Sermon Notes 20 Nov 2016

Our text for today is found in Romans 12: verses 14-21. In order to set the stage we need to backtrack a few verses back to begin in verse 9.

9 Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. 10 Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. 11 Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. 12 Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. 13 Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality. 14 Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. 15 Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. 16 Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight. 17 Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. 18 If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. 19 Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” 20 To the contrary, “if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.

The Holy Bible: English Standard Version. (2016). (Ro 12:9–20). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

When I was in junior high school I was part of a Bible quiz team that focused on the 12th chapter of Romans. I can remember even at that relatively tender age wondering what verse 20 was all about. You had some time during coffee chat to mull that over a bit for yourselves. When Pastor Rick called us back together there were a number of different takes on what verse 20 is getting at. So let’s dive in and wrestle together with the text for a few minutes.

As you know, Paul is writing in Greek, a marvellously nuanced and precise language. Here Paul used two words that I have underlined that woodenly translate “charcoal fire”. There is nothing overtly spectacular in either of those words– the first word (which comes out as “anthrax” in English) is the root word for our word anthracite coal. If you can visualize a hunk of coal, you have the right image. The second word, which comes out as “pyre” in English, simply means burning, or smoldering, or blazing, or somehow otherwise described as being on fire.

When I dove into the lexicons to ferret out the semantic ranges of these words I was immediately met by this refreshing admission by Louw and Nida.

25.199 σωρεύω ἄνθρακας πυρὸς ἐπὶ τὴν κεφαλήν: (an idiom, literally ‘to heap coals of fire on the head,’ but the historical background of this idiom is not known, and hence to some extent the meaning is uncertain)

Translated into my manner of speech, Low and Nida are saying WE DON’T KNOW EXACTLY WHAT THIS MEANS! As is often the case with figurative expressions, there is significant ambiguity.

As you would expect of any ambiguity, there is a great deal of scholarly ink spilled over this passage. That should be no surprise, as scholars are notorious for delighting to split frog hairs (yes, I know, frogs do not have hair—which makes my point!). We are not surprised to find that scholarly opinion is divided, although as is the case with any scholarly debate, tends to follow well-ploughed furrows. In this case, there are twin furrows that seem to run through scholarly thought—the furrow of coals of fire as a metaphor for shame and remorse on the part of the offender and coals of fire as a metaphor for God’s vengeance and retribution. Following is just a smattering of these opinions.

Consider but a sampling:

“Many explain, the memory of the wrong awakened in your enemy by your kindness, shall sting him with penitence.” (Vincent, 1888)

Weust (1955) citing Denny says, “The meaning of ‘heaping burning coals on his head’ is hardly open to doubt. It must refer to the burning pain of shame and remorse which the man feels whose hostility is repaid by love.”

Weust goes on to cite Alford: “I understand the words, *For in this doing, you will be taking the most effectual vengeance;* as effectual as if you heaped coals of fire on his head.

You have got to love the scholarly certainty evident in Denny’s phrase “hardly open to doubt.”

More recently, Waalvord and Zuck write,

“The coals on the head may refer to a ritual in Egypt in which a person showed his repentance by carrying a pan of burning charcoal on his head. Helping rather than cursing an enemy may cause him to be ashamed and penitent.” (Waalvord & Zuck, 1983)

And finally, Moo writes,

“But the fact that it is we, by our good deeds, who bring the burning coals on the enemy suggests rather that Paul is holding out to us the hope that our kindness will stimulate shame and repentance in the enemy. “ (Moo, 1994)

The above perspectives are plowing in a furrow started by Matthew Henry. Henry observes,

Two senses are given of this, which I think are both to be taken in disjunctively. *Thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head;* that is, “Thou shalt either,” 1. “Melt him into repentance and friendship, and mollify his spirit towards thee” . . . 2. “It will aggravate his condemnation, and make his malice against thee the more inexcusable. Thou wilt hereby hasten upon him the tokens of God’s wrath and vengeance.” (Matthew Henry, 1662-1714)

While the vast majority of literal translations render Paul’s term as “burning coals” or some other cognate (meaning they leave it to you to figure out exactly what meaning is intended), other more “dynamic” translations make some exegetical decisions for the reader, as we see here in how the New Living Translations renders it thus.

Rom 12:20 Instead, “If your enemies are hungry, feed them. If they are thirsty, give them something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals of shame on their heads.” (New Living Translation)

The second main furrow of interpretation is coals of fire being a metaphor for God’s vengeance.

