

## **SCORE UNEVEN, ROMANS 12:9-21**

Pax Romana #30

- Intro: Tony Campolo spoke with a German WW2 veteran who told this story: "First you have to understand that we lost about 425,000 American men & women in WW2. Russia lost 40 million to the Nazis. There wasn't a home that wasn't touched by the killing. When the war was over and they were marching the German prisoners out of Moscow the procession began with the obviously fed officers, buttoned up to the neck in their tunics, in a semi-proud goose step. People lined the streets, growling, surging. It took all the police could do to keep them from tearing the German prisoners to pieces. They were screaming, and shouting obscenities. Then, behind in the line came the enlisted men. Skinny, tattered, diseased, dragging themselves along the street, undernourished. There was dead silence. The noise of the crowds stopped as people stared. Then one woman broke through the line of police and ran up to a soldier and gave him a piece of bread. It broke loose all along the line as people began to offer food to the passing prisoners. The soldier who told this story said, "I couldn't believe it. All I could think was they must look at us and realize we're not the enemy, we're just somebody's little boy, sick and dying, and far away from home."
- Campolo concluded that we would all be more gracious if we could see each other not as an enemy, but as somebody's little kid, sick, dying, and far from home. Our text, Romans 12, at the front of the third major section of the letter, begins to ex-

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plain how the well-spring of God's grace to underserving sinners ought to affect how we behave in the world.

- read text...
- **1. My love must overcome my justice.** This is not to say that justice is a bad thing. It is to say that it is not the brightest star in the heavens. Love is brighter. God is defined in scripture as love, and while it tells us he is also just, it never says "God is justice." It does say "God is love." What are we to make of this? Perhaps it seems strange to you that while most of us long to receive love, we are more prone to hand out justice. But did you notice the theme of Romans 12 is quite on the other side?
  - Overcome evil with good. v21
  - "If your enemy is hungry" tell him he deserves... oh I'm sorry, it says "feed him." v20
  - Do not take revenge. v19 (What? Are you serious?)
  - Do not repay evil for evil. v17
  - Associate with the low life v16
  - Say nice things about people who curse you. v14
- How are you doing with the one outweighing the other? Have you ever felt angry because you work long hours and someone you know works a lot less and makes a whole lot more money? Have you ever been upset when you came home to an empty house while others in the family were off having fun somewhere with friends? Has it ever ticked you off that people in other jobs get more vacation than you? Or that you are still using an

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iphone 4 while your neighbors child has an iPhone 8? We might be mad because we don't have a boat. We might be made because we have a boat we have to take care of ourself because we could barely afford the boat, while other people have two. What I am trying describe are some of the ways we start believing that the world is unfair, and that we are entitled to justice. Everybody wants justice. Why isn't there a superhero group called the Love League? That doesn't fire us up as much as a Justice League, does it?

- **A.** Think of it, a vast majority of our shows and tales are about some hero bringing some villain to what? Justice. But justice cannot warm the heart. So the more we demand it, the more bitter we become down inside, and more and more ready to repay, or pay back the rascal that offends us.
  - "He said that so I'm leaving"
  - "That was her job, not mine!"
  - "You offended me when you..." (Most of the time we may have started it all but we don't see that part. Only the other's.)
- When our boys were young this kind of thing frequent. One would come to me and say, "Brother hit me with a shoe."
  - "Well, lets go punch him out", I say. As he stammers in shock I ask, "And what did *you* do to *him*?" (see, we've run around this tree before, right parents?)
  - "Nothing". I turn to the other son... "Well?"

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- "He pushed my pillow off the bunk."
  - "That's because he shot me with the nerf gun"
  - "Well you scratched my nose when we were playing swords."
  - "Well, um...one time you took one of my Starbursts...once...!"
  - "It's only fair, cuz you got the last can of Pepsi at grandma's house".
  - "But you ride in the front seat more than I do, that's not fair either."
- May I hint that while as we age we are more subtle, we are easily equally as concerned for ourselves as children? The logic of justice is never done. The logic of justice is why marriages fail. The logic of fairness is how the mass slaughter of Tutsis by Hutus of Rwanda happened in the 90's. But justice misses the things that sustain the human spirit. Devotion (10). Honor (10). Joyfulness (12). Sharing (13). Hospitality (13). Justice isn't about sharing, rather it's about making sure I get my fair share! To get justice I may have to harm you, but ...
- *"Love does no harm to its neighbour. Therefore love is the fulfilment of the law." Romans 13:10, NIV.*
- B. Justice does far more to harm our life than injustice because of it's ability to dampen love. I am trying to convince us and myself that to suffer injustice is to be preferred over demanding my rights. The supreme love of justice leads to the pool of bitterness and vengeance. Vengeance, for example, is the passion

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to get even. To give the other the pain they gave you. Why do we want this so badly? In the end it's result is two people with pain. Double pain.

