

Bite Size Bible Study

Burning Coals #117

By Pastor Lee

We are expected as Jesus followers to love our enemy. That is the admonition of Jesus. Why then does Paul tell us in Romans 12:20 to heap burning coals on the heads of our enemies?

“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.”

Romans 12:20 NIV

This verse is often pulled out of context to justify getting revenge on an enemy. But does it really mean what it seems to say? Heaping burning coals on one's head doesn't seem to be a loving act of kindness.

Let's look at Romans 12:18-21 CJB in context:

If possible, and to the extent that it depends on you, live in peace with all people. Never seek revenge, my friends; instead, leave that to God's anger; for in the Tanakh (Deuteronomy 32:41) it is written; “Adonai says, ‘Vengeance is my responsibility; I will repay.’”

On the contrary (Paul says);

*“If your enemy is hungry, feed him;
if he is thirsty, give him something to drink.
For by doing this, you will heap
fiery coals [of shame] on his head.”*

Do not be conquered by evil, but conquer evil with good.

Paul is quoting Proverbs 25:21-22 CJB

If someone who hates you is hungry, give him food to eat; and if he is thirsty, give him water to drink. For you will heap fiery coals [of shame] on his head, and ADONAI will reward you.

Did you notice the difference in verse 20 between the NIV and the CJB? Do you now recognize that burning coals are not literal? It is a metaphor for awakening the enemy's bad behavior.

The Jewish Encyclopedia states that The word “coal” is often used in a metaphorical sense and here it is likened to awakening his deadened conscience and help him to realize his wrong.

When we read the verse in context and using several translations the saying becomes clear that we are not seeking to injure our enemy but to awaken his conscience to see beyond his current view of the world around him.

This again is a lesson to not take a verse out of context or the original culture and make it mean something that was not the original intent.

Using multiple translations and footnotes in many of the Study Bibles will help us to understand what the biblical writers were trying to tell us, as well as point to other passages that relate to a given passage. Sometimes that seems to be an unmerited exercise to look up related passages, but if we are going to be Bible literate it is necessary.

Case in point:

If we had found that Romans 12:20 related to Proverbs 25:20 RSV and had gone back to that verse and read passages before and after we would have found the following topic. *“Like one who takes away a garment on a cold day, or one that pours vinegar on a wound, is one who sings songs to a heavy heart”.*

The physical picture of discomfort illustrates that if we are trying to make a person in mourning happy, it just distresses them more, and pouring vinegar on a wound makes it hurt even more, and taking a persons outer garment on a cold day makes them that much more uncomfortable.

Likewise, the passage about coals is about the emotional discomfort an enemy will feel when you waken his conscience about his conduct toward you, when your conduct toward him is only kind and respectful.

We can always overcome evil by doing good. It is not always easy nor does it always come easy for us to do it. Jesus, our mentor, showed us how; now all we need to do is learn to follow His lead.

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