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## Homiletics: Sermon Study on Romans 12:16-21 for the Third Sunday After Epiphany

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## HOMILETICS

### A ROYAL PRIEST—IN MY WORLD OUTLOOK

*The Theme for January.*—The Epiphany cycle is fruitful in materials for this theme. Is. 60:1-6 sounds the note of God's mercy for the Gentiles, and the Bethlehem star reminds that Christ was born for them too. As pointed out below, a number of lessons of the month underscore the concept also that Christians who have Christ's life in them are to be an epiphany of Christ to the world. In that accent lies the relation of the royal priesthood to the Epiphany.

### *Sermon Study on Romans 12:16-21 for the Third Sunday After Epiphany*

*The Third Sunday after Epiphany.* The manifestation of Christ to the world. The *Gospel*: Christ's miracle of healing manifests Him as the Son of God. *Introit*: Believers rejoice in God; let all the earth join in. *Gradual*: The heathen shall fear the name of the Lord. *Collect*: God's manifestation to be one of powerful defense. *This text*: The manifestation most easily seen by the world, Christians as "living epistles" reflecting in attitude and conduct the very nature of Christ.

*Context.* Appropriately the Standard Epistle texts for the first three Sundays after Epiphany come from Romans 12. The theme appears in v. 1, which with its "therefore" relates this chapter to all that precedes, namely, the record of the divine imputation of the "mercies of God." This supplies motivation for the appeal: "Present your bodies a living sacrifice . . . unto God," the bodies as instruments for God's use in revealing the divine nature to the world. Hence, "be not conformed to this world"; it supplies only the setting for Christian action. "Be transformed," God-wise. Let this appear in your relations with one another as Christians; now (text), with all men, "the world," even your enemies.

*The Priesthood.* Sacrificing was formerly the work of the priest class; here all Christians are appealed to for a sacrifice. The object is to be our own bodies. Yes, as completely as the "slaughter-sacri-



fic" (Lenski) was offered, so wholeheartedly do we bring our sacrifice of ourselves. Yet, it is to be a *"living sacrifice"*; just as Christ wholly offered Himself and now lives for us, so our offering is fulfilled in our continued living unto God. The priesthood of *all* believers! This is applicable to all who have been redeemed by the "mercies of God."

V. 16c. This verse might well be omitted as fitting better with the preceding. Christians are "wise unto salvation," but not "wise in their own conceits," literally, alongside themselves (*παρά*), in their own estimation. This will violate "one-mindedness" (v. 16a) and engender strife. The intrusion of an imperative (*γίνεσθε*) in the midst of infinitives and participles, all strung together without so much as an *ἔστε*, has the force of "Don't be that way"; present tense: "Do not have the habit of becoming" (Robertson). Self-conceit is unthinkable for the royal priest who has offered his whole self to God.

V. 17. The worldly attitude divides acquaintances into friend and foe, and dispenses kindness or hatred accordingly. The royal priest is to "recompense to no man evil for evil"; "to no man" regardless of who he is, though an unbeliever, a Gentile, an "enemy," an outsider. Never "evil for evil," *κακὸν ἀντὶ κακοῦ*, no tit for tat, no repaying of meanness with more meanness (*κακόν*, bad, base, mean), no "he hit me first, therefore I must hit him back," the ingrained carnal attitude so very prevalent in the world. The motto of Scotland: *Nemo me impune lacessit*. "The world calls it manhood; it is doghood rather!" (John Trapp, quoted in Newell's commentary.)

We are not to "recompense" (*ἀποδίδωμι*) pay off, pay back, literally, to put away a thing by giving or paying; does the vengeful man hope to rid himself of the mean thing by returning it? Experience shows it makes matters only worse. The royal priest is to be like his Lord, who, though "reviled, reviled not again," 1 Peter 2:23, 21.

No evil is the believer to do, but things "honest" (*καλά*), better, "lovely, pleasing, noble, praiseworthy." Note the change to the plural: not one mean thing is he to do, but noble things a-plenty. These he is to "provide," to think of beforehand (*προνοέω*, middle with the accusative of the thing thought, planned for). Noble



deeds are to appear not by accident, but as the product of deliberate planning. After all, the priest's "living sacrifice" of himself has been a "reasonable service," full of thought and spirit.

