked into the middle of a conversation. He had just said, in verse 26, that God is so in touch with us that even when we are too distraught to pray, God’s Spirit within communicates how we feel. Verse 28 noted that God works out everything for good in our lives. In Verse 30, we were reminded that the same God, Who loved us before we were even born, will ensure that we will always be with God in eternity.

So Paul begins his conclusion by saying, “What shall we say to all this?” If God is for us, who could be against us (*in any way that would matter*)? With that much going for us, why worry about anything?

As it happens, not only do we find ourselves worrying about nearly everything, we also worry about other people’s lives as if we don’t have enough worries of our own. Sometimes we find ourselves living out the character of the older grudging brother in the parable of “The Prodigal Son.”<sup>1</sup> This is the guy who said to his dad, ‘Why are you throwing a big party and butchering the blue-ribbon steer after junior went out and blew half of your life’s savings on gambling and sex? I’ve been faithfully doing my end of the bargain all my life so it’s his party but I’ll cry if I want to.

But verses 32-34 say that God is the judge (the only judge) and no matter what, there is nothing that we can ever do that will separate us from the love of Christ. God shows no distinctions<sup>2</sup> and Jesus said ‘the rain falls on the just and the unjust alike.’<sup>3</sup> If you want to put this



into theological terms, a person can never come to not be loved by God because God’s love isn’t dependent on our ability to be “good enough.” So it comes to this: if God loves us unconditionally, just as we are, why is it that we can’t act that way toward others? Why is it that it is so hard for us to apply what we have experienced from God to how we treat others?

It likely has to do with our feelings about ourselves. That is, our ability to love others has a lot to do with our ability to love ourselves. If we have trouble with accepting ourselves as worthy and lovable beings, it shows up in the extent to which we can value and love others around us. It means that people who are prejudiced and who allow hatred for minorities to dwell within them, they are usually feeling poorly about themselves. These are people who consider themselves of more worth than others (whom they deem below them on the hierarchical ladder of worth *in their own mind*).

But God’s grace and love are at the very core of our Christian faith. Here it is in one sentence: God loves us just as we are and we are to love others just as they are. On this principle hang all of the laws and prophets.



Back in High School, I had to struggle with spoken languages and I regularly butchered any French words I tried to say. I’d agonize in the language lab in trying to learn how to pronounce, with the right guttural inflection, *Mon-sieur* and *Qu’est que ce’s*.<sup>4</sup> I’d sweat bullets during the tests and did miserably.

But there was this girl, in my French class, who copied her exercises out of a friend’s workbook, never doing it on her own. So I figured she never knew her *Que Serrat’s* from her

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<sup>1</sup> But the modern publishers should have created the title “the elder grudging brother” instead

<sup>2</sup> Romans 3:22

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 5:45

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<sup>4</sup> Excuse my French but these words and phrases are only for rhetorical effect.

*Serrat's*. And that girl got B's and it really galled me. I resented her but God loved her.



Have you ever resented the fact that you are just average at something? We all do. You're in a group who decides to go bowling and once you get there, you see that you're the only one who doesn't own their own bowling ball.



I saw serious resentment when I was a kid in Sunday School. We were collecting coins, one Halloween for UNICEF to help children around the world who were starving.

One Sunday morning, during the "opening exercises" gathering, an adult started telling us that these moneys go to feed children in communist countries. He said, "You feed them today but tomorrow they'll come back to fight you and take over our country." So the whole UNICEF project in our church was canceled. God sends rain on the just and the unjust but not us," he said, "We're not going to feed those little pinko-commie kids." The people in my youth taught me resentment toward children who were starving. These adults were modeling a life view that God didn't love starving children if they are in a communist country.



You see, it's the hierarchical mentality leering its ugly head from the swamp again. Many people have to go through their lives with a template or grid they drop over everything they experience. Their definition of worth, dignity and nobility is all about classifying some people as more worthwhile than others.

Whether it is through our nationalism,<sup>5</sup> racism,<sup>6</sup> sexism,<sup>7</sup> or any of the other "isms" that crop up in our mentality, we seem to insist on stomping through our lives, classifying some as less worthy than us. It's the American way. It's the human way but it certainly isn't God's way.

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<sup>5</sup> the belief that one's nation is superior to others

<sup>6</sup> the belief that one's race is superior to others

<sup>7</sup> the belief that one's gender is superior to others

The very individuals and groups of people we have on our "less worthy list" are the ones God calls us to love. That's why Paul reminded us that God is the judge, not people. If God loves you and me unconditionally, we should do the same with others.

But here's a hard one: if we are supposed to love others unconditionally, we shouldn't worry about it if others don't love *us* unconditionally – and they most certainly do not. Here's the answer: We shouldn't take other's opinions and judgments personally.



Now Western Protestantism has tended to distort a truth in the Proverbs wisdom literature. Proverbs says, 'If you live a wicked life, you'll have a life of trouble. If you live a good life, you will be blessed.'

The Protestant ethic of American Capitalism takes this general truth and horribly distorts it. Our culture teaches that if you are suffering or are poor, it automatically means you have been living a bad or lazy life. That if you are wealthy and healthy, it is because you have been good and you deserve it. "You must be living right" we often say with a smile.

