ACTUALLY LIVING BY THE PRINCIPLES by Rick Liggin

At some point, we have to decide if we’re going to actually live by the principles taught in Scripture, principles we all acknowledge to be right. Consider, for example, the following text: “*Never* pay back evil for evil to *anyone*. Respect what is right in the sight of *all men*. If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with *all men. Never* take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, ‘“Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,” says the Lord.’ ‘But if your *enemy* is hungry, feed Him, and if he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.’ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Rom. 12:17-21, emphasis mine, ral).

 Now, does this text actually mean what it says? Does “never” actually mean *never*...in any circumstance? Is it ever right to “pay back evil for evil” (12:17)? No? Never? Is it ever okay (maybe in some very “special circumstances”) for you to “take your own revenge” (12:19)? We’re not talking about letting an evil doer experience the natural consequences of his own actions; rather, we’re talking about taking action that is vengeful or that is “payback” for some wrong done to us. Is it ever okay to do that? This text says, no, it’s *never* right to pay back evil for evil or take your own revenge! We simply are not allowed this luxury!

 This doesn’t mean that we are to “enable” someone who is sinning by ignoring his sin or refusing to confront it! And it doesn’t mean that we should never urge him to abandon (or stop) his sinful actions in obedience to Christ. It also doesn’t mean that we refuse to exercise legitimate, biblically authorized discipline against him. It’s not “vengeance” or “payback for evil” when we *legitimately* exercise biblical discipline, whether that be the discipline of a child (Eph. 6:4) or an unruly Christian (1 Cor. 5:1-13; 2 Thess. 3:6-16) or a criminal (Rom. 13:1-7). Legitimate Bible discipline isn’t payback or vengeance. It is, in fact, a necessity for the good of the one in sin. Now we had better be sure that when discipline is exercised, it is the sinner’s good that motivates us to take this action and not a sense of payback or vengeance; but we must discipline sinners!

 So again, does “never” actually mean *never*? Does “anyone” really mean absolutely *anyone?* Does “all men” really include *all* men? Someone answers: “Yes!” And if I’m reading this text correctly, I would have to agree: “never” means *never*; and “anyone” actually means *anyone*; “all men” really includes *all* men; and “your enemy” means *any enemy!*

 So, does “anyone” include my spouse? Does “all men” include a mate? Does “never” include interaction with my spouse? Hmm. Now, we’re getting personal! What if my “enemy” *is* my spouse…who is making my life a living hell? Does this text still apply in such cases? Must I still overcome evil with good when the evil is being propagated by a spouse who is being disobedient to the Word? We’re going to have to decide whether or not we will practice the teaching this text here…even with a difficult spouse. Are we going to obey these principles across the board or are will we practice “selective obedience” to this text?

 When I assume the worst about my spouse’s words or actions and then respond with anger, disgust, pouting moodiness, or the “silent treatment” based on that assumption am I taking revenge or getting “payback” for evil? What if my assumption actually turns out to be true; am I then allowed to react with anger, disgust, or pouting? Am I getting “payback” when I say hurtful and mean things to my mate because “I need to get his attention”? Am I being vengeful when I refuse to forgive a wrong or “hold a grudge” until she proves her repentance is genuine with fruit of repentance? Is it “payback” when I stay mad or hurt until he comes “groveling” before me at my feet? Am I really trying to “be at peace with *all* men” when I snap at (or am snarky, pouty, or moody toward) my mate because of something he or she does? Whenever I meet evil with evil or don’t meet evil with good, am I not failing to practice these principles?

 The overriding principle in our text is this: regardless of what happened or how he or she meant it and regardless of how it sounded or how he or she acted, I still must *not ever* take my own revenge! I must *never* pay back evil for evil! I still must *not* be overcome by evil; but in every single case, I must still overcome (or meet) evil with good! So even if my spouse is disrespectful, unloving, moody, pouty, snarky, angry, hurtful or whatever, I must meet evil with good! The question is: am I really going to practice what this text says, or am I going to find “exceptions” when putting this text into practice is hard?

 Let me suggest that the sooner we actually start practicing these principles, even in hard situations, the sooner we will be like Jesus...which is the point of discipleship! Don’t we want—more than anything else—to be like Jesus? If so, then we need to start practicing these principles…even when it’s really hard!

 Now, let me also point to a beneficial by-product: it is only by *consistently* practicing these principles that our relationships with others (especially a spouse or enemy) will improve! We may protest, “But all I’m doing is trying to help her do better!” But “help” is not what we’re doing! What we’re actually doing is trying to *drive* them to change and do better. This *will not* work! What we have to understand is this: I cannot force, nag, pout, or punish a mate into changing for the better; I can only *influence* a change in my mate by the power of my own changed life! If anything will improve your relationship with a difficult mate, it will be a consistent application of these Biblical principles *to yourself!* And even if the consistent practice of these principles doesn’t improve the relationship, at least you will be what God wants you to be! To act in any other way (any way that violates these biblical principles) is to be overcome by evil! You don’t want that, and God certainly doesn’t want that!

So please—for the sake of others, for the sake of your spouse, for the sake of yourself—choose to actually practice these principles! Do we really believe the principles are right? Is Christ really my Lord when I’m tempted to set aside these principles, or do I selfishly choose to be my own lord and find an “exception” to the principles? Hmm. Well, I don’t know about you, but Candy’s husband has some work to do

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