The comfort of Christ’s coming justice
Text: Romans 12:19

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**Scriptures:** Micah 6:6-8; Deuteronomy 32:35-42; Romans 12:9-21

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 96, 533, 94, 487, 531+532

**Series:** Heidelberg Catechism (LD19Q&A52)

**Theme:** The return of Christ to judge the living and the dead

**Proposition:** Waiting for Christ’s future coming judgement brings comfort in present distress

**Introduction**

Young children, imagine that someone sticks their foot out trips you up. Older ones here; imagine that you are fairly sure that someone has gossiped about you, or slandered your name to others, or perhaps, a less-capable fellow-worker is promoted ahead of you because he or she is good friends with the company owner or your supervisor. Personal injustice, real or perceived, abounds in this world. It is virtually unavoidable for all those living on this planet. It has been this way since the fall of our earliest ancestors Adam and Eve.

The letter of the Apostle Paul to the capital city of the Roman Empire is written to “*All those in Rome, who are loved by God and called to be saints*” (1:7). Before Paul wrote these words, there had been a mass expulsion of Jews from Rome by decree of the Emperor Claudius. The historian Suetonius explained that this was “*because they were constantly rioting at the instigation of Chrestus*”. Christians were falsely, unjustly, accused of public acts of rebellion against the civil government.

Amongst these persecuted Christians were Prisca and Aquila, who left Rome and went with Paul to Ephesus (Acts 18:18), later returning to their home city (Rom 16:3). There they, together with the other Christians in their city, would have received the letter we now know as ‘The letter to the Romans’. When Paul writes the first word of our text “Beloved” he is including Prisca and Aquila and all those who are loved by God, being saved in Christ. He is writing to people who have experienced great personal injustice. They knew what it was to be unfairly treated.

Today, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Paul writes to you, brother and sister in Christ and me, about personal injustice and how you and I are to rightly respond to those who have wronged us. Christians, saints, are characterised by the fruits of their faith, including:

1. Loving one another with brotherly affection;
2. Not being lazy in zeal, but fervent in spirit, serving the Lord;
3. Blessing those who persecute us;
4. Not repaying evil with evil;
5. Living peaceably with everyone, as much as it depends on you;
6. Not seeking revenge for personal injustice, which is our focus this afternoon from our text in Romans 12:19: “*Never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.’”*

We are going to consider this practical instruction from the Lord as we also reflect on the comfort that Christ’s return ‘*to judge the living and the dead*’ brings to us, under three points:

1. Never avenging yourself
2. Leaving it to God’s wrath
3. Being comforted by Christ
4. **Never avenging yourself**

Perhaps you can remember as a child someone purposefully tripping you up. What did you likely feel like doing in return? Getting them back either by doing the same to them or maybe throwing them a punch or a kick? If you think someone has gossiped about you or slandered you, what do you likely feel like doing? The same to them perhaps, or worse? If a fellow worker is promoted ahead of you and you think this unfair, what might you feel like doing? Being mean to them? Trying to make them look incompetent?

These are some examples of what is often called ‘getting even’. ‘Getting even’ is when we try to right perceived or actual wrongdoings against ourselves by taking our own revenge. This is what our text is about. Paul writes ‘*Beloved, never avenge yourselves*’. The Greek word translated ‘avenge’ means to vindicate one’s right by returning pain or injury to yourself with pain or injury to the person who has, or you think has, wronged you. The emphasis conveyed by the word ‘yourselves’ here is on not taking personal revenge for real or imagined injustice against yourself. This is not the same thing as seeking justice for others.

A literal translation of the original Greek is “*Never your own, revenge take*”. The tense indicates a continuous pattern of not taking personal revenge. To sum up the key message here: “*The Christian must be free from the desire to get even*”. There is a natural inclination for revenge which is part of our fallen nature. We want to be both judge and executioner against those who have wronged us – in reality, or at least in our own mind.

There is a better way - as Christ Jesus has shown us. He suffered far greater personal injustice than you or I ever will. Gospel writer Luke records that the executioners of Jesus ‘*came to the place that is called The Skull, there they crucified him, and the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. And Jesus said,* "*Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do*”’ (Luke 23:33-34). Jesus did not avenge Himself. Unlike you and me, He was perfectly innocent of any sin, any crime, any wrongdoing, any lack of wisdom. Unlike you and me, He has the power and authority to retaliate against any and all of His enemies. He is also perfectly holy so any avenging He did would be perfectly just. Yet, Jesus did not avenge Himself as He was being unjustly executed as a criminal. Brothers and sisters, Jesus does not command us to do anything that He has not already perfectly done.

