

HEARTBEATS Staying Connected 6/24/2022

Dear Friends in Christ,

There are many passages in the Bible that are difficult for us to understand. In part, this is because they have meaning in the context of that time but aren't as simple to understand today. In other cases, we simply have to expand our study of scripture to encompass the whole of what is being said.

One such passage is Romans 12:20, where Paul writes, "In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his (your enemy's) head." Wow! That seems a pretty hurtful and even vicious way to treat another. But when we enlarge our reading of Paul's writing, we find that this is the whole of the paragraph which includes those words:

⁹ Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. ¹⁰ Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves. ¹¹ Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. ¹² Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. ¹³ Share with God's people who are in need. Practice hospitality. ¹⁴ Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. ¹⁵ Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. ¹⁶ Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited. ¹⁷ Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. ¹⁸ If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. ¹⁹ Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord." ²⁰ 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." ²¹ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

This, on the whole seems to fit better with the message of the Gospels, particularly the instructions to, "do not repay anyone evil for evil," "live at peace with everyone," and "do not take revenge." Even feeding your enemy when he is hungry and providing drink when he is thirsty seems to match with things that Jesus says. Yet what about this heaping burning coals on his head?

This is where the where the historic and cultural context comes in and can be helpful in understanding what the Bible is advising us. In biblical times, when someone visited your home, you were to extend hospitality to your guest. This certainly included food and drink. But when it was cold, as it can be in the desert environment at night, the host would wrap the head of the guest in a towel or cloth including an indentation or sort of bowl on top. Then the host would take hot coals from the fire and place on the head with the protection of the cloth to help warm the guest.

Paul says that by offering acts of grace and hospitality, we can change the relationship with those who may seem an enemy to us. By meeting the needs of anyone, and especially one with whom we have an adversarial relationship, we can build bridges. Such actions can warm them—their heart and their attitude—like coals to provide comforting heat to someone who is cold toward us. Paul's words, like those of Jesus, encourage us to always seek to develop and strengthen positive relationships with everyone. This is what God did when God sent Jesus. This is what Jesus did by going to the cross for us. And this is what we are called to do whenever we have the opportunity.

In Christ's love,

Pastor Jeffrey