Before coming down on the shame aspect of the idiom as their preferred interpretation, Carson et al. write,

“This could be a reference to future divine punishment: if the enemy is not moved to repentance by our good deeds, our kindly actions will render God’s wrath all the worse.” (Carson, France, Motyner, & Wenham, 1994)

Keener (1993) writes,

“Here Paul quotes Proverbs 25:21–22; although Solomon might have meant “heap burning coals upon his head” as the enemy’s emotional misery, in Paul’s context of vengeance (Rom 12:19) this expression may mean that one’s enemy will be punished all the more severely in the day of judgment. This is also the sense in which the Dead Sea Scrolls viewed nonretaliation.”

And taking one further step back, we Jamieson, Fausset and Brown writing in 1871 observe,

“As the heaping of “coals of fire” is in the Old Testament the figurative expression of divine vengeance (Ps 140:10; 11:6, &c.), the true sense of these words seems to be, “That will be the most effectual vengeance—a vengeance under which he will be fain to bend” (So Alford, Hodge, &c.). Ro 12:21 confirms this.” (Jamieson, Fausset and Brown, 1871)

The above perspectives are plowing in the twin furrows started by Matthew Henry. Pre-dating all of these, Henry observes,

Two senses are given of this, which I think are both to be taken in disjunctively. *Thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head;* that is, “Thou shalt either,” 1. “Melt him into repentance and friendship, and mollify his spirit towards thee” . . . 2. “It will aggravate his condemnation, and make his malice against thee the more inexcusable. Thou wilt hereby hasten upon him the tokens of God’s wrath and vengeance.” (Matthew Henry, 1662-1714)

So, at the risk of being overly reductionist, scholarly wisdom seems to condense down to this set of constructs:

I do good to someone who has done evil to me   
a) so they will feel bad  
b) so God will really get-em

When I first began to wrestle with this as a junior-high quiz team contestant, I have to admit that something bothered me about these common understandings. They both may well be true, and I expect probably are, but somehow, it seemed like it would be very hard for me to keep my motives right. In both cases, it is really hard for mwe to not drop off the cliff on the side of revenge.

We are not alone in our unease. In response to the shame perspective, way back in 1888, Vincent betrayed his own unease:

“Many explain: The memory of the wrong awakened in your enemy by your kindness, shall sting him with penitence. This, however, might be open to the objection that the enemy’s pain might gratify the instinct of revenge. Perhaps it is better to take it, that kindness is as effectual as coals of fire.” (Vincent, 1888)

I’m not sure, nor is anyone else I have read, exactly what he meant by that last waffle-sentence. What is clear is that Vincent was wrestling with the same notion Matthew Henry before him struggled with when Henry wrote,

“Not that this [revenge] must be our intention in showing him kindness, but, for our encouragement, such will be the effect.” (Henry, 1662-1714)

Cognitive dissonance is a really good thing, because that feeling that something is not quite right becomes a motivation to dig in deeper and learn.

So, in going forward in our understand, we need to take one more step back and look at the idiom Paul is using in the actual source Paul was using—Proverbs 25: 21-22.

This is how the ESV renders these verses.

21 If your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat,

and if he is thirsty, give him water to drink,

22 for you will heap burning coals on his head,

and the Lord will reward you.

The Holy Bible: English Standard Version. (2016). (Pr 25:2122). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

At the first look, we seem to be stuck where we were. As you know, while Paul was a Hebrew and very learned in Hebrew, he is writing the book of Romans in Greek. We all are aware that even when working in mother tongues (as Paul was undoubtedly fluent in both Greek and Hebrew from childhood), moving back and forth in languages is not always a straight-forward thing.

So, I headed back into the dusty stacks to see what others had to say about Solomon’s words. I dug into the actual Hebrew word itself that most translations render “burning coals.” This is when I ran into something that I had not known before that I believe is very important.

When I read Swanson, this is what I found:

1624 גַּחַל (*gǎ·ḥǎl*): n.masc.; ≡ burning charcoal, live carbon coals, i.e., hot embers of a fire (2Sa 22:9; Pr 6:28; 26:21), bolt of lightning, i.e., a flash of fire from the sky (2Sa 22:13; Ps 18:13. Note: though context favors this meaning here, it is possible to interpret as prior entry. (Swanson, J. (1997). *Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains : Hebrew (Old Testament)* (electronic ed.). Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, Inc.)