- This is not the way of Jesus. Helmut Thielicke writes, "We reject Christ when we practice justice instead of love." You know what that suggests, don't you? By constantly watching our for my own fairness, I am pushing God away. I am being exactly what Jesus Christ was not
- **2. Starting grace is better than continuing justice.** I know that doesn't sound good to you. But grace can bring warmth back into your house. I want you to note the descriptor "starting", as in "initiating." Someone has to suffer to break any cycle of justice or evil. You and I must come to believe that the suffering involved in grace is worth it if we are to experience something better.
  - *"It is better, if it is God's will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil. For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God." 1 Peter 3:17, 18, NIV.*
- See, it is God's character that we are imitating. God is both just and loving but which one is more? Which way does God lean?
  - *"... the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a*

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*thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.” Exodus 20:5, 6, NIV.*

- What makes God different from humans and what makes some humans very god-like comes in loving very ungodly people, offering them kindness instead of simply stopping their blow, inquiring with honest interest of the already self-absorbed person ignoring you. God is the great initiator of grace. God’s initiative lies at the heart of the Gospel.
  - The lovesick father runs to the prodigal son.
  - A landlord cancels a debt too large for a servant to repay.
  - An employer pays an 11th hour hireling the same as first-hour crew.
  - A banquet giver goes out to the highways and byways, pulls people from under bridges and makes them guests.
  - A divine son steps out of heavens throne room to come to the ghetto of earth .
- God is all about shattering the law of retribution by *initiating* grace. He invaded earth, absorbed our punishment, and offers us heaven instead!
- B. So what is starting grace? Initiating grace? In a word, forgiveness.
  - 1) First some things that forgiveness is not. Forgiveness is never merely following suit when the other person has led with his regret; forgiveness is more likely taking the initiative. Also, forgiveness cannot be done while remaining

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proud. We say, "Very well, if so and so is sorry and will come to me I will forgive her." This is not forgiveness at all. This is retributive justice! We watch like a hawk eyeing his prey from a high perch, to see if the other guy will humble himself, even only in a glance of the eye, a hint between the lines in an email that he could be sorry a little. And then we know that we were in the right! They have knuckled under so we are OK with muttering the meaningless "I forgive you." No, Paul's command was honor one another above yourselves (10), and do not be conceited (16). Now for what forgiveness is...

- 2) Forgiveness is a giving up of the natural law of fairness for the sake of love. Again I'll quote Thielecke
  - "When we do to our neighbor all that God does to us, a new, vivifying, re-creative atmosphere comes into our life. For one thing is sure and that is that every human being wants to love and be loved. If you have a husband or wife, a neighbor, an associate who is filled with resentment against you, who holds a grudge against you, treats you underhandedly, whose eyes glitter with hatred and contempt, you can be sure that he does not feel right underneath, that he is suffering under all this, and that he would be happy if he could love instead of hate; indeed, that he would be grateful to you if you would give him the chance to come out of his dark hole.

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For loving and being loved is a natural process like inhaling and exhaling. It is simply unnatural when it is otherwise. But the other person cannot find the switch. It needs an initial spark, otherwise he remains crippled and wastes away in his hatred. When a person ceases to love, his inner man ceases to breathe and he suffocates. Therefore, through my loving I must provide the initial spark. Often a single word breaks the dismal spell. A hand clasp can burst chains. Do I really wish only to be just and let the other person stew in his own juice?" Thielicke p.113

- C. Finally, Forgiving others begins in being forgiven by God. Mirosalv Volf wrote a fantastic book on forgiveness titled "Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace." In the book he uses the beautiful imagery of a stream to show how God's character (love) is poured into us by His Spirit and becomes our character. God is certainly the fountainhead. The stream of love and forgiveness flows from Him because it is His nature and character. Mistakenly, we often think we are at the end point of the stream ... the recipient ... the forgiven one. But, truth be told, we all stand mid-stream. We are indeed recipients but not the end ... we receive His character and then as it becomes our character we pass that same love and forgiveness on to others. We forgive even as we have been forgiven (Col. 3:13). If I can



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keep that in mind, how much I'm forgiven, that I'm forgiven, that I'm loved and eternally so –I am more able to let the stream flow on.

### • **Conclusion:**

- Debbie Morris was kidnapped along with her boyfriend for 36 hours. They shot him and raped her repeatedly. A movie was made about her assailants called *Dead Man Walking*. But later, as a survivor, Debbie had to wrestle with going on in life. Forgiveness isn't fair you see. But it's God's way. Here's what Debbie learned...
- *"I think that many times people in my situation think that justice is what is going to heal them...And I was disappointed time after time because justice was not fulfilling.. What we get confused about is the healing effect of justice. Justice is not what heals us... There's no such thing as justice here on earth for what that man did...The only justice is going be when God gives his final judgement."*
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- Morris went on to write a book called *Forgiving the Dead Man Walking* in which she shared what she learned. Morris recalled thinking in the midst of the attacks, "Where is God right now -- the God that I love? Does he even exist?" That answer would come much later for Morris when Willie was seated in the courtroom answering for his actions. "Why did you let her go?" Willie had been asked. "I know it was a stupid thing to do," he responded. "But there was something different about her. When I looked into her eyes, I saw love."

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- Morris could not believe her ears. Love? Disgust, contempt, hatred, but surely not love, she said. "When I thought that I had been abandoned by God, he really was there," she said. What Willie saw was not her love, she said, but the love of Jesus Christ in her, who was looking back at him.
- It takes faith to forgive, to chose to value love more than justice. It takes the faith of v19 that says God is the one to sort all things out. And here's the most beautiful thing of it all: in our savior, both Gods perfect justice and his boundless love meet! The merit of Gods only son was traded for the demerit of many human creatures. Our sin got justice in this body. Our souls got love when he died in our places. And it was all his idea, his doing, his initiative. Come fall in love with this Savior once again.