Remember the first Christian martyr, Stephen? As they were stoning him to death, he called on the Lord and said ‘“*Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!” Then falling on his knees, he cried out with a loud voice, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them!” Having said this, he fell asleep.’* (Acts 7:59-60). Stephen did not try to avenge himself, but instead like Christ, sought forgiveness for his executioners.

About 1500 years later the English martyr John Rogers (not to be confused with the RCNZ Emeritus minister of the same name) was burned to death at a stake at Smithfield. Asked by Sheriff David Woodroofe to recant, Rogers said “*That which I have preached I will seal with my blood*”. Then Woodroofe said “*Thou art a heretic*”. To which Rogers replied, “*That shall be known at the day of judgement*”. Well said Woodroofe “*I will never pray for thee*”. “*But I will pray for you*” replied Rogers. The 16th century martyr John Rogers did not try to avenge himself.

Stephen and John Rogers suffered far greater insult and injury than you or I have, or are likely in the future endure. Yet they were able in the power of God to return evil with good and to wait for Christ to come in judgement upon their enemies, for whom they prayed that God would grant mercy. Christ and His suffering faithful followers through history understood that they are never to take their own revenge. Beloved of the Lord, do you understand this in your life? How do you respond to those who do you injustice? Do you leave the injustices that have been done to you to God’s coming wrath?

1. **Leaving it to God’s wrath**

Big problems occur in the Christian life when we try to do God’s work for Him! As if we could! Attempting this impossible task has been the downfall of many Christians, including and especially, pastors and elders. We fall into error when we try to change people, fix people, or save people. This is God’s work, in which He is pleased to use people like us as instruments in His hands to do the work which He has prepared beforehand for us (Eph 2:10).

Similarly, you and I need to be ‘stand aside’ and never take our own revenge, but instead ‘*leave it to the wrath of God*’. It’s worth noting that in the original Greek, the text simply says, ‘*Give place for the wrath*’. However, it is clear from the context here that this wrath is God’s just anger against sin. If we are to stand aside and ‘*leave it to the wrath of God*’ should we never pursue any justice in this life then? No, we are to pursue justice as we heard earlier from Micah 6:8 “*He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?*”. The Hebrew word translated ‘justice here’ refers to a judicial hearing with an appointed judge and/or court, witnesses and a delivered verdict.

So, as Christians there are situations where going to court to seek justice for ourselves and others is the right course of action. There is a warning in 1 Corinthians 6:5-8 about a believer not taking a fellow believer to court over civil disputes, but instead settling matters like this within the church community though wise mediation. However, in Romans 13:1-7 the Apostle Paul affirms the God-ordained role of the state in criminal cases. If a crime has been committed (such as sexual abuse, other violence or even murder), or alleged to have been committed, then justice should be sought within the state judicial system.

Similarly there is provision within our church governmental structure for appeals and disputes to be heard by a local church session and/or by the wider bodies of the Presbytery and Synod. Remember that our text is about not seeking personal revenge but instead leaving this to the wrath of God. A good question to ask is ‘*practically, how can beloved children of God like you and me leave personal vengeance to the wrath of God?*’. Here are four ways:

1. **Overlook the offence** “*Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins*” (1 Pet 4:8). Resist the temptation to prosecute every personal infringement, perceived or real. Be like the Lord God ‘slow to anger’ – “long of nose”. In general, the more mature we are in Christ, the more willing we are to overlook offences against us.
2. **Seek to be at peace with everyone. Rom 12:18** *“If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men”* At times we can be too easily offended by others, imagining them to have evil motives, mishearing or misunderstanding what they have said to us or about us. Aim to think well of others. The Heidelberg Catechism, in unpacking God’s will for us in the 9th commandment, helpfully states that ‘*I should do what I can to guard and advance my neighbour’s good name*’ (A112).
3. **Fully forgive others readily when they repent of sin against you. “***Be on your guard! If your brother sins, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. And if he sins against you seven times a day, and returns to you seven times, saying, ‘I repent,’ forgive him*.” (Luke 17:3-4). “*But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father who is in heaven forgive your transgressions.*” (Mark 11:26).
4. **Desire to forgive others when they have not yet repented of sin against you.** What if the person doesn’t come and repent of their sin against you? Continue with a heart-attitude which desires to forgive them. How should you relate to those who have not yet sought your forgiveness? Romans 12 is very helpful here.
* v14 “*Bless those who persecute you, bless and do not curse them*”.
* v17 “*Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honourable in the sight of all*”.
* v20-21*"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." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good”.*

The wording of the Heidelberg Catechism Lord’s Day 51 is especially helpful here as it explains the fifth request of the Lord’s prayer: ‘*Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us means “Forgive us just as we are* ***fully determined****, as evidence of your grace in us, to forgive our neighbours*”’.