So, there is a normal carbon-based sense to this word, but there is another meaning—more on the order of fire from the sky, or a lightning bold. What is very interesting is that Swanson argues that this second usage seems to fit the context better.

Swanson tells us that the same word appears in 2 Samuel 22:13, and in Psalm 18:14 . You can see here how the NIV translates both of those verses, and the ESV deviates from the idea of a burning coal in rendering Psalm 18:14.

2 Samuel 22:13 Out of the brightness of his presence; bolts of lightning blazed forth. (NIV)

Psalm 18:14 He shot his arrows and scattered the enemies, great bolts of lightning and routed them. (NIV)

Psalm 18:14  And he sent out his arrows and scattered them; he flashed forth lightnings and routed them. (ESV)

So we take a step back and think, “Oh! Bolts of lightning, flashes of light.” That puts an interesting trajectory to this.

As we mull that over, we remember that Jesus both was associated with and Himself had said some rather startling things about hot bright things flying around.

Let’s just briefly consider two of these. John the Baptist introduces to us the metaphor of baptism with fire. Matthew and Luke’s accounts (Luke 3:16) are virtually verbatim.

“I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.” (Matthew 3:11, ESV)

Then, there is the statement that Jesus made that Luke records in chapter 12, verse 49.

“I came to cast fire on the earth, and would that it were already kindled! “(Luke 12:49, ESV)

Again, there is a great deal of scholarly opinion on what Jesus meant by that, usually plowing our now familiar furrows. This one opinion stood out to me, though: The *fire* stands for the spread of the message or the power of God, and Jesus longs that it might spread more quickly.

Marshall, I. H. (1994). Luke. In D. A. Carson, R. T. France, J. A. Motyer, & G. J. Wenham (Eds.), New Bible commentary: 21st century edition (4th ed., p. 1002). Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press.

Hang on to this thought: Fire = a metaphor for God’s power

Let’s take that understanding back to our text and see what verse 20 looks like.

20 To the contrary, “if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will [*turn lightning bolts of God’s power loose]* on his head.

Regardless as to whether Solomon had a primary meaning of a coal of fire or a lightning bolt in mind, reflecting on the Proverbs passage, Wiersbe offers us this somewhat tempered observation:

Gentleness ought to lead to kindness; see Rom. 12:19–21, where these same verses are quoted by Paul and applied to NT Christians. Instead of adding coals to the fire of anger (Prov. 26:20–21), we help to put out the fire by showing love and kindness. Read Christ’s commandment in Matt. 5:9–12. If the person needs to be chastened, God will take care of the matter: “Vengeance is mine, I will repay.” We must be careful, however, to perform these kind deeds with the right motive. If we try to obligate people to us, or if we try to “buy them off,” God will not bless. But if we sincerely love them and want to help them, God will honor and reward us. Of course, these good deeds must not be done to impress people; Prov. 21:14 says they ought to be secret. Solomon is not suggesting a bribe here; rather, he is saying that kindness will be like oil that will heal the troubled waters. (Wiersbe, 1993)

Wiersbe, W. W. (1993). *Wiersbe’s Expository Outlines on the Old Testament* (Pr 25:21–22). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

So, to distill Wiersbe’s wisdom, God’s job is to judge and execute judgment; my job is to love and help people without any agenda or motive other than God tells me to do that. If I really do that, God will do something. Hold that thought: I think Wiersbe is really on to something, and we will come back to this shortly.

So, whichever way you translate the phrases variously rendered “coals of fire” or “bolts of lightning”, we ultimately land in the same place. My job in all of this is to do good to someone who has harmed me. God will take care of the rest.

At this point, you probably feel another wave of unease floating over you, as do I. To live out, I mean to actually live out, what Paul is admonishing us to do in this passage sounds really hard to do.

Let’s read these verses again, and think about what that would look like in practice.

14 Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. 15 Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. 16 Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight. 17 Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. 18 If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. 19 Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” 20 To the contrary, “if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals [or, *turn lightning bolts of God’s power loose*]on his head.

*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*. (2016). (Ro 12:9–20). Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

Notice there is a stark absence of qualifiers in this. Bless those who persecute you. Full stop. No indication of degrees of persecution are allowable before I retaliate.

Repay no one evil for evil. Full stop. No indication of degrees of evil to be overlooked before I retaliate.

Verse 19 is even more uncomfortable because it puts the word NEVER before the word avenge.

Could Paul really mean NEVER?