This is done for God's sake to be "acceptable" (v. 1) to Him, but the Christian is conscious of being observed. Regardless of who looks ("in the sight of all men"), things noble are to appear. Compare parallels, 1 Thess. 5:15; 2 Cor. 8:21. This is our Christian calling, 1 Peter 3:9-18; Matt. 5:16.

V. 18. Keep the punctuation of the A. V.: "If possible" — first, the *objective* possibility. Implication: It may not always be possible, in view of circumstances. The confessing of God's name, loyalty to Savior, Church, truth, faith, duty, may require boldness and may lead to "not peace, but a sword," Matt. 10:34. We're still in the Church Militant.

However, as regards ourselves, the *subjective* possibility, let not the peace be disturbed. "As much as lieth in you," τό, the accusative of general reference, literally, "the from-you part" (Robertson), or as for what arises (ἐξ) out of you. Strife is not to originate with the believer.

Rather he will "live peaceably with all men," 2 Cor. 13:11; Mark 9:50; 1 Thess. 5:13. Εἰρηνεύω, to make peace, then to cultivate, maintain, be at, live in peace. How often Paul practiced this "if possible" and "as much as lieth in you"! Grotius: *Omnium amici este, si fieri potest; si non potest utrimque, certe ex vestra parte amici este*. On the other hand, *Neque enim fieri potest, ut Christi militibus aeterna sit pax cum mundo, cuius princeps est Satan* (Calvin, quoted in Philippi).

V. 19. In order to strengthen his appeal in this difficult matter, the Apostle inserts the address "Dearly beloved," ἀγαπητοί. Jesus was the Beloved One, ὁ Ἀγαπητός, Matt. 3:17, etc. Christians generally are the ἀγαπητοὶ Θεοῦ, Rom. 1:7, etc. But they are that in a community sense, all of them together. Paul loves his readers with a divinely wrought love; perhaps he intends to remind them that they are "fellow beloved, *sc.* of God."

"Avenge not yourselves"; note the change to finite verbs with the stepped-up action. The stress is on the *yourselves*. Do not take the law into your own hands (even in civil law, no judge may sit on his own case). Ἐκδικέω, to vindicate one's own right, to do



justice (what the poor widow wanted the judge to do for her, Luke 18:3); δίκη, justice, penalty, ἐκ, exacted *from* a person.

This is the prerogative of a higher Judge. "Give place unto wrath, *sc.* of God." Τόπον is indefinite, "a portion of space viewed in reference to its occupancy" (Thayer), implying "time and opportunity to work" (Meyer), like our "elbow room," "make way for the doctor!" (cp. Eph. 4:27: "place to the devil"). Let God occupy the place of dispensing justice, not you; you step aside, get out of the way. You are only a priest of God, not God Himself!

Other suggestions as to the subject of the ὀργή must be rejected, such as "stand aside for the wrath of the offender, that is, let his anger burn itself out," though this might seem to fit the sense of Matt. 5:39; nor, "give place to your own wrath, that is, let it exhaust its resentment before taking any action," though this usage could be defended by Latin parallels. Rather, the reference must be to God's wrath because of contrast with the preceding "avenge not *yourselves*" and because of the following quotation, which points to God. Nor is it unworthy of God to have anger toward the "enemy," this emotion "in which God is as opposed to man's wickedness." Paul's readers know all about this (article, *the*, that well-known, wrath of God), from a full description in chap. 2.

The quotation is from Deut. 32:35 (also quoted Heb. 10:30 f.).

"Vengeance" has the same root as before; is also used of government in Rom. 13:4. "I will repay," same root as v. 17a, with prefix ἀντί; God stands over against the evildoer and pays him off, accurately, personally. Ἐμοί, to Me it belongs, it is My business, and Mine alone. How presumptuous of man to push God off the judgment seat and to take over His duties! How unthinkable for a royal priest who knows his place under the rule of God!

Nor does the believer gloat over the prospect of doom overtaking his enemy (compare the following). When standing back and giving God room, "it is not thus implied that the falling of Divine vengeance on our enemy should be our desire and purpose, but only this, that, if punishment is due, we must leave it to the righteous God to inflict it; it is not for *us* to do so." (*Pulpit Commentary.*)

V. 20. "Therefore"—if we are not to avenge ourselves, what then? Remain passive and idle? No, good may be done. Not vengeance, but its very opposite.



