

**Title: The Love Reflex****[Slide 1]****Text: Romans 12:14-21****A Hostile World****Persecution:**

If you were a Christian living in Rome in Paul's time, you would have known what it is like to face persecution. The first churches sprang up from within a vibrant Jewish community of some 40,000 people living in Rome. Thousands of Jews had been taken to Rome as slaves after the Roman conquest of Judea in 63 B.C. This population was eventually freed, and became a large immigrant community in the city.

Then as now, people were conflicted about the presence of immigrant populations in their country. The Roman writer Cicero called Judaism a "barbaric superstition" that was inimical to everything Roman. The philosopher Seneca wrote:

**[Slide 2]**

*"The customs of this accursed race have gained such influence that they are now received throughout the world. The vanquished have given laws to their victors" (De Superstitione)*

By the time that Paul wrote his letter to the Christians in Rome Jews had been expelled from the city three times. The most recent expulsion – in A.D. 49 – swept up the Jewish Christians as well. When Paul wrote the Book of Romans the Jewish Christians had only recently been allowed to return.

Life in Rome was filled with uncertainty and the daily insults that came from being a religious minority. If you were a Christian living in Rome, *persecution* was never far from your mind.

**Blessing!**

It is in this context that Paul issues the following command:

**[Slide 3]**

*Romans 12:14 NIV*

*Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse.*

His words, of course, echo those of Jesus Himself. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus said:

**[Slide 4]**

*Matthew 5:44-45a NIV*

*"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be the children of your Father in heaven."*

Jesus' words were spoken into an even more volatile environment. His country was under Roman occupation. Any Roman soldier could compel you to carry his pack for a mile. Soldiers were known to confiscate peoples' property and rough people up. But Jesus commanded a radically different response from that of violent resistance:

**[Slide 5]**

*Matthew 5:39-41 NIV*

*"But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles."*

For this to happen, Jesus' followers would need to discover a whole new way of thinking and living. Think of it as learning "the love reflex."

**A Hostile World:**

Whether or not we face persecution for our faith, we too live in a hostile world. The hostility may come from someone at work or school. It may come from within our own family. We may feel attacked by our own culture just for believing in Jesus and honoring the values we find in God's Word. Whatever the case, we need to learn and practice "the love reflex." When we do, we will discover that even hostility opens the door to God's New Creation.

## Learning “the Love Reflex”

### Identify with your opponent:

Paul gives us three commands that are essential if we are to learn to respond to hostility with God’s love. The first one is the command to *identify with our opponent*. Paul writes:

#### [Slide 6]

*Romans 12:15-16 NIV*

*Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.*

Paul’s first focus is on how we feel when we encounter hostility or people unlike ourselves. The first instinct when we’re attacked is to get angry in return. We may fight back or we may resort to a passive-aggressive response: smiling on the outside and fuming on the inside.

Paul says: Instead of getting caught up in the anger and hostility, make an effort to understand how the other party is feeling, then experience that feeling for yourself. This doesn’t mean changing your beliefs or excusing evil behavior. It means trying to see how the other person is seeing the situation.

We are not, therefore, to retreat into pride and self-righteousness. We’re not to stay cloistered in our own little group. We’re to make the effort to identify with those who are not like us.

### Don’t get even:

Paul’s second command is *to not get even*.

#### [Slide 7]

*Romans 12:17-18 NIV*

*Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.*

When we let our emotions get caught up in hostility, it won't be long before we try to get even with our opponent. When we do, we spiral deeper and deeper into the chaos of evil in our world.

I remember a time when someone launched a vicious attack against my family. It's bad enough when someone attacks you; but when they go after one of your children, that's something else! Every fiber of my being wanted to get even. But I heard God telling me to not fight back.

Not fight back! You have to be kidding, Lord! But then the Lord showed me that the attack was simply a ploy to get me angry so that my opponent would have something on me. My job in that situation was to be a man of peace. Fortunately, I kept quiet and my opponent's attack fizzled.

Choosing to be a man or woman of peace opens the door for the Holy Spirit to lead us out of the hostility and into God's blessing. We become more like Jesus and we experience a foretaste of God's New Creation.

### **Let God fix the world:**

Paul's third command is simply: *Let God fix the world.*

He writes:

### **[Slide 8]**

*Romans 12:19-20 NIV*

*Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written, "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. 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."*

When we let our emotions get caught up in the hostility around us, we try to get even. And that means that we have set ourselves up as the world's judge and jury. God may be the Judge at the Final Judgment, but we're sitting on the bench in the here-and-now.

But when we make the effort to identify with an opponent and refuse to get even, we make a place in our hearts for God to be the Judge. We let God be God.

God's way is for us to the exact opposite of taking revenge and trying to exact justice on our own terms. We are to positively bless the other person. In other words, we are to act like New Creation people right here in the middle of this old, broken world. Why can we dare to do this? Because we are letting God fix the world.

## **Who wins?**

### **Who wins?**

When we face evil in our lives we have to make a decision: Who wins? Does evil win or does God's goodness win? God lets us make the call.

Paul concludes:

### **[Slide 9]**

*Romans 12:21 NIV*

*Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*

When we experience evil and hostility, the real battle is not whether or not we come out on top. The real battle is whether we ourselves be overcome by evil or whether we overcome evil with good.

Cursing back, getting even, or taking vengeance means that evil wins. Oh, we may feel a moment's satisfaction in putting someone in their place or in making our opponent suffer. But the price for our little victory is that we are now swallowed up by the hostility and evil that attacked us.

Our mission is exactly the opposite: We are here on this earth to overcome evil with good. And we do so precisely when we encounter the hostility of this world.

### **The Love Reflex:**

Perhaps you are thinking right now: "I can't do that! I could never bless my abuser or empathize with that hateful person who tried to destroy me!" Or perhaps you wish you could settle an old score. Perhaps you're just waiting for God to judge that person and show that you were right all along.

Those feelings are understandable. God wired us to want our world to just and fair. He has promised that in the end everything wrong will be made

right. But right now He has an even more important assignment for us. He is calling us to conquer evil in the here-and-now by living out the Love Reflex. He sent His Holy Spirit into our lives to enable us to do just that.

When we do, we will be creating a place unlike any other in this world. That new place will be a place where people – even our foes – find God’s love in action. It will be a “Place for You,” no matter who you are or what you’ve done. It will be a little taste of God’s New Creation.