Just for the sake of argument, what if someone tried to kill you and a close member of your family, and succeeded in killing the family member and you were left fighting for your life for months afterward? What then? Surely, surely there would be justification in that circumstance to set this passage aside. At least, that is the way my brain would tend to work.

Earlier you met Dina and Maman’i Aby Armand, and I told you we would return to their story. As Rachel and Mark and the girls had lived with them for a couple of weeks when they first came to Madagascar, they very much wanted us to meet them. So we invited them over for a meal one night and spent a delightful evening with them—despite our being able to communicate in 50 words of English, French or Malagasy that we knew between us. I knew they were remarkable people, but a later conversation with Jamie gave me insight into how remarkable they actually are. I share their story so they can teach you as they have taught me.

Earlier you saw this slide that shows where Eden Foundation is actively replanting. In the top left of the picture you see a cluster of planting points that I want to zoom in on.

Zooming in a bit more you see a village clustered in the isthmus. It is located there because, as fishing was the primary way of making a living, it was possible to fish in the mangrove channels on windy days, and in the open sea in more calm weather.

Zooming in yet again, this shot taken from a helicopter shows the village with more detail. You can see many outrigger canoes pulled up on the beach.

You need a little bit of background to fully understand what happened in this little village, and how it connects to Dena and Mama N’ Ibi.

Jamie Schattenberg was raised in Madagascar, and growing up, his best friend was a Malagasy boy named Josy. Josy had some brothers, including Dina. Listen in to Jamie’s own words as he gives account of what started in Mahabana 17 years ago.

Josy, a good Malagasy friend, took Jamie to Mahabana for the first time in 1999 with the hopes of good fishing and the chance to share the sweet message of Christ.  Just prior to their arrival there was a house fire that killed 2 people.  When Jamie and Josy arrived in Mahabana, the people were gathered together to discuss the taboos in the village as an explanation of why the people were killed and to make sure the taboos were being followed.

Taboo #1:  You can’t eat, raise and say “chicken”.

Taboo #2:  You can’t work in the mangrove channel on Tuesdays.

Taboo #3:  *Vazaha*or foreigners.  Though with Jamie’s presence, it was quickly clarified that it was “military foreigners”, thereby allowing Jamie to stay.

Taboo #4:  Jesus and the Bible.

In order to understand the depth of such taboos, you should know that taboos in Madagascar literally control the lives of the Malagasy as they follow these in order to appease and seek favor from the ancestors.

Little did the people gathering know, Jamie and Josy had 12 Bibles in their backpacks.  After living there for 2 weeks, Jamie and Josy wanted to start a small Bible Study.  They prayed for 1 person to come, asked 2 people to attend and yet God brought 12 men and women!  Immediately the people of Mahabana directly opposed the Bible study through verbal threats and spiritual curses.  A month after the start of this study, one man, Florent, stood up and said, “I’d rather live in the light and be persecuted than to live in the darkness”.  Florent is a key member of the church to this day.  Another man, Dina, said, “I’ve been reading my Bible and I’m sad to think of my life.  I want to follow Jesus”. Today, Dina is a key leader in the church, in the reforestation projects and the elected president of Mahabana.  Despite extreme opposition, the small group of 12 believers, couldn’t contain the joy, hope and freedom they found in Christ.  The light of Christ was beginning to shine on this small peninsula that had been steeped in darkness for generations.

Listen as Jamie’s own words again describe the changes in Mahabana in the subsequent 13 years:

I stepped off a Malagasy sailboat and into life within the village of Mahabana. A village barely touched by the outside world and so entrapped by the vices of poverty on every level. A village where 30% of the population controlled the other 70% simply due to ownership of canoes and fishing supplies. A village were many of the desperate 70% were enslaved to the manipulating 30% through debt bondage, as indentured servants. A village with no infrastructure and where diseases went untreated, allowing them to run their destructive courses in human bodies. Where children received no formal education, and where 13-year old girls were married off to older men who often left them once they were pregnant. A village that brought meaning to the biblical phrase “even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death.” The instant we walked into this village the shadow of death hovered ever close, weighing heavy on our shoulders. A village defined by taboos or “fadys” that dictated the way of life even when they were destructive leading to death. A village were jealously reigned and curses were rampant against any who prospered beyond the others. A village that literally lived in hopelessness and was stuck in the way of darkness. A village where I called home for 2 and a half months just trusting that God would work in powerful ways in the lives of these unknowingly desperate people.