Even the disciples got into this hierarchical mentality when they saw the man who had been born blind. "Who sinned that this man was born blind?" they asked Jesus – hopefully out of earshot of that physically challenged man. This is the thinking of the Protestant ethic which resulted in Social Darwinism in the early part of the twentieth century. This was when it was trendy for people to think that the "fittest" (and most successful people) are that way, not because of inheritances, power, privilege and oppression but because "they have somehow evolved into a more worthy being."



I once knew an individual who was a living exponent of the Social Darwinist philosophy. His name was Bill. Bill and his family were wealthy and Linda and I had the great learning experience of living

on that family's estate in a carriage house over their garage.

In exchange for living there, during my grad school days, I did yard work and carpentry on the estate. Almost daily, Bill made comments about "the Haves" as opposed to the supposedly ignorant middle class that he referred to as "the Have-Nots." He would comment on all the people who supposedly "came from poor stock." He sounded like he was talking about soup but it was actually about human beings.

He would also refer to people with wealth and position as having come from "higher bred families. *I would wonder if he had come from a kennel himself.* Curiously, when talking with his visiting friends, he would refer to Linda and me as "The Help."

One day I was raking leaves with him down near the frontage of the estate and a neighbor, from across the street, called out to him. "Hey Smith!"<sup>8</sup>

The man was a friendly, cigar-smoking good-natured fellow – the type with whom most people would immediately feel comfortable. But Bill did not answer him.

I stopped raking, looked at the man, then at Bill, and again the man called out. After seeing that I had stopped raking, Bill slowly turned to the man and said, "Are you addressing me?"

The man asked Bill if he could have some cow manure from Bill's cows for his tiny garden in the back of his rather modest home. Bill turned him down.

Later that day, Bill said that he turned the man down because he had addressed him improperly. His second reason for ignoring him was that Bill guessed that he could have been the unknown neighbor who had, years ago, complained to the city about the presence of livestock on his property.

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I worked around this man for two years and I'm sorry to say, I hated him. I resented his wealth and his arrogance. I wasn't mature enough

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<sup>8</sup> A pseudo name to protect the privacy of the individual.

and I hadn't read enough to realize that Bill's apparent arrogance was a result of his tremendous fear. He was terrified that if he didn't keep up his appearances of being "other" than the "average person," he might not have any worth at all – and he would turn out to be in his mind "average."

Sometimes I'd feel sorry for Bill but for those two years, I never conquered those feelings of resentment until later in my life. Yet God loved Bill totally and unconditionally. God, undoubtedly, didn't like Bill's actions and hierarchical mentality but loved him – but I didn't. I should add that God didn't love the hatred and resentment that was brooding inside me but loved me anyway.

The truly sad thing about my resentment was that it rendered me as totally useless to reach out to Bill as a Christian and fellow human being. Because of my resentment, I was useless to God in that man's life and it totally shut down any possibility of my connecting with Bill.

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That's the burden of being a follower of Christ. God is "on our side" but we're not supposed to dislike the other team. We're supposed to be advance people for the kingdom of God and love the other team members. Unlike sports, we want *everyone* to join our team. It's like playing soccer and having your team captain say, "Every once in a while, kick the ball to the other team. Tell them, 'Here, you take some shots.'"

We're supposed to have a recruitment policy with a conspicuous absence of competition, . . . even to the point of experiencing persecution, Paul says. This is that element of Jesus' teachings that says we're to "go the second mile," . . . sensing within us that we are an oppressed minority in this world as Christians.

How do you think Joseph felt when his brothers were full of bitter resentment when he got that special coat of many colors from his dad? Do you think Joseph felt like rejoicing when his brothers threw him into an abandoned cistern and then later pulled him out, only to sell him as a slave to a caravan heading for Egypt? What would

you have done if you had become the number two ruler in Egypt and these same scoundrel brothers were standing before you terrified?

Sitting on a gold-inlaid throne with great political power over life and death in that country, Joseph wept and then kissed his evil brothers out of love. That's why that story made it into the Bible. Not because it was a reversal of fortunes, 'small time boy makes it big and the tables are turned.' It is there because love conquered resentment and even humans, who deserved to really get it, found that they were loved.

**God's love is at the heart of the Christian faith. If God loves us unconditionally and totally and if nothing will ever separate us from God's love, then neither should anything separate us from loving other people.**



We can hate oppressive behavior, perhaps, but somehow we're supposed to love people as ones whom God has made and loves. When we turn away from people, it's like us telling God, "Get someone else to care about them because I don't want to be bothered!"

It's relatively easy to fall into the habit of following the traditions of a Christian church, . . . being Presbyterian, being church attendees but that's the easy way. That's not the habit or the work to which we are *first* called. What comes first is following in the footsteps of Jesus, as this poem from Kari Hill suggests.

"When I decided to follow Jesus, I thought it would be pretty easy. The journey would be well-planned and trodden before, . . . but it was *hard*. Jesus is not easy to follow.

He moves swiftly and with cause and soon I tired of trying to keep up, . . . falling behind, . . . while Jesus and the rest went on ahead, leaving only footsteps in the dust.

The summer ended and winter brought rain and my Jesus footprints were lost in the mud, . . . and I stood there realizing that I had followed only Jesus' path and not Him. I would need strength. It was no longer possible to follow Jesus at my own leisurely distance." ❧