Follows now a direct quotation from Prov. 25:21 f., quoted by the Apostle without quotation marks. "Enemy," the adjective used as substantive, here with the addition of a genitive pronoun, may mean either "hated" or "hating." In view of the context, it is best taken as objective, one who is hostile toward you.

"If he hunger, feed him"; if he suffer want, here in its proper sense of "be hungry"; "feed him," literally, feed by putting a bit or crumb into his mouth, as one might feed a small child or a convalescent. We might almost translate: if he hungers, *tenderly* feed him. "If he thirst, give him drink," hold a cup to his mouth (a glass straw to his lips). Both samples, and that is what these are, indicate an absence of all bitterness, yes, even of mere indifference on the part of the believer. Indeed, his love is to be shown not *in absentia*, the help is not merely to be thrown in the "enemy's" direction; in every way the Christian acts as friend.

"For in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head." Rule out promptly any suggestion of injuring the enemy (Hengstenberg: Do deeds of kindness, and so aggravate his case before God so he will all the more merit God's wrath!), else how could a Christian wholeheartedly proceed to "heap up" deeds of kindness? And how would that overcome evil (v. 21)?

Stoeckhardt quotes Hofmann: Coals of fire have to be noticed. Better, they cause discomfort, even pain, the sense of shame, a compunction about the shabby treatment shown the believer. The end result of not merely casual sparks of kindness, but "coals of fire," live, burning, heaped up, may well be penitence on his part, reconciliation with you, peace. How well such activity harmonizes with the priest's role in the world!

True, many will dismiss this as "impossible." And, apart from "the mercies of God" it is! Yet priests of God, having offered themselves wholly to God, are not carrying chips on their shoulders (v. 16c), have taken forethought to do always things noble (v. 17b), strive continually to keep peace (v. 18). They follow the great High Priest, who prayed for His enemies, yea, died for them, etc.

V. 21. Summary: "Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good." The verb is *νικάω*, to conquer, to carry off the victory. Well, this is what the vengeful person seeks for himself. How much better the method and the result for the royal priest! The



hater is consumed by his own hatred; evil overcomes the evildoer. If a Christian yields to the spirit of vengeance, he has been defeated, perhaps a mortal blow has been inflicted on him as a Christian and priest of God!

No, in the Christian's hand is the powerful weapon of "good," not καλὰ, as before; but ἀγαθόν, admirable in the sense of useful, salutary, beneficial. This leads to triumph of the highest order. It may lead to reconciliation, perhaps even to repentance and faith, as the "enemy" comes *with us* to "glorify your Father which is in heaven"—yes, so that even the angels may celebrate the victory.

This is the Christian's life program and calling (present imperatives, continuing action). Not to be overcome, to let evil get us down (ὑπό, be overcome *under* evil), but rise above it. So the chapter ends triumphantly: Subdue your enemy with kindness!

#### SUGGESTED OUTLINES

Life is full of irritations and injuries, also for the priest of God; some people are actually hostile. What of the priest of God in such a setting? God says:

This means *"Love—Even the Enemy"*

- I. Leave the dispensing of justice in the hands of God
- II. Act as a channel of mercy in the stead of God

Or:

#### *The Priest of God in a Hostile World*

- I. Let God be God—I *am* His priest
  - A. Not wise in my own conceits, in relation to God and man, v. 16c;
  - B. No "evil for evil," or "vengeance," vv. 17a, 19;
  - C. My purpose in life: "things honest," "live peaceably," vv. 17b, 18;
  - D. My failure to keep my place emphasizes my need for God.
- II. Let my light shine—I *am* His priest
  - A. His mercy fills my need ("mercies," v. 1; "beloved," v. 19); Review Phil. 2:5-8; Rom. 5:5-10; Luke 23:34; etc.;
  - B. Now I love (1 John 4:19) even my enemy, v. 20;
  - C. And so fulfill my priesthood, vv. 20b, 21; Matt. 5:16; 1 Peter 2:9.

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