Brother, sister, not leaving room for the vengeance of God is very damaging to you personally and may well detrimentally affect those around you. The result is generally growing resentment, bitterness, and the strengthening of an unforgiving spirit. The writer to the Hebrews wisely has these wise words for us: ‘*Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no "root of bitterness" springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled*’. (Heb 12:14-15). The benefit of leaving room for the wrath of God is also that we can be comforted by Christ’s coming justice, which brings us to our third point.

1. **Being comforted by Christ**

It is painful to be personally wronged. We feel the injustice acutely when it is against us, especially when it comes from someone we have been close to in the past. David expresses the distress of personal betrayal in Psalm 41:9 “*Even my close friend in whom I trusted, who ate my bread, has lifted his heel against me*”.

In our text, Paul writes ‘*Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,” says the Lord.’* Here the Apostle quotes from Deut 32:35 – ‘*Vengeance is mine, and recompense, for the time when their foot shall slip; for the day of their calamity is at hand, and their doom comes swiftly*.'

‘The time when their foot shall slip’ was the text for Jonathan Edwards well-known 1741 sermon entitled *“Sinners in the hands of an angry God”.* Here are three sentences from this strong sermon: “*There is nothing that keeps wicked men at any one moment out of hell, but the mere pleasure of God*”. “*Natural men are held over the pit of hell in the hand of God*”. “*They deserve the fiery pit and are already sentenced to it, and God is dreadfully provoked*”

The Word of God reminds us that “*It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God*” (Heb 10:31). In the Apostle’s Creed we are reminded that all will come before Christ to give an account when He comes to judge “*the living and the dead*” (1 Pet 4:5). This event is unavoidable for each and every person who has ever lived, lives, and will ever live on this earth. The Scriptures put it this way “*just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment*” (Heb 9:27).

This is the time when the prophetic words our text (‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay’) will most certainly be fulfilled. Jesus spoke of this Day of Judgement in Matthew 25: “*When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats*” (v31-32). The goats – representing those who have not turned to Christ in repentance and faith – will go to eternal punishment (v46).

Here is the gospel call – “don’t be a goat”! Turn to Christ and be saved whilst you yet have breath! Be one of the sheep who are judged ‘not guilty’ because Christ has paid for all their sins, and they are counted as righteous in Him. The sheep, beloved of the Good Shepherd in whom they trust, having repented of their sins and turned to Him in faith, go to eternal life. It is to these beloved sheep that our text is directed, as are the words of Heidelberg Catechism Lord’s Day 19A52 in response to the question “*How does Christ’s return ‘to judge the living and the dead’ comfort you*”: “*In all my distress and persecution I turn my eyes to the heavens and confidently await as judge the very One who has already stood trial in my place before God and so has removed the whole curse from me. All His enemies and mine He will condemn to everlasting punishment: but me and all His chosen ones He will take along with Him into the joy and the glory of heaven.”*

The present comfort of the future coming judgement is that we are set free **now** from the tyranny of trying to precisely settle the score in a myriad of injustices, great and small, perceived and real, which we inevitably encounter in life. The coming final judgement reminds us of Christ, who willingly bore the wrath of God for us. The fearful anger of God fell upon Him (Rom 5:9), thereby rescuing us from the coming wrath of God on the final day of judgement (1 Thess 1:10). At the end of this age, the perfect vengeance of God will be seen by all people and the Lord will be praised as Paul will remind the Romans in chapter 14: “*For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of God. For it is written, “As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to Me, And every tongue shall give praise to God.” So then each one of us shall give account of himself to God.* (Rom 14:10b-12)”.

What account will you give on that Day?Will you be found as one who never took his/her own revenge? One who left room for the wrath of God in perfect judgement? One who in his/her distress and persecution turned his/her eyes to the heavens and confidently awaited as judge the very One who had already stood trial in their place before God and so has removed the whole curse from them?

How Christ will be honoured in that day when we are seen to be those who listened to the Good Shepherd’s voice and followed him, overcoming evil, not with evil but with good!

Brothers and sisters, glorify God, wait for His perfect vengeance, be comforted you who are in Christ this day and sing together with us now “*It is well with my soul*” because God will perfectly/justly deal with everyone when Christ returns to judge the living and the dead.

AMEN.