CHAPTER 5
COLLIDING WITH THE NEW TESTAMENT

Colliding with the New Testament after having suffered such a barrage of imprecations and pleas for divine vengeance to be wreaked against one’s enemies—seen to be likewise the enemies of God—one is at first taken aback by the startling demands of Christ and his apostles, injunctions which initially appear to counter and even overthrow the ethics of the prior age as expressed in the Imprecatory Psalms. And indeed, there is a noticeable progress in the development of divine revelation—here, in particular, the ethic of enemy-love: both the command itself and the ramifications of that command are made more explicit and given greater emphasis, and the expectation of divine vengeance finds an increased eschatological focus. However, upon closer inspection, although occurring with less frequency and often with less vividness of imagery, the New Testament as well is seen to be interspersed with the conspicuous presence of extreme and even personalized imprecations, which markedly bear no concomitant implication of condemnation.

Apparent Contradictions

“Love your enemies.” In the arrangement of the first Gospel, the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5–7) is presented as that grounding expression of Christian ethics.\(^1\) Arising

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\(^1\) It is specifically introduced as a sermon given to “his disciples” (Matt 5:1-2).
from its midst, and arriving at the climax of Christ’s discourse on the Law in Matthew 5:17-48, comes the startling cry: “Love your enemies.” This portion of his oration is replete with radical statements which appear to contradict the teaching of the Old Testament; yet this contradiction is more apparent than real. Jesus himself introduces his several internalized and intensified “re-statements” of the Old Testament with the words, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish, but to fulfill” (5:17). In these words Jesus certified that he did not come to set himself up as a rival to the Old Testament—he does not disparage nor discredit what has come before. Rather, the Old Testament propels us toward Christ, is summed up in Christ, and must be interpreted through Christ. Carson agrees that “Jesus does not conceive of his life and ministry in terms of opposition to the Old Testament, but in terms of bringing to fruition that toward which it points. Thus, the Law and the Prophets, far from being abolished, find their valid continuity in terms of their outworking in Jesus.”

In what follows (5:21-47), Jesus affirms the Old Testament by reiterating—via hyperbole—the original intent of several commands, contrary to the prevailing Pharisaical

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4 Jesus made frequent use of this device for the sake of startling emphasis. Cf., e.g., the parallel utterances of Christ in Luke 14:26 and Matt 10:37—the former of which reads, “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother . . . he cannot be my disciple.” In the latter the offensive language of hyperbole is softened to comparison: “He who loves (his) father or mother more than me is not worthy of me.”
and scribal understanding of them.5 This he did by plunging to the heart of the matter—the intent and implications of the commands, based upon his own authority. This was a radical measure in and of itself, for Christ was placing himself on the level of the Lawgiver, God. The crowds recognized such authority. Indeed, the contrast between the authority of Christ and that of the Jewish religious leaders was publicly evident: at the conclusion of his sermon the crowds were awed by the import and impact of his words (Matt 7:28-29).

Moreover, these restatements of Christ are framed by an inclusio of “impossible righteousness” (both surpassing that of the Pharisees—5:20, and comparable to that of God—5:48),6 the climax of which are his words in Matthew 5:43-45, 48:7

43 Ἡκούσατε ὅτι ἐρρέθη, Ἀγαπήσεις τὸν πλησίον σου καὶ μισήσεις τὸν ἐχθρόν σου. 44 Ἔγω δὲ λέγω ὑμῖν, ἀγαπάτε τοὺς ἐχθροὺς ὑμῶν καὶ προσεύχεσθε ὑπὲρ τῶν διωκόντων ὑμᾶς. 45 Ὑπὸς γένησθε υἱοί τοῦ πατρὸς ὑμῶν τοῦ ἐν οὐρανοῖς, ὅτι τὸν Ἰησοῦν αὐτοῦ ἀνατέλλει ἐπὶ πονηροὺς καὶ ἀγαθούς καὶ βρέχει ἐπὶ δικαίους καὶ ἀδικούς. . . . 48 Ἐσεσθε οὖν ὑμεῖς τέλειοι ὃς ὁ πατήρ ὑμῶν ὁ οὐρανός τέλειος ἐστίν.

43 You have heard that it was said, “You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.” 44 But I say to you, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45 so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for he causes his

5 For a discussion of Christ’s “reinterpretation” of the lex talionis in Matt 5:38-42, refer to chap. 4, n. 84.

6 This call for perfection serves as a reminder that the demands of God are impossible apart from divine enabling and may be truly obeyed only by relying on God and his grace.

7 In the full pericope of Matt 5:43-48, verse 48 carries the dual function of summing up both the premier and over-arching command to love as well as the larger preceding pericope of 5:20-48, tying our activity to the prior activity of God, who is our exemplar. Verses 46-47 illustrate the command of enemy-love in tangible form.
sun to rise on the evil and the good, and he sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. . . . 48 Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

The first half of Jesus’ initial statement (“You shall love your neighbor”) is a quotation from Leviticus 19:18—words which come directly after prohibiting revenge or personal grudge, and which are considered the second-greatest commandment by Jesus’ own testimony. The latter half (“You shall hate your enemy”), however, is not to be found,

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8 These words are paralleled in Luke 6:27-28, 35-36:

27 Ἄλλα ὑμῖν λέγω τοῖς ἀκούσσιν, Ἀγαπᾶτε τοὺς ἐχθρούς ἡμῶν, καλῶς ποιεῖτε τοῖς μισούσιν ὑμᾶς. 28 Ἑυλογεῖτε τοὺς καταρωμένους ὑμᾶς, προσεύχεσθε περὶ τῶν ἐπηρεαζόμενων ὑμᾶς . . . . 35 πλὴν ἀγαπᾶτε τοὺς ἐχθρούς ὑμῶν καὶ ἀγαθοποιεῖτε καὶ δανίζετε μηδὲν ἀπελπίζουτες καὶ ἔσται ὁ μισθὸς ὑμῶν πολύς, καὶ ἔσται τοιού ὑπόστου, ὅτι αὐτὸς χρηστὸς ἐστίν ἐπὶ τοὺς ἀχαρίστους καὶ πονηρούς. 36 Γίνεσθε οικτίρμονες καθὼς καὶ ὁ πατὴρ ὑμῶν οικτίρμων εστίν.

27 But I say to you who listen, “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, 28 bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you . . . 35 But love your enemies and do good (to them) and lend (to them), expecting nothing in return. Then your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and evil. 36 Be compassionate, just as also your Father is compassionate.”


as such, in any of the writings of the Old Testament. Yet there is a likely representation of the mindset behind this quotation in the Rule of the Qumran Community (1QS).

This document begins with the resolve of the members “to love all the Sons of Light—each according to his lot in the counsel of God, and to hate all the Sons of Darkness—each according to his guilt at the vengeance of God” (1QS 1:9-11). This hatred was such that it involved even the withholding of compassion from them (1QS 10:20-21). Apparently, many people of Jesus’ day had come to believe that if the Old Testament commanded the love of one’s neighbor, then it must also, consequently, command the hatred of one’s

10 However, Warstler argues that the command to hate your enemy “is a legitimate summary of Old Testament teaching.” Kevin Robert Warstler, “The Law of Love in Matthew 5:43-48” (Th.M. thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1995), 19; cf. 5-8. Olof Linton, in “St. Matthew 5, 43,” Studia Theologica 18 (1964): 78-79, likewise believes it to be an adequate paraphrase of the Old Testament’s instruction in this matter. Contrariwise, Sutcliffe summarizes astutely what the men of Qumran would have learned from the Old Testament with regard to both God’s and the believer’s attitude toward the enemy: “God hates sin and sinners too, precisely in so far as they are attached to sin, because as sinful they attract to themselves the hatred due to sin. Nonetheless God desires their repentance and longs to forgive. But if they persist in the stubbornness of their evil wills, He is obliged in justice to punish and to avenge. So too the pious Israelite, following the ways of God, hates sin and sinners and is called upon at times to act as the instrument of divine vengeance. But he must not entertain any personal hate or rancour. On the contrary he must act kindly even to those hostile to himself. He is commanded to love his neighbour as himself and this commandment embraces also foreigners resident in the land. He must act in regard of all even as he would wish others to act in regard of himself.” E. F. Suttcliffe, “Hatred at Qumran,” RevQ 2 (1960): 349.

11 Contra Sutcliffe, who claims that Jesus’ statement is not reflective of the teaching to be found at Qumran. Ibid., 355.


13 Again: לא אתוך על כל סורר כרכ. “But I will have no compassion for any who rebel against the way.” Ibid., 46:47.
enemy.\textsuperscript{14} This understanding is given expression in the second century B.C. apocryphal book of Sirach 12:4-7:\textsuperscript{15}

\begin{quote}
\phantom{148}
\begin{itemize}
\item Give to the godly man, but do not help the sinner.
\item Do good to the humble, but do not give to the ungodly; hold back his bread, and do not give it to him, lest by means of it he subdue you; for you will receive twice as much evil for all the good which you do to him.
\item For the Most high also hates sinners and will inflict punishment on the ungodly.
\item Give to the good man, but do not help the sinner.\textsuperscript{16}
\end{itemize}
\end{quote}

But Jesus says, “Love your enemies.” In these words, Jesus shockingly asserts the unthinkable: that we are to “love” those we “hate” (or who hate us). This does not discount

\textsuperscript{14} This mindset was not solely isolated to the Qumran sectarians, for the general populace held a certain hatred toward Samaritans in general and in principle (cf. John 4:9; Neh 4, 6), and the Zealots held such rancor against the Romans that their very existence was sustained by their violent objective: the overthrow of Roman power and her expulsion from their land.

\textsuperscript{15} These words are in direct contrast to both Jesus’ words in Matt 5 and the apostle Paul’s in Rom 12.


\begin{quote}
\phantom{148}
\begin{itemize}
\item Do not return evil to the man who disputes with you;
\item Requite with kindness your evil-doer,
\item Maintain justice to your enemy,
\item Smile on your adversary.
\item If your ill-wisher is [. . . ,] nurture him.
\item Do not set your [mind] on evil.
\item [. . . .] agreeable [to] the gods.
\item Evil [. . . .] an abomination [. . . of] Marduk.
\end{itemize}
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
\phantom{148}
\begin{itemize}
\item Give food to eat, beer to drink,
\item Grant what is asked, provide for and honour.
\item In this a man’s god takes pleasure,
\item It is pleasing to Šamaš, who will repay him with favour.
\end{itemize}
\end{quote}

that they are yet our enemies; but, in a sense, our enemy becomes our neighbor. In the
context of Christ’s radical love command in Matthew 5:43-48, he defines “enemy” in such
a way as to include both those who are foes in the customary politico-national sense, but
also those whose enmity is primarily interior, including those among one’s own people
(who in Lev 19:18 are explicitly considered one’s “neighbor”). Indeed, it is this latter
element which is his point of emphasis.¹⁷ In this brief pericope, “enemy” is placed parallel
to “those who persecute you” (5:44), “the evil” and “unrighteous” (5:45), implicitly “those
who do not love you” (5:46), “tax collectors” (who were among their own people, but
largely considered greedy and oppressive traitors, 5:46), and implicitly “those who aren’t
your brothers” and “Gentiles” (5:47).

Likewise, in the introduction to, and parable of, the Good Samaritan in Luke
10:25-37,¹⁸ Jesus expands the concept of “neighbor” beyond what it initially appears. In
this parable, Jesus drives home that the heart of the command, “Love your neighbor,”
includes implicitly within it, at least to a certain extent, “love your enemy.” For in this
parable, to the question: “Who is my neighbor?” (10:29) Jesus answers in essence, “Your
enemy” (whether from the perspective of the Jew to the Samaritan, or vice versa; cf. John
4:9); for he asks in response: “Who was the neighbor to this man?” (10:36). To Jesus, my

¹⁷ Thus, as Spicq observes, Christ “preserved exactly the spirit of Leviticus which it

¹⁸ Note how this parable follows on the heels of Jesus’ sending out of the seventy-two.
Nestled in that account are the words of Luke 10:10-12, in which Jesus directs his disciples to
perform a symbolic curse—a portent of impending doom—against those who do not receive them or
their message.
“neighbor” may indeed be my “enemy”; for the one who is in need, and whose need I may meet, is my neighbor—whoever he may be.

In addition, the expression of kindness, as exampled in this parable of Christ, is essentially love in action. And in the Sermons on the Mount and Plain, this love is patterned after the action of God, a God who freely exhibits kindness and compassion toward the evil and ungrateful (Luke 6:35-36), thus expressing his perfection (Matt 5:48).

And this love characterized by indiscriminate kindness toward friend and foe alike is a “perfection” his followers are to imitate.19

19 Betz comments on God’s perfection in Matt 5:48: “In what way is God perfect? He bestows the benefits of his creation continuously on the bad and the good and on the righteous and the unrighteous. He does so, not because he is motivated by the expectation that the wicked and the unrighteous will become grateful to him and worship him; the assumption is, rather, that God’s enemies will not appreciate his benefits. They will remain enemies even though he keeps doing good to them. His generosity, however, does not provide any justification for the enmity of his enemies. This is God’s perfection. . . . The ‘sons of God’ can become perfect, too, by imitating God in dealing with their own enemies. The implication, however, is that the Christian must not sentimentalize the demand. Enemies are real and remain real, and love of the enemy does not mean loving them in order to turn them into friends. Although such conversion of the enemies is desirable, it cannot be the motivation and purpose.” Hans Dieter Betz, The Sermon on the Mount, ed. Adela Yarbro Collins, Hermeneia, ed. Helmut Koester et al. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 323-24. Cf. Dabney’s masterful effort at reconciling Christ’s revolutionary and thoroughgoing command vis-à-vis the like imperative of recognizing evil as evil and displaying appropriate hatred toward it (and thus in some measure against those who bear it, cf. Rom 12:9): “The sum of the matter, then, appears to be this: the law of love does not require the injured Christian to approve or countenance the evil character manifested in the wrong done him, or to withhold the verdict of truth and justice against it when righteous ends are gained by pronouncing it. The law of love does not require him to intervene for delivering the aggressor from the just claims of either human or divine law for penal retribution; nor does it forbid his feeling a righteous satisfaction when that retribution is executed by the appropriate authorities; but the law of love does forbid his taking retribution into his own hands, and it requires him still to extend the sentiments of humanity and the love of compassion to the enemy’s person so long as he continues to partake the forbearance of God, which love of compassion will prompt the injured party to stand ready to forgive the element of personal damnnum to his enemy, and to perform the offices of benevolence to his person, in spite of his obnoxious character.” Robert L. Dabney, “The Christian’s Duty Towards His Enemies,” in Discussions by Robert L. Dabney, vol. 1, ed. C. R. Vaughan (Richmond: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1890), 720.
Moreover, in certain discrete instances, the Old Testament unquestionably commands kindness toward enemies. For example, Exodus 23:4-5 says: “If you happen upon the stray ox or donkey of your enemy, you must surely return it to him. If you see the donkey of one who hates you fallen under its load, do not fail to help him; you must surely help him with it.” Likewise, Proverbs 25:21-22 states: “If one who hates you is hungry, give him food to eat; and if he is thirsty, give him water to drink. For fiery coals you will heap on his head, and Yahweh will reward you.” In addition, this command is exampled by many of the saints of old. Of notable mention is Naaman’s Israelite slave girl, who sought the welfare of her enemy master—the Aramean army commander, and of Yahweh’s kind response to him through his prophet Elisha (2 Kgs 5). Further mention could be made of Elisha in 2 Kings 6:18-23, whose counsel to the Israelite king to feed rather than kill the enemy Arameans, captured by a combined exhibit of divine power and human intrigue, was apparently intended to forestall continued enmity, which result did transpire

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20 Betz’s objection in The Sermon on the Mount (307) that “such help is directed toward the animals, not toward the enemy” is unwarranted. For in the agricultural milieu of the ancient Near East, these animals were a principal means of support, without which one might easily fall into financial ruin. So although this command positively affects the beast, its intent is aimed primarily at aiding the enemy. As the apostle Paul so bluntly asks, obviously expecting a negative response: “Is it about oxen that God is concerned?” (1 Cor 9:9). Here he speaks not categorically, but for the purpose of emphasis and of divine intent.

21 These verses are quoted by Paul in Rom 12:20 as the basis of our New Testament ethic. For exegesis of both the Old and New Testament passage, refer to Appendix C. For Old Testament examples which illustrate this command in detail or in principle, cf. 2 Kgs 6:22-23 and 1 Sam 24:17-19.

22 For an example of Yahweh’s surprising kindness toward the Assyrians—his inveterate adversaries and the oppressors of his people, cf. Jonah 4. Notably, the response of Jonah, who balked at this display of love, is portrayed as unbecoming.
for a time (6:23b). While it must be granted that the command to “love your enemies” is nowhere to be found in the Old Testament, the concept “cannot be confined to the words themselves. When enemies are fed and cared for, rather than killed or mistreated, then in effect love for the enemy is being practiced.”

Furthermore, even in the context of Leviticus 19, “neighbor” is broader than its immediate parallel, “brother”—including all within one’s bounds (even resident aliens). In Leviticus 19, both fellow Israelites and resident foreigners were to be loved in like manner—“as yourself.” Compare Leviticus 19:18, "And you shall love your neighbor as yourself,” with Leviticus 19:34, “And you shall love him (i.e., the foreigner in your midst) as yourself.” Although the term speaks generically of a “resident alien,” in this context there is the recognition of an implicit or provisional

23 William Klassen, Love of Enemies (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 28. As is repeatedly illustrated in Scripture, love of enemies is shown primarily by deeds of kindness to them. And this kindness toward enemies (i.e., love in action) is commanded in the Old Testament (e.g., Exod 23:4-5 and Prov 25:21-22 noted above).

24 Although Lev 19:18 parallels “neighbor” with “one of your people” (i.e., an Israeliite), both the near context and the broader Old Testament concept of kindness broke beyond that narrow restriction (cf. Lev 19:34; Deut 10:19).

status of enmity as well. For, although Israel entered Egypt on friendly terms, their “sojourn” in Egypt was characterized by the enmity of slavery. It was this mistreatment of the Israelites by the Egyptians that Yahweh sought to counter among his own people, counter to their own inclinations toward oppression and suspicion (cf. Lev 19:33, in which the natural reaction to such a foreigner would be “mistreatment”). Thus, a subtle sense of enmity, yet combined with the command of love (to be expressed in deeds of kindness), is indeed borne out in this passage.

Jesus, then, rather than presenting a novel (or imposing even a foreign) interpretation on the Leviticus 19 passage, was both distilling and radicalizing the essence of the Old Testament teaching in this regard. In his terse command, however, he distinctly moves beyond the oblique teaching of the Old Testament and its case law, making the

26 Cf. likewise Gen 15:13; Exod 22:20; 23:9; Deut 10:19; 23:8; 24:17-22. Thus, there appears to be a propensity toward oppression and status of suspicion against גיר. Notice especially Exod 23:9, “You shall not oppress a stranger גיר. You yourselves know the soul of a stranger (i.e., how it feels to be one), for you were strangers in Egypt.” Thus, as Stigers observes: “the clearest sense of the noun גיר is seen when used of Israel in their sojourn in Egypt.” Harold G. Stigers, “מייד,” TWOT, 1:155.

27 Such a predisposition toward mistreatment belies a certain sense of enmity. Cf. also Exod 23:22-23, in which God designates the indigenous peoples as enemy nations to be destroyed upon Israel’s entrance into Canaan, and Deut 23:4-5, which excludes the Moabite from the assembly of Yahweh, with the poignant accounts of Rahab the Canaanite and Ruth the Moabite being embraced into the community of faith (Josh 6:25; Ruth 1:16; 4:13-22). King David’s stringent measures against the Moabites in 2 Sam 8:2 may be explained as David’s dealing with the Moabites as a nation as opposed to dealing with them on a personal level. Contrast these drastic actions with his earlier dependence upon the Moabite royalty for their familial loyalty (1 Sam 22:3-4; cf. Ruth 4:17). In the intervening years, the national enemy of Israel under Saul (1 Sam 14:47) had become the national enemy of Israel under David. Contrast also David’s relationship with Shobi the Ammonite versus his relationship with the kingdom of Ammon, under Shobi’s brother Hanun (cf. 2 Sam 10 with 17:27).
demand of enemy-love overt, and placing emphasis on what would have been considered the generally “unthinkable,” as far as characteristic attitude and action is concerned.

Arriving at these words of Jesus after having passed through the Imprecatory Psalms, however, raises the very difficult question: In commanding his followers to “love their enemies,” was he intending to utterly displace the seemingly barbaric pleas exclaimed in these psalms? Perhaps he was; but then again, perhaps not so. For, in extreme circumstances, even Jesus did not shirk from uttering excoriating woes (e.g., Matt 11:20-24; 23:13-39)\textsuperscript{28} and pronouncing imprecation (cf. Mark 11:12-14, 20-21)\textsuperscript{29}—all against hardened unbelief. Yet we cannot accuse him of acting out of accord with his own radical dictum.\textsuperscript{30} By Christ’s own witness and example, then, this enemy love is the attitude of readiness to show sustained and indiscriminate kindness. However, if the enemy’s cup of iniquity has become full to overflowing, so to speak, this love is overtaken by the demands of justice and divine vengeance. Jesus’ approach, in this regard, is strikingly similar to the approach of the psalmists who penned such harsh words. Notable among them is David

\textsuperscript{28} For discussion regarding the relationship between the woe oracle and imprecation, refer to Appendix A.

\textsuperscript{29} For exegesis of this passage, cf. below.

\textsuperscript{30} The ultimate expression of enemy love, and of blessing those who persecute and curse, are the words Jesus himself voiced from the cross regarding the ones who had nailed him there: “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34). Cf. the creative tension in the differing responses to degrees of enmity exemplified by the apostle Paul in 2 Tim 4:14-16. Of Alexander, a hardened enemy of Paul and the Gospel, he solemnly states, “The Lord (i.e., Jesus; cf. 2 Tim 4:8) will repay him for what he has done” (understood as an imprecatory wish in the Byzantine tradition and a portion of the Western, as evidenced by the optative ajpodwv/h; cf. the example in 2 Chr 24:22); whereas concerning those who had wronged Paul by abandoning him in his time of trial and need he pleads, “May it not be counted against them”—reminiscent of the dying words of our Lord (and of Stephen, Acts 7:60).
who, by his testimony in Psalms 35:12-17 and 109:4-5, divulges his past habitual kindness toward those who were his enemies, and for his repeated kindness was returned abuse. His was an example of extreme love—and a love which finally and fittingly met its extremity.\(^{31}\)

In the broader view, then, rather than being completely incompatible, enemy love and enemy imprecation are found to strangely complement one another.\(^{32}\)

“Bless, and curse not.” From its position nestled amidst that “masterful summary of Christian ethics”\(^{33}\) rehearsed in Romans 12:9-21, and reminiscent of Christ’s words in Luke 6:28, “bless those who curse you” (εὐλογεῖτε τοὺς καταρωμένους ὑμᾶς) and in Matthew 5:44, “pray for those who persecute you” (προσεύχεσθε ὑπὲρ τῶν διώκοντων ὑμᾶς, )\(^{34}\) comes the clarion call:

31 For further expressions of imprecation arising out of the context of extremity, cf. Jer 18:18-23 and Lam 3:52-66 (esp. 3:64-66). In all cases, the basic issues are the same: that of gross and undeserved enmity—even unto death—against the pious.

32 There is one sense in which God loves his enemies, and another in which he hates them. In both cases, those who follow him are to follow suit, remembering that they were once as well the enemies of God (Col 1:21-22).


34 Paul had apparently some awareness of Christ’s sermons, whether they had yet been codified or not. As Moo argues, Paul seems to combine these two forms of Jesus’ saying from the ‘Sermon on the Mount/Plain,’ suggesting perhaps that he quotes here a pre-Synoptic form of one of Jesus’ best-known and most startling kingdom demands.” Douglas J. Moo, The Epistle to the Romans, NICNT, ed. Gordon D. Fee (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), 781. Cranfield prefers to regard Paul’s phraseology as “a free reminiscence of the traditional dominical saying.” C. E. B. Cranfield, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans, ICC, ed. J. A. Emerton and C. E. B. Cranfield, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1979), 640. Moo continues: “Paul’s dependence on Jesus’ teaching at this point is bolstered by the fact that he appears to allude in this same paragraph to other portions of Jesus’ teaching on love of the enemy from this same ‘sermon’ (cf. vv. 17a and 21).” Moo, The Epistle to the Romans, 781. Similarly, Dunn observes that “the spirit of the Sermon on the Mount breathes through these verses”—
Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse (Rom 12:14).

Herein lies one of the most difficult statements of Scripture—one that runs counter to the Christian—indeed, the human—constitution. For when one is persecuted by evil men, one’s instinct is to curse, yet the Christian is enjoined to bless.

Rather than being a haphazard collection of ethical injunctions, Romans 12:9-21 evidences a highly stylized structure which is summed up in, and subsumed under, the introductory heading of ἡ ἀγάπη ἀνυπόκριτος, “genuine love”—a love which entails first and foremost abhorrence of what is evil and adherence to what is good (12:9). The verses which follow serve to explicate what that sincere or unhypocritical love looks like in several concrete examples. Moreover, the command to “bless” one’s enemies is framed by the call both to “hate evil, clinging to the good” (12:9) and to “conquer evil with good” (12:21).37

35 In a section of Scripture dominated by (imperatival) participles, v. 14 stands out starkly in its use of the true imperative and, moreover, evidences its apparent dependence upon the words of Christ in Matt 5:44 and Luke 6:28.


37 According to the structure and development of this passage, πονηρόν in 12:9 is synonymous with κακόν in v. 21 (cf. its prior introduction in v. 17), both of which function as antonyms of ἀγαθόν.
Black rightly observes that the overt repetition of these words “is a major device for defining 12:9-21 as a literary unit. Not only does it signal the beginning and end of the unit, but it binds the intervening material together, suggesting that what is embraced within the brackets belongs together.” In some manner then, at least, the Christian is to wish the wicked well (cf. 12:14), while at the same time hating that very wickedness (cf. 12:9b). Thus, in the right context and in the right way, holy hatred and genuine goodness can join hands (12:19-20; cf. Ps 35).

Within the examples of genuine love sketched in this passage, the command to “bless” in Romans 12:14 is given special emphasis: (1) in its use of the imperative (as opposed to the prevalence of participles); (2) in its repetition; and (3) in its reinforcement by the prohibition of its opposite, “do not curse.” Black recognizes that this emphasis stems from Paul’s attempt to demonstrate that the dominant Christian virtue “reaches its climax in the love of enemies. Love is intended not only to permeate the relationship of Christians to one another but to shape their attitudes towards those who even seek their ruin.”

Reflecting on the command of Christ to “love your enemies,” and on the nature of obedience to that command in light of the elaboration found in Romans 12:9-21, Piper delineates: (1) Such love is ready and willing to meet the physical needs of the enemy (Rom 12:19).


39 Perhaps this is as the puritan Gurnall has said: “A wicked man cannot wish well to a saint as a saint, as, on the contrary, a saint cannot bless the wicked as such. . . . They do, indeed, desire their conversion, and therein wish them well, but in the wicked way they are in at present they cannot bless them.” William Gurnall, The Christian in Complete Armour, vol. 2 (Glasgow: Blackie & Son, 1864; reprint, Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), 447.

12:20). (2) It likewise seeks the spiritual welfare of the enemy—ultimately his conversion, desiring that the enemy be blessed and not cursed (Rom 12:14). (3) Yet, the evil from which the enmity stems is viewed as no less abhorrent (Rom 12:9); for if there is no intense hatred \( \text{ἀποστυγόντες} \)\(^{41} \) of evil, then there will be no intense love for one’s enemy. Indeed, the good which love desires is primarily the removal of the cause of enmity, which is unbelief.\(^{42} \)

But how is the believer able to do this? As per Romans 12:17, “Repay no one evil for evil,” and 12:19, “Do not avenge yourselves,” the Christian is disallowed from any involvement in personal revenge or retribution, but he is assured of God’s just revenge—whether it is to be temporally or eschatologically enacted (12:19-20). And although not stated here, the understanding elsewhere in the two Testaments\(^{43} \) is that at appropriate times the believer may call on him to do so.\(^{44} \) For example, in Luke 18:7-8, as the climax to the parable of the preceding verses, Jesus comfortingly assured his disciples that God would indeed exact vengeance \( \text{ἐκδίκησιν} \) in response to the cries of his people—ostensibly for

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\(^{41}\) As Cranfield argues, the force of the \( \text{ἀπό} \) is intensive: thus, “to hate utterly.” “What is required is not just a refraining from doing what is evil, but an intense inward rejection of it.” Cranfield, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans, 631 n. 5. Schreiner notes that “true virtue is not passive about evil but has an intense revulsion of it. Evil is not tolerated but despised as that which is injurious and wicked.” Thomas R. Schreiner, Romans, BECNT, ed. Moisés Silva (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 664.


\(^{43}\) For New Testament examples of imprecations, cf. below.

\(^{44}\) Secondarily, the state and the judicial system are to exercise divinely sanctioned vengeance, and the Christian is to uphold that justice and to submit under God to those institutions that exact it (Rom 13:1-4).
that vengeance (cf. Luke 18:3, ἐκδίκησον με). Likewise here, in Romans 12:9-21, the foundation upon which these ethical injunctions are laid is the confidence of divine justice. Paul bases his remarks on the promise of God found in Deuteronomy 32:35, “Vengeance is mine; I will repay,” and on the certainty expressed in Proverbs 25:21-22 that kindness spurned will not go unanswered by the divine Avenger (Rom 12:19-20).

How does one relate this dictum of Paul to the vehement curses of, for example, Psalm 109? Paul, in Romans 12, is speaking in terms of principle, of the general characteristics and sentiments of a true Christian—in much the same way that Jesus speaks in the Sermon on the Mount. However, the Imprecatory Psalms, as do the other imprecatory passages of both Old and New Testaments, arise out of extreme circumstances—circumstances which warrant the appeal to extreme ethics. Martin Luther

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45 This plea for vengeance is a key element of the Imprecatory Psalms, as they are by consensus defined and described (cf. chap. 1, pp. 4-6). It is to be granted that not all psalms of lament are Imprecatory Psalms, but the category of Imprecatory Psalms are characterized both by more formal curses as well as cries for divine vengeance.

46 As Bock discerns with regard to the love command in the Sermon on the Plain, from which much of the essence of Paul’s remarks were drawn: “The reason the disciple can love all humanity is that the disciple knows that God will deal justly with all one day. Even the woes of Luke 6:24-26 are grounded in God’s final act of justice. It is the sermon’s eschatology of hope and justice that lays the groundwork for the disciple’s love ethic.” Bock, Luke, 1:567.

47 These verses are addressed in greater detail in Appendix C.

48 Dunn, for one, would assert that these two are irreconcilable, for he views the return of blessing for cursing as a distinctive feature of Christian teaching which constitutes an advance beyond both the more characteristic lex talionis attitude of the covenant as previously understood and the more typically Jewish assumption that God would curse those who cursed his people, as promised initially in Gen 12:3. Dunn, Romans 9–16, 744-45.
admits the possibility of such circumstances, in which “it is wrong not to curse.”49 The resolution is to be found, I propose, in the phrase: “be quick to bless, and slow to curse”—a mindset well expressed by Hengstenberg: “Just as Christ did not at first come to condemn the world, but that the world through him might be saved, so also with the Christian, when he sees enmity against God’s word, his kingdom or his servants, the first movement of his soul should be to pray to God that he would soften these hard hearts and open these blind eyes—a movement to which the Psalmists also were not strangers.”50 This concept of “quick to bless and slow to curse” finds its pattern echo in the divine and Christian character trait, “slow to anger.” In Ephesians 4:31 and Colossians 3:8, anger (ὀργή) is considered sin. Yet, in both Testaments, the Lord is displayed as expressing anger—and in graphic terms (e.g., Nah 1:2; Mark 3:5); thus, anger cannot be deemed inherently sinful without impugning the character of God. Yahweh resolves this apparent paradox in his self-description as “slow to anger” (Exod 34:6; cf. Nah 1:3). This is translated into the Christian life as: “let every man be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger” (βραδύς εἰς ὀργήν) (James 1:19).51


51 This apparent paradox of the Christian’s approach to anger is addressed even in the near context of Eph 4:31 cited above; for in verse 26, the command is ostensibly given to “be angry, and sin not”—thus intimating that there is an occasion for righteous indignation, if dealt with properly and swiftly. Cf. Daniel B. Wallace, “ὍΡΤΖΕΣΟΕ in Ephesians 4:26: Command or Condition?” Criswell Theological Review 3 (1989): 353-72.
Instances of Imprecation

Christ. An instance of actual imprecation from the lips of Christ\(^{52}\) is recorded in Mark 11:14—uttered *en route* to the Temple courts against a fig tree which had all the appearance of vitality but no fruit. As both the near context and the larger development of the Gospel make clear, Jesus’ cursing of the fig tree is a not-so-veiled imprecation against faithless and fruitless Israel—an Israel who had so stubbornly rejected him.\(^{53}\) This rejection would culminate in the crucifixion; Christ’s imprecation would climax in the desolation of A.D. 70.\(^ {54}\)

This exhibition of Christ belongs in a series of incidents initialized by his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, in which he was heralded by the people as the promised Davidic Messiah-king (Mark 11:1-11), and culminating in his prophecy of the imminent destruction of the very Temple complex he had so recently cleansed (Mark 13:1-2).


\(^{53}\) This curse of Christ was directed both against the fig tree itself and against the community the fig tree ostensibly symbolized: the nation of Israel. It is an illustrative curse on the iniquitous nation and, in particular, her religious leadership. For the intimate tie between an object utilized in a curse and the person or thing signified by that curse, cf. the ancient Near Eastern practice and understanding of the curse discussed and illustrated in chapter three.

\(^{54}\) This desolation of Jerusalem (prefiguring the eschaton) is referred to by Christ in Luke 21:22 as the ἡμέραι ἔκδικησεως, “days of vengeance,” implying the resumption of his quotation of Isaiah 61:1-2 in Luke 4:18-19 and, moreover, “pointing out that the fall of that city was a fulfillment of the threat of vengeance (the vengeance of the covenant) made through Moses (in Lev 26 and Deut 32). It is clear from this text, as well as from the parable of the importunate widow [Luke 18:1-8], that Jesus did not do away with biblical vengeance.” Joel Nobel Musvosvi, *Vengeance in the Apocalypse*. Andrews University Seminary Doctoral Dissertation Series, vol. 17 (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1993), 137.
Furthermore, the rejection-curse implicitly placed upon his people is explicated directly following in the parable of the tenants (Mark 12:1-12, esp. v. 9), which utilizes the language and imagery of Isaiah 5:1-7—a solemn parable of judgment against God’s people Israel, followed by a succession of woes.

The curse of Christ is pointed, marking the distinct end of one era and the beginning of another: Μηκέτι εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα ἐκ σοῦ μηδείς καρπὸν φαγοί, “May no one any longer eat fruit from you—ever!” (Mark 11:14). Immediately following his curse, Christ moves into the Temple precincts where, of all places, “God ought to receive the purest form of worship,” but instead he finds the basest form of corruption: greed. Upon their return following Christ’s purge of the Temple, Peter takes notice of this same tree, and marvels at the demonstrable effect of Christ’s curse: Ῥαββί, ἴδε ἡ συκὴ ἡν κατηράσω ἐξήρανται, “Rabbi, look! The fig tree that you cursed—it has withered!” (Mark 11:21). Lane observes the intentional crafting of this immediate context:

In the Gospel of Mark Jesus’ action in the Temple is firmly embedded within the fig tree incident. The a-b-a structure of Ch. 11:12-21 (fig tree–cleansing of the Temple–fig tree) serves to provide a mutual commentary on these two events. Just as the leaves of the tree concealed the fact that there was no fruit to enjoy, so the

55 Cf. the narrative progression in Matt 21-24 (esp. Matt 21:19 with 21:43, “The kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit”).

56 The wording in Matt 21:19 is similar: Μηκέτι ἐκ σοῦ καρπὸς γένηται εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα, “May you no longer bear fruit—ever!” At the parallel juncture in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus likewise speaks of the coming judgment against Jerusalem—but here tearfully and prophetically, yet in brutal language harking back to Ps 137:9 (LXX: ἐδαφιεῖτι; cf. Hos 10:14; 14:1): καὶ ἐδαφιῶσών σε καὶ τὰ τέκνα σου ἐν σοί, “and they will dash you and your children among you to the ground” (Lk 19:44).

magnificence of the Temple and its ceremony conceals the fact that Israel has not brought forth the fruit of righteousness demanded by God. Both incidents have the character of a prophetic sign which warns of judgment to fall upon Israel for honoring God with their lips when their heart was far from him.  

As the near context strongly intimates, then, this curse of Christ was not directed against the fig tree as such, as much as it was directed (for his disciples’ benefit) against his unrepentant people as a sign of their divine visitation in judgment—a judgment which marked the realization of that curse. This is indicated by the intentional location of this pericope as an inclusio to the Temple cleansing (Mark 11:12-21)—the dramatic locus of the rejection of Christ by his people and of his people by Christ (cf. Mark 11:14, 18). Thus, this curse puts an end to God’s program as it had been administered historically through the nation Israel. As Cole remarks regarding the intent of Christ’s action: “Unless we realize that this was an acted parable of Israel, we shall be puzzled by all sorts of irrelevant

58 William L. Lane, The Gospel of Mark, NICNT, ed. F. F. Bruce (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1974), 400. Although this action of Christ was indeed a “prophetic sign,” it was explicitly signified by actual imprecation. Indeed, the text refers to Christ’s utterance as a curse, and it is given as a curse. This curse spoken by Christ gave assurance of the impending calamities which were to befall his unrepentant people. As such, it evidences a certain semantic interplay and functional overlap between the differing domains of curse and prophetic sign/judgment. Indeed, every imprecation—whether of the Psalms or here, if divinely answered, finds its realization in some future action. In this instance, the realization of Christ’s imprecation is seen in the ensuing judgment of A.D. 70.

59 This is buttressed as well by the larger context of Mark 11–13.

60 Hendriksen likewise argues: “It is impossible to believe that the curse which the Lord pronounced upon this tree was an act of punishing it, as if the tree as such was responsible for not bearing fruit, and as if, for this reason, Jesus was angry with it. The real explanation lies deeper. The pretentious but barren tree was a fit emblem of Israel. See Luke 13:6-9 (cf. Isa. 5). Jesus himself would interpret the figure the next day.” William Hendriksen, Exposition of the Gospel According to Mark, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1975), 442.

61 Cf. Mic 7:1-4 for a prophetic backdrop to this account.
questions. . . . Henceforth Israel was to be blasted and fruitless; and the physical judgment of AD 70 was but an outward token of this. . . . [A]nd immediately below the Marcan fig tree passage, in verses 15-19, there comes the acted parable of the cleansing of the Temple. God came to His Temple looking for fruit and found none; and so it was inevitable that the predictions of Mark xiii.1,2 be made. . . . Like tree, like temple, like nation; the parallel is exact.”

Far from being an arbitrary choice or happenstance, Christ’s curse of the fig tree was intentional, drawing from a long history of imagery familiar to his people. Compare, initially, this account with Christ’s parable of nearly expended patience with an unfruitful fig tree uttered earlier in his earthly ministry (Luke 13:6-9). In this parable, the unfruitful fig tree unquestionably represents unrepentant Israel, and serves as an illustration of his call for his people to repent (Luke 13:1-5). Moreover, in the Old Testament, the fig tree was frequently associated with the nation Israel: when verdant and fruitful, it was a picture of peace, prosperity, and divine blessing; yet when ravaged and


63 Bock comments that Jesus here “compares the crowd to a fruitless fig tree, a comparison he frequently made (Matt. 21:19-21 = Mark 11:13-14, 20-21; Matt. 24:32 = Mark 13:28 = Luke 21:29).” Darrell L. Bock, Luke, vol. 2, BECNT, ed. Moisés Silva (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), 1208. He perceptively observes that “the parable depicts the nation on the edge of judgment and God as a patient God, allowing the nation one final chance to respond to him in faith. . . . The warning is especially urgent because the people’s time is about to run out. Jesus describes the nation as a fig tree later in his ministry (the cursing of the fig tree in Matt. 21:18-19 = Mark 11:12-14).” Ibid., 1202. Thus, Bock evidently understands the cursing of the fig tree in Mark 11:14 as a symbolic cursing of the nation and people of Israel.

64 Cf., e.g., 1 Kgs 5:5 [Eng 4:25]; Mic 4:4; Joel 2:22.
withered, it served as “a vivid emblem of God’s active punishment of his people.” For example, in Jeremiah 8:13 Yahweh includes this imagery in his judgment oracle against his rebellious people:

I will put an end to them entirely, declares Yahweh:
There will be no grapes on the vine;
and there will be no figs on the fig-tree;
and their foliage will wither.
What I have given to them will be taken from them.

In certain passages, moreover, God’s judgment against Israel’s fig trees is juxtaposed with Israel’s rabid idolatry and the perversion of God’s worship (e.g., Hos 2:13-15 [Eng 2:11-13]). Of particular note is Hosea 9:10-17, in which Yahweh speaks of Israel’s beginnings as “early figs on the fig tree” (9:10), but because of their gross iniquity Yahweh promises to “drive them out of my House” (i.e., “Temple,” 9:15). And they who are named “Ephraim” (i.e., “fruitfulness”) are instead “withered” and “bear no fruit” (9:16).

Mark’s readers, then, steeped in the Old Testament, would have readily understood Christ’s cursing of the barren fig tree as at the very least a solemn judgment upon Israel as a nation, but even more particularly in this context, as a judgment directed against a corrupt Temple and its cultus. Hooker likewise concurs: “This, then, is why

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66 Cf. Jer 5:17. Note also that in this context Yahweh thrice asks, “Should I not avenge myself on such a nation as this?” (Jer 5:9, 29; 9:8).


Jesus curses the tree: not out of pique, but because it represents Israel, and Israel has fallen under the judgment of God. . . . Mark, by embedding the incident in the story of the fig tree, shows clearly that he interprets it as a sign of God’s condemnation of Israel because of her failure to bear fruit. This suggests that he sees it as a symbol of the future destruction of the temple and the final cessation of worship.” 69 Christ’s visitation here is reminiscent of the prophecy of Malachi, in which Yahweh promised to send his “Messenger of the Covenant” to his Temple, to cleanse his priests and people (Mal 3:1-5)—a coming accompanied by the threat of divine curse (<r@, Mal 3:24 [4:6]). At his approach to the Temple, then, in its state of acute corruption and perversion, and in light of the patent and repeated rejection of him by the leaders of his people, this curse is called down by Christ.70

The Apostles. In Galatians 1:8-9,71 the Apostle Paul utters what is unquestionably a curse of the severest magnitude: that of eternal damnation.

8 ἀλλὰ καὶ ἐάν ἡμεῖς ἢ ἄγγελος ἢ οὐρανοῦ εὐαγγελίζηται ύμίν παρ᾽ ὁ εὐηγγελισμένα ὑμῖν, ἀνάθεμα ἠστι. 9 ὡς προειρήκαμεν καὶ ἄρτι πάλιν λέγω, εἰ τις ύμᾶς εὐαγγελίζεται παρ᾽ ὁ παρελαβέτε, ἀνάθεμα ἠστι.

But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel to you other than what we preached to you, let him be “anathema”! 9 As we have said before, so now I


70 It is to be noted here that Christ distances himself a degree from personal imprecation by cursing the fig tree as the symbol of Israel rather than naming Israel itself. He curses the nation indirectly, via the figure of the fig tree, rather than directly. The imprecation is thus initially somewhat softened from what is seen in the Imprecatory Psalms, yet is no less real. For the intended realization of that imprecation in the life of the nation is more horrible and graphic than anything before or after (cf. Matt 24:21; Mark 13:19; Luke 21:22-23).

71 Cf. similarly 1 Cor 16:22.
say again: If anyone should preach a gospel to you other than what you received, let him be “anathema”!

In Hellenistic Greek, the term ἀνάθεμα was used to denote both “something dedicated or consecrated to the deity” as well as “something delivered up to divine wrath, dedicated to destruction and brought under a curse.”\(^72\) It was used in the Septuagint to translate the Hebrew ἄφω—\(^73\)a term characteristic of the Israelite “holy wars”; whatever was so designated was dedicated to Yahweh for total destruction. The Pauline usage of the term, likewise, refers to being brought under the divine curse—but here the curse of eternal condemnation.\(^74\) Such a character to this curse is the apparent intent of the ἀνάθεμα, a connotation confirmed by Romans 9:3, where Paul startlingly expresses the desire to become ἀνάθεμα . . . ἀπὸ τοῦ Χριστοῦ if that would mean the salvation of his people; for to be “accursed . . . from Christ” is a curse of condemnation. The villainy of those who are the intended recipients\(^75\) of Paul’s imprecation (ἀνάθεμα ἔστω) is the perverting of the gospel of grace by enslaving it to the rigors of legalism. Those who seek to undermine

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\(^73\) E.g., Deut 7:26; 13:18; Josh 6:17-18; 7:11-15.

\(^74\) This imprecation of Paul may be contrasted with the imprecations characteristic of the Imprecatory Psalms. There, the curses are typically temporal and often gruesomely vivid (e.g., Ps 58:7, “Smash their teeth in their mouths!”). Paul’s anathema is distinctly different (although later in the epistle, in Gal 5:12, Paul becomes noticeably graphic; cf. n. 76 below). Here, there is the absence of physical imagery, and its focus is eschatological—finding its locus in the eternal judgment of God. And yet, in this, Paul’s imprecation is the more severe.

\(^75\) That the false teachers are not mentioned by name is no proof that Paul approves of only a general curse of damnation, for in other passages, he does not flinch from naming apostates and trouble in his denunciations (cf., e.g., Alexander in 1 Tim 1:20; 2 Tim 4:14; Elymas in Acts 13:10-11).
the ground and sustenance of the Christian’s salvation truly merit the harshest of
denunciations.\footnote{Cf. Gal 5:12, in which Paul utters further execration against these same troublemakers who sought to enforce upon the converts of Galatia the demand of physical circumcision, in particular, as a ritual necessary for salvation; but this time he does so in graphic—and even grotesque—words: ὀφελοῦ καὶ ἀποκόψονται οἱ ἀναστατοῦντες υμᾶς.” “I wish even that those who are agitating you would emasculate themselves!” Such seemingly unbridled language is indeed troubling, to such an extent that Klassen, for example, has concluded that this “is a sin Paul committed here. It can be understood and forgiven. Under no circumstances should it be made a model for Christian behavior.” William Klassen, “‘Love Your Enemies’: Some Reflections on the Current Status of Research,” in \textit{The Love of Enemy and Nonretaliation in the New Testament}, ed. Willard M. Swartley (Westminster: John Knox Press, 1992), 21. However, Calvin counters with an appropriate response: “Paul cannot be accused of cruelty, as if he were opposed to the law of love. . . . It is a cruel kind of mercy which prefers a single man to the whole church. ‘On one side, I see the flock of God in danger; on the other, I see a wolf “seeking,” like Satan, “whom he may devour.” (1 Pet. v. 8.) Ought not my care of the church to swallow up all my thoughts, and lead me to desire that its salvation should be purchased by the destruction of the wolf? And yet I would not wish that a single individual should perish in this way; but my love of the church and my anxiety about her interests carry me away into a sort of ecstasy, so that I can think of nothing else.’ With such a zeal as this, every true pastor of the church will burn.” John Calvin, \textit{Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul to the Galatians and Ephesians}, first published 1548, trans. William Pringle (n.p., n.d.; reprint, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1948), 157.}

Moreover, in Acts 13:10-11, Paul voices severe words against a certain Elymas\footnote{This name, as Yaure argues, is probably to be understood as a Greek transcription of the Aramaic נַחֲלִיָּה, “dreamer” or “interpreter of dreams,” which “designates a person who, supernaturally inspired, could not only interpret dreams but also deliver divine messages revealed to him in a state of trance,” thus bearing, in common usage, the same connotation as the term μάγος, as required by the text (Acts 13:8). L. Yaure, “Elymas–Nehelamite–Pethor,” \textit{JBL} 79 (1960): 305.} the Sorcerer, attendant to the Roman proconsul of Cyprus where Paul and Barnabas were ministering the gospel. When Sergius Paulus wished to hear the word of God from them, Elymas raised strong opposition and sought to keep the proconsul from the faith. It is only at this point, but decisively so, that Paul utters what may arguably be considered an imprecation of blindness against him. Such is the understanding of Fitzmyer as to the import of Paul’s words: “Paul curses Bar-Jesus and, in effect, calls upon the Lord to cause
the blindness.” Haenchen likewise considers this “a solemn curse.” Notice also that both here and in Acts 8:20, in consonance with the Akkadian Maqlû incantations and possibly certain curses against enemies in the psalms, the imprecations are uttered against μάγοι—variously “sorcerers, magicians, astrologers, interpreters of dreams.” And although this magician’s name was properly Βαρησοῦ, “son of Jesus” (13:6), Paul addresses him in accordance with his work and character as υἱὸς διάβολου, “son of the Devil” (13:10).

10 Ὅπληρης παντὸς δόλου καὶ πάσης ῥαδιουργίας, υἱὸς διάβολου, ἐχτρεπτικῇ ἁμαρτίᾳ, ταῦτα ὕποπτα τοῦ κυρίου ταῦτα εὐθείᾳ. 11 καὶ νῦν ᾧ δικηγόρου ἐπὶ σὲ καὶ ἔση τυφλὸς μη ἐπιστρέψων τὸν ἡλίον ἄχρη καιροῦ.

10 “You son of the Devil! Enemy of all that is right! Full of all deceit and trickery! Will you never stop perverting the right ways of the Lord? 11 So now, behold! The hand of the Lord is against you, and you will be blind, unable to see the sun for some time!”

Although this extreme malediction is given in the future tense as a proclamation of judgment, it nonetheless bears the essence of a curse, for it is uttered as

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80 As Webster defines the term, a malediction is “a proclaiming of evil against someone; imprecation,” and is subsumed under the category of “curse.” William Allan Nielson, et al., eds., Webster’s New International Dictionary of the English Language, 2d ed., unabridged (Springfield, MA: G. & C. Merriam Company, Publishers, 1944), 1488, 648. Thus, Paul’s proclamation of blindness against Elymas classifies as a malediction.
the express wish of Paul\textsuperscript{81} (a wish immediately fulfilled). Moreover, it conforms to the pattern revealed, for instance, in Deuteronomy 28, in which promises of judgment are given as the “curses” of the covenant (cf. especially 28:15, 28-29). This curse of Paul through the Holy Spirit (cf. Acts 13:9) is strikingly similar to, and reminiscent of, the curses of both the Old Testament and the ancient Near East. Compare, for example, the result of Paul’s curse on Elymas: “Immediately mistiness and darkness fell upon him, and he groped about, seeking someone to lead him by the hand” (Acts 13:11), with Deuteronomy 28:28-29: “Yahweh will smite you with . . . blindness . . . . You will grope about at midday like a blind man gropes about in the darkness.” Moreover, blindness was a common curse-theme in the ancient Near East as well, as can be seen, for example, from the Vassal-treaties of Esarhaddon: “May Shamash . . . take away your eyesight; walk about in darkness!”\textsuperscript{82} In addition, it is of import to note that this curse was uttered in accordance with the principle embodied in the lex talionis: since Elymas had sought to keep the proconsul in spiritual blindness, so he was cursed with physical blindness.\textsuperscript{83} Furthermore, that Paul was “filled with the Holy Spirit” (Acts 13:9) as he voiced his cry comments unequivocally as to its rightness and propriety in the New Testament age and comports, in some measure at least, with New Testament ethics.

\textsuperscript{81} Such a sense is implied by Paul’s language and tone in these verses. For the potential inclusion of “wish” in the category of imprecation, cf. chap. 1, n. 17.

\textsuperscript{82} ANET, 538. Here the mood is explicitly imprecatory.

\textsuperscript{83} Cf. also its tie to Paul’s own conversion experience, which was accompanied by temporary blindness. Moreover, that the curse was to remain in effect ἄγρι Καύρου, “for a time,” intimates that the curse, though severe and directed against flagrant opposition, was intended to leave the door open to repentance and restoration.
Additionally, the Apostle Peter, in confronting Simon the Sorcerer who sought to purchase from him the power of the Holy Spirit, uttered the caustic curse: Τὸ ἀργύριον σου σὺν σοὶ ἐίη εἰς ἀπώλειαν, “May your money perish with you!” (Acts 8:20). Such a scathing curse consigns Simon and his money with him to destruction, and functions as a solemn warning regarding what will surely happen to him if he does not change his attitude. Indeed, however severe, this apostolic curse was to be actualized solely on the condition of continued sin and impenitence. This is evidenced by the exchange which directly follows, in which Peter voices a plea of repentance along with the offer of release: “Repent, then, of this evil of yours and pray to the Lord. Perhaps he will forgive you the intent of your heart” (Acts 8:22). Even in the midst of such imprecation there is ever implicit or explicit the hope of repentance and restoration. Thus is gained additional insight into the maledictions of both psalmist and apostle: “that for all their appearance of implacability they are to be taken as conditional, as indeed the prophets’ oracles were. . . . Their full force was for the obdurate; upon repentance they would become ‘a curse that is causeless’, which, as Proverbs 26:2 assures us, ‘does not alight’.”

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The saints in heaven. The cry of the martyred saints in Revelation 6:10 is manifestly an appeal to a higher, divine court “in the face of a gross miscarriage of justice that resulted in their condemnation and death”:86 “Εὕρη πότε, ὁ δεσπότης ὁ ἅγιος καὶ ἀληθινός, οὐ κρίνεις καὶ ἐκδίκεις τὸ αἷμα ἡμῶν ἐκ τῶν κατοικουμένων ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς; “How long, O Master, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?”87 As Thomas observes, “this prayer follows the pattern of the ‘imprecatory’ psalms,”88 and in the martyrs’ cry there is the understood “petition to carry out vengeance against those who have shed that blood.”89 This language bluntly harks back to the divine promise in the Song of Moses to “avenge the blood of his servants” (Deut

86 Musvosvi, Vengeance in the Apocalypse, 158. Indeed, whenever innocent blood is shed, there is justly the call for vengeance. Ibid., 185. Moreover, this call for vengeance to “the Master” (ὁ δεσπότης), “is to be understood in the light of the covenant motif, wherein the suzerain is obligated to bring redress and justice when a vassal is attacked and injured.” Ibid., 216. That the death of the martyrs here is viewed by God as a “sacrifice” is evident from their description as “souls under the altar” (cf. Rev 6:9 with Lev 17:11, “the soul/life of the flesh is in the blood,” poured out “at the base of the altar,” Lev 4:7, 18, 25, 30, 34).

87 Beale notes that the expression “how long?” is typically used throughout the Greek Old Testament—notably in the Psalms—for questions concerning when God will finally punish persecutors and vindicate the oppressed. G. K. Beale, The Book of Revelation, NIGTC, ed. I. Howard Marshall and Donald A. Hagner (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 392. Moreover, in this expression in the present context the imprecatory cry is at least implicit, and in several places in the Psalms it is made explicit, in its direct and intentional coupling with imprecations (cf. Pss 79:5-6, 10, 12; 94:1-3; also Ps 74:10-11). For a judicious defense of the imprecatory intent of Ps 74:11, cf. Marvin E. Tate, Psalms 51–100, WBC, ed. David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker, vol. 20 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1990), 243.

88 Robert L. Thomas, Revelation 1–7: An Exegetical Commentary, Wycliffe Exegetical Commentary, ed. Kenneth Barker (Chicago: Moody Press, 1992), 445. Such a cry as this for divine vengeance is indeed an imprecatory prayer, as it is broadly defined and exhibited in the Imprecatory Psalms (cf. chap. 1, pp. 46). Indeed, every appeal to God for harm to justly fall on wicked persons is, by definition, an imprecatory prayer.

89 Ibid., 446.
32:43), and is, moreover, a plea which characterizes the backbone of the Imprecatory Psalms. Notice the coupling of the cry of divine vengeance with the call “how long?” in the following examples:

79:5 How long, O Yahweh, will you be angry forever, Will your jealousy burn like fire?  
6 Pour out your wrath on the nations that do not know you . . . .  
10 . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . . Before our eyes, make known among the nations that you avenge the outpoured blood of your servants (Ps 79:5-6, 10).

94:1 God of vengeance, O Yahweh, God of vengeance, shine forth!  
2 Rise up, Judge of the earth; pay back to the proud what they deserve!  
3 How long will the wicked, O Yahweh, How long will the wicked exult? (Ps 94:1-3).

Furthermore, the development of the Book of Revelation is largely the divine response to his martyrs’ cry. For instance, Revelation 16:5-6, in response to the realization of God’s judgments, issues the praise: “You are just . . . for they have shed the blood of saints and prophets.” And Revelation 18:20, 24 similarly rings out: “Rejoice! . . . for God has judged her for the way she treated you. . . . In her was found the blood of prophets and saints.” Notice particularly, at the climax of the Apocalypse, the cry of the heavenly crowd: “Hallelujah! . . . He has avenged the blood of his servants” (Rev 19:1-2). Moreover, the Song of Moses, which provides the foundation for the theology of divine vengeance, and

90 The essential mood of Ps 94 concurs with the larger corpus of the Imprecatory Psalms, for its cry for vengeance is founded on the complaint: “They crush your people, O Yahweh, and they oppress your inheritance! They slay the widow and the sojourner, and they murder the fatherless!” (Ps 94:5-6).
upon which the martyrs implicitly appeal, is