Bless Them!
Romans 12:14

We come to an incredible command this morning because it is one that has been so talked about and discussed and that is persecution as believers in Jesus Christ. In other words, we will suffer for our faith in Jesus Christ. We certainly live in a fallen world, and we will suffer from that fallenness. Accidents will occur, or individuals will sin against us, relationships can and will be difficult, and there is a distinctive way that we should respond and treat others in the midst of that hardship. But everyone in the world cannot escape the pain of living under the fall. Doesn't matter how much money or where you were born - pain and hardship finds every single person irregardless of who they are. But what Paul is talking about here is something distinctively Christian, and that is persecution for our faith - persecution because I have believed and made known the truths of the opening 11 chapters.

And it is amazing how many Christians are surprised that they suffer for their faith. But listen to what Peter says in 1 Peter 4:12-14, "**Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you.**" What Peter is saying is that this is not something strange or an oddity but every single believer will experience this someway or somehow as part of living in this dark world, and is one of the evidences that we are Jesus Christ. Paul says something similar in 2 Timothy 3:12, "**Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.**" Even as our brother Richard preached on this text, he taught us that this is a promise. The "all" describes those who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus or for Jesus Christ. And even Jesus said, in John 15:20, "**Remember the word that I said to you: 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours.**"

We are called to let the light of Jesus Christ shine from us. It is talking about living a life for Christ. And when you do, you will face opposition. You will face hatred. It could be because there are certain activities that you will not engage in and they see this as a rebuke to these activities. It could be that there are certain conversations that you will not engage in as far as the humour of the world. So and so is just too good for us! It could be that you preach and teach that Jesus is the only way. It could be that on the doctrines of Scripture you will not move. And if you are overwhelmed by the truths of what God has done through Jesus Christ, the only thing that you can do is something that is absolutely supernatural and that is to live that life out, to speak and live out the gospel. And opposition, defiance, and hostility will find you. It is not that we go looking for it. In fact, if we go looking for it, there is something wrong in our hearts.

But we all stand for something. The question is what are we really standing for? I think we all want to stand for something and against something. It gives us a sense that our lives matter, and we are connected to something bigger. People march with BLM because they want not bring change but in any protest you are linked to others and there is a sense that we are making a difference. Some stand against Covid

restrictions. In fact, some churches are known as Covid churches because of their opposition. The suffering here is related to the opening 11 chapters. It is related to the gospel. This is what our passion is to be and what is to consume our lives.

So when you realize that there is going to opposition in varying degrees and there are going to be people who hate you and stand oppose to you because of your faith and joy and satisfaction in Christ, the only question that is left is how will we respond? What are we going to do when we are provoked or someone says all manner of evil against us? And I believe that this has wider application also. How do I respond when others in my household or even in the church say all manner of evil against you? The reason I lost it is because this is what he said or she said. The reason I have nothing to do with him or her is because they did that or said that. What these commands through this whole section are calling us to do is based on our relationship with Christ, and what he has done for sinners is to respond in a way that is different; in a way that is uniquely Christian no matter what people say or do to us, and let me say that is difficult. So what I want to do in this verse is to look at what we are not to do and what we are to do. Hopefully this will help us as we are going through opposition at this time or prepare us for that opposition that will come.

1. First of all, there is a way that we must not respond. V.14.

Now let me caution us: again, we do not go looking for opposition. There are many who would love to be opposed, and would really love to put on a show of how hard their life but how dedicated their lives are to Christ (book and mini-series to follow). There are a couple of things here that you have to see in this text. One is that it is about Jesus and not about us. Jesus even said on the Sermon on the Mount, in Matthew 5:16, "**In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.**" This is not about hero worship. The spot light can never be about us. It is always about Christ, and anything we face is minor compared to the opposition and punishment that he faced on our behalf.

So it has to be all about Christ but the second thing it has to be about your enemies - your persecutors. They will spend eternity somewhere. They have sinned and fallen woefully short of the kingdom of God just like us. And God commands us to be a living demonstration of the beauty of the gospel. And the main way we depict that gospel is through the same attitude of Christ. And one of the ways we respond is what we see at the end of the verse, "**Do not curse them.**" A curse is a word of judgment wanting the worst to come upon them. So as we see in the next verse instead of weeping with those who weep, we actually celebrate that something has happened to them that is unpleasant, or we hope something unpleasant happens to them. We think in our hearts we are good and angry, but we are only angry.

And the reason why Paul commands this is that it is hard not to curse when we are opposed. Think of those who have done wrong to you. It might not even be in persecution sphere. It might be a hard to get along relative, a spouse that is on your case, a child that is getting on your nerves, and the natural response is to lash out. It is to give it to them. We have all felt that venting of others and have been guilty ourselves. It is so natural when people attack us or gossip or slander us or work against us to attack them. We have that inner lawyer in us that rises to our defence and goes on the

offence. And it is amazing how many times we say things that just do not need to be said. It might be to someone's face. But it just is not helpful - there is no redeeming value in it. It might be behind someone's back and it is amazing how much slander goes on, with no goal in mind other than demeaning others before others.

And let me ask you: is that the way that you handle opposition in your life? Is there a bunch of cursing coming from your tongue and your life. How much cursing went from your lips this week? Listen what James says about the tongue in James 3:6-10, "**And the tongue is a fire, a world of unrighteousness. The tongue is set among our members, staining the whole body, setting on fire the entire course of life, and set on fire by hell. For every kind of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by mankind, but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so.**" Our lives are not to be a contradiction of the gospel but a display of God's love for undeserving sinners in Jesus Christ. How are we doing? It seems so natural to curse.

Now there is another element that makes this command really hard and difficult as far as not cursing those who persecute you. And that is the more that you desire to live godly and seek to magnify Christ the more opposition in your life. And again it might surprise you. You might think it to be the opposite because of the modern day teaching that if we live for Christ everything will go well. But think of the principle here. Listen to John 3:20, "**For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed.**" So think of it, the reason why they do not come to the light is that it exposes things. It exposes wickedness and sin in all its forms. Well, a Christian who is dedicated to Christ, witnessing and living for Christ, that has his joy and reason for living found in Christ, his light is going to that much more bright and intense. And the difference between light and darkness is that much more obvious. And therefore the opposition or persecution is that much greater. The Christian who is not overwhelmed with Christ, and who has pursuits and joys anchored in the world is going to have less and less intense opposition.

So think about it: this command here is for those who really desire to be living sacrifices to our great God, because the temptation when you want the highest and best for others, and they reject you and then scorn and ridicule and say all manner of evil against you and hate you and seek to harm you, the temptation is going to be to curse them. We can feel that emotion rising in us. Paul is saying to follow in the steps of the Lord here. Peter also commands us to follow the example of Christ in 1 Peter 2:21-23, "**For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly**." Follow his example. Seek to magnify him. And remember we have this command because of the promise that all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted. The more we desire, the more light comes from our

lives, and the more the opposition. God will use your light, but as he does there will be opposition.

2. Secondly there is a way we need to respond. V.14.

Have you ever heard of grin and bear it Christianity? It is when we are with someone, and we really want to lash out at them, but instead, out of obedience to Christ we just clench our teeth and bear it. We can easily even stay out of the presence of others for the simple reason that they are our enemies. We often even teach this principle to our children: "if you don't have anything good to say, don't say anything at all," which is not a bad statement but for us as Christians it does not go far enough. If we were the enemies of God and Jesus Christ sought to draw us into his presence and he did, if he sought to bless us, which he did and still does, and we are called to live out the beauty of the gospel, then grin and bear Christianity is not enough. It is not enough just not to curse others. It does not go far enough, and I think we all recognize that, but in actual experience to seek out and bless others who have cursed and have done evil against us just seems too much. I can understand not cursing them, which still leaves the possibility of ostracizing or extracting them from our lives. And it is amazing how the Scriptures teach and command us about how we are to treat our enemies. It is so different and radical, and these commands are given to us from our God. This is what in the ancient world turned the world upside down. They would persecute believers who would in turn seek to bless them. How can you not but be astonished?

So look at verse 14 and really think about the responses that you have to opposition and how God is calling us to respond, "**Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.**" You see we think the opposite of cursing is not to curse, but the opposite is to not only not to curse but replace that cursing which the natural person would do to opposition, and bless the one who is cursing you. It is to change the rules dramatically in how we respond to the hard hearts of others. It is so different. The blessing here is some sort of benefit that we could be in someone else's life for their joy, or to meet their need or whatever. Rather than lashing out we replace it with blessing. We can be thoughtful and creative in this area.

Again, it is extraordinary how God calls upon believers to treat their enemies. Christ again on the Sermon on the Mount challenges us in Matthew 5:43-46, "**You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?**" It is easy to love those who love you and think it is something special or Christians, such as loving your children, but even there notorious tax collectors loved their families and others like them. No, the distinctiveness of Christians is to that we love and desire to be a blessing to our enemies. This is exactly how Jesus has loved us. Romans 5:10, "**For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life.**"

So the question we have to ask is how can we bless those who persecute and do all manner of evil against us? And that is a great question because it deals with the practicality of carrying out God's will and God's command in our lives. One way is to talk positively and biblically about our opponent. We have a tendency not only in talking bad about that person but also going overboard. But he or she is someone who is trapped in sin, and I would be the same way of not for the grace of God. Remember and communicate to others that there is not that much difference between you and that person or persons. The only difference is the grace of God. Seek to point out some of the positive attributes that they have where they reflect God because even though they are sinners the image of God is still found in them. Your words always have to be seasoned with grace and hope. It is not that we are being dishonest about the other person but we are looking at him and yourself through the lens of Scripture and the hope of Christ. If there is some tangible way that you can show them the love of Christ then do it. And we will discuss that next week when we see we are to weep with those who weep and rejoice with those who rejoice. Maybe sending a card of condolences if something has occurred or a card of congratulations if something good has occurred. It does not have to be big, but in those small blessings God is glorified.

Also, pray for those who persecute you. And as we will also see in this passage it is not that God would judge them but God's blessing in Christ might be on them. And this is exactly what we see in Jesus when he hung on the cross and the crowd hurled insults and curses on him. He not only didn't curse them but prayed for blessing. Jesus says in Luke 23:34, "**Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.**" And Stephen after preaching the gospel is taken out and stoned prays his final words for his persecutors in Acts 7:60, "**And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them.**" And when he had said this, he fell asleep."

And I think we should go one step further in blessing those who curse us with our prayers. Jesus prayed during his final moments on the cross, and Stephen the final moments before he was martyred. But I believe we should pray that God would use us as the vehicle to help bring our enemy to Christ. Sam Storms writes in his excellent book, *Reaching God's Ear, "***One of the most dangerous things about prayer is the tendency for it to become an excuse for doing nothing. I realize that sounds paradoxical. After all, praying is doing something. To pray fervently and persistently is hard work. But it is easy for some of us, once we have worked hard at prayer, to think that God desires nothing more of us. The truth may be that prayer is God's way of preparing us to do whatever is necessary to bring about the very thing we have requested.**" So many do that: they pray for others but that God would use someone else rather than us. The sacrifice is just too great to be used by God to give the gospel or to be the instrument of blessing in the life of another.

But God uses willing hearts. He uses those who truly love him and therefore when we pray and pray fervently for our enemies, God does something else in our prayers, and that is he changes us and our desires for our enemies. Rather than wanting to God to curse them we want him to bless them. And we even want to be the instrument of blessing in their lives. Storms also writes, "**May God help us, when we pray, not only to wear out our knees but our shoe leather as well. May we, by his grace, conclude our prayers with a sincere, heartfelt: 'Here am I, Lord. Send me!'**"

What a beautiful response to glory of God's grace in our lives, "**Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.**" In a day and age that talks so much about persecution and the writing of blogs and so on, you really do not see this lived out. Yes Christian, you will be persecute. Respond with the heart of the gospel.