

November 17, 2019

Title: Peacemakers

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Text: Romans 12:14-21

Tribes at War

Chick-fil-A, anyone?

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“Chick-fil-A.” Just say those three syllables and you can start a war.

Chick Fil A sold enough chicken sandwiches in 2010 to almost encircle the planet. That would be 282 million sandwiches to be precise. But the most popular item on the menu? Waffle fries.

You can buy these goodies in almost every state in the union. Except on Sunday, that is.

So what’s the problem with such a successful and popular company? Well, it turns out that its founder, Dan Cathy is a Christian who took a stand against same-sex marriage in 2012. For many people of a liberal or secular persuasion his words were an act of war. This spring two major airports refused to allow a Chick-fil-A franchise into their food courts. Which is why you probably won’t see a Chick-fil-A in Burlington, VT anytime soon. Wow, getting a Walmart built was a heavy lift in and of itself!

Of course, the Chick-fil-A controversy is just one example of the much wider culture war that we are experiencing in 21st century America.

The tribes are at war. And all too often we Christians find ourselves in the line of fire. So how are we to respond?

Defusing the culture war:

Paul gives us the answer when he writes:

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Romans 12:14 NIV

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse.

Paul knew what it was like to live in a world with tribes at war. He had switched sides from his traditional Jewish upbringing to becoming a bold proclaimer of the Good News of Jesus the Messiah. As a result, he became Public Enemy #1 with his own people. And then there was the never-ending culture war between Christians and the pagan world around them.

Paul suffered severe persecution throughout his ministry: he was beaten, imprisoned, stoned, slandered. He was the target of assassination plots. But as a follower of Jesus, he determined to do what Jesus had commanded:

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Luke 6:28 NIV

Bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.

So just what does it mean to bless your opponent in the cultural and tribal war we are experiencing?

Be a Blessing:

#1: Empathize

If we want to bless those who oppose us, a good starting point is found in the word "empathy." To empathize means to understand and share the feelings of someone else. Paul writes:

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Romans 12:15 NIV

Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn.

Empathizing doesn't mean giving up your point of view or your convictions. It means taking the time and effort to feel what the other person is feeling in a given situation. It means recognizing the very real feelings that they have as a fellow human being.

We've all done this with our kids: a toy gets lost and our child is devastated. We know that in the grand scheme of things the toy can be replaced or recovered. But *in the moment it is essential that we validate the fear and loss that our child is experiencing.* "We mourn with those who mourn."

The same is true when it comes to the burning social issues of our time. What does it *feel like* to be a sophomore in college and find out that you are pregnant? Paul isn't saying that we have to validate improper sexual behavior. Nor is he saying that an abortion is the cure for the problem. But *he is saying that we are to show genuine love to a person who feels overwhelmed by her situation.*

Not easy. But essential if we are to defuse the culture war.

#2: Live in harmony with one another:

Paul's second key to blessing our opponents is for us to make every effort to just get along with each other:

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Romans 12:16a NIV

Live in harmony with one another.

This goes along with what he says a few verses later:

Romans 12:18 NIV

If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.

God put us here to be peace-makers, not war-mongers. And remember: *peace* means *Shalom* – God's loving and just governance of His creation. Creating chaos through anger and vitriolic attacks does not create Shalom.

We can't fix the world on our own. But we can be men and women of peace who make our little corner of the world a better place. And that starts with finding ways to get along with others whenever possible.

#3: Don't be full of yourself!

Paul's third key to blessing our opponents focuses on humility:

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Romans 12:16b NIV

Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.

In other words, don't be full of yourself! Don't be full of your self-righteousness. Don't think that it's on you to write stinging tweets or Facebook posts against all of those other people who are ruining our country.

Instead, get off your high horse. Find someplace to help others. Don't get caught up taking sides. Be unpredictable! Be a disruption to the phony boundaries created by zealots in the culture war!

Isn't that what Jesus did? He deliberately hung out with the dregs of society and welcomed them into the Kingdom of God. He refused to get caught up in the culture war around Him.

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#4: No retaliation!

So what do you do when things go south? When you are unjustly accused? When someone lights up your social media world with lies about you or your family?

Paul has a revolutionary command for those situations:

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Romans 12:17 NIV

Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone.

No retaliation!

Jesus commanded:

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Matthew 5:38-42 NIV

"You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you."

A slap on the right cheek was delivered with the back of the hand – a stinging insult. A lawsuit is to be met with grace, not a countersuit. Roman soldiers had the right to compel a person to carry his gear for one mile. Jesus says to go with him two miles! We're to be people characterized by generosity, not greed.

No retaliation.

#5: No revenge!

And with the command against retaliation goes a second command:

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Romans 12:19-20 NIV

Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. On the contrary:

*"If your enemy is hungry, feed him;
if he is thirsty, give him something to drink.
In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head."*

Let God be the Judge and Jury for the whole wide world. Let Him establish and maintain His moral order in His creation. He doesn't need a bunch of zealous vigilantes dishing out punishment on those with whom they disagree.

Instead, we are to be a – guess what? – *blessing!*

“Heaping coals of fire” on someone’s head is not some kind of backdoor punishment. It may refer to causing them to reconsider their hostility and feel remorse. The ancient Egyptians displayed repentance by carrying a container of coals on their head. Or it might mean something much more positive.

There was one time in my life that I actually *saw* someone walking with coals of fire on her head. I was a missionary in Africa and was driving home through the forest on a misty afternoon. All of a sudden, a woman came walking down a side trail in the forest. She had a woven basket on her head, with smoke coming out of it and trailing behind her. She had evidently visited a neighbor for some embers to help her start her own fire. Now she was going home to fix dinner for herself and her family.

So maybe the burning coals are just another way to bless your enemy!

Peacemakers:

Paul sums up the conversation with these words:

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Romans 12:21 NIV

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Things will always go one way or the other. Either evil conquers us in a situation, or we conquer evil. And the way we conquer evil is not by fighting harder or getting revenge. It is by being a peacemaker. That means being someone who deliberately goes against the grain of the hostility and hate in a situation or a culture. It means creating little oases of God’s Shalom – God’s love, goodness and justice – in a messy, out-of-control world.

This is what a transformed mind focuses on in every situation. This is what a child of God does. As Jesus said:

Matthew 5:9 NIV

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the children of God.”