Contrast this with Jamie’s description of Mahabana 13 years later:

The village of Mahabana barely resembles the village I called home so many years ago. A village where the weight of the shadow of the valley of death no longer lingers, but rather a sense of hope and life pervades the village. A village where those in need have been given jobs to replant mangrove trees, millions of them actually. A village where jobs have enabled the percentage of people who own their own canoes and fishing gear to rise from 30% to 90%. A village were indentured servanthood is for the most part a thing of the past as debts have been paid off and most of the village is no longer reliant on the fishing supplies of a few. A village where children are being sent to school in the city and where girls can be found single even up into their twenties and not forced into unhealthy marriages. A village where the orphans and widows are being cared for. A village where women have been empowered with jobs and given more freedoms to fish, own their own canoes, play soccer and live better lives. A village where taboos or “fadys” have lost their destructive powers. A village where hearts are being transformed by Jesus Christ, who is leading them to live lives of honesty, longing to see one another prosper. A village where laughter penetrates every waking hour and days are lived full of life. and where people say for the first time in their lives they can sleep with peace of mind.

What reasonable and rational person could ever honestly say the first state was preferable to the second?

In this picture you see Dina on the far left, standing next to Maman’i Aby, while Josy is on the far right standing next to his Mom. Working with Eden, this extended family was instrumental in the economic and spiritual transformation at work in this village. The contrast in these two descriptions is stark, and flies in the face of any misunderstanding of Christianity as being “pie in the sky, by and by.”

But, as Jamie said, there was extreme opposition. You can well believe that the 30% who held the 70% in virtual slavery were not impressed with Josy and Jamie bringing God’s word to Mahabana—just as they were not impressed with the results of the employment Eden offered the 70%.

Jamie is a master of understatement in his phrase, “despite extreme opposition.”

Do you remember the hypothetical scenario I posed a while ago? Actually, this was not hypothetical. As Eden Foundation began its work in Mahabana, one of the important people in the village who had a lot to lose financially (think, one of the 30%) coerced his wife to poison the food of Maman’i Aby and her nephew. The nephew died, and Maman’i Aby spent months fighting for her life.

How does that qualify for the categories laid out in our text for today? Enemy—evil—avenge.

What would you do? I am terrified to think what I might do in that circumstance. If we went around this entire room I don’t think any of us would ever guess what Dina and Maman’i Aby did in response:

Maman’i Aby hired this same lady who poisoned her and her nephew to cook for her on a permanent basis. Yes, you heard that right.

Let that sink in for a minute. Maman’i Aby hired the lady who tried to kill her to cook for her.

That must have been just as jarring for the people in Mahabana as it is to us.

In the aftermath, this lady gave her heart to Christ. Her husband fled town and has never been heard of since.

Remember that Mahabana was taboo Jesus and the Bible? When Maman’i Aby and Dina did not respond as people expected them to respond, something happened to the people of Mahabana. Many, many, many came to Jamie and asked him to teach them about Jesus. Today there is a thriving church, and as an outgrowth of the church, a school. These, working together with the employment Eden offers and the habitat restoration that is ongoing in the mangrove channels, have changed many aspects of life in Mahabana for the good.

I know that there are many components that contribute to the literal transformation of Mahabana economically and spiritually. But I can’t help but think that you are looking into the eyes of two obscure, simple people who, because they truly lived out what Paul was calling us to do, God was turned loose in Mahabana. You are looking at Romans 12:14 lived out in the full. Mahabana today is the evidence of God’s power transforming lives.

In God’s economy, you are looking into the eyes of greatness.

Romans 12: 14-20 is not a lofty theory that is fun to mull over but never put into operation. Nor is this a simplistic bobble-head, bland sort of Casper Milquetoast mindless platitude.

How can I really love people?

This is tough, grinding, difficult work that quite literally goes completely against how we, as human beings, are hardwired.

In fact, it is pretty much impossible to actually live this out unless at the deepest recesses of my being, from which everything that I say, do and think stems from, becomes radically re-ordered, I can never do it. That is why Paul put Romans 12:1-2 at the beginning of this section.

Romans 12:2 (ESV)

**2**Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

I want to close by going back to something Jamie said that I read earlier: “Another man, Dina, said, “I’ve been reading my Bible and I’m sad to think of my life.  I want to follow Jesus”.

Maman’i Aby and Dina were able to respond as they did because they both had experienced Romans 12:2. You and I can never do live out Romans 12: 14-20 unless I experience the transformation of Romans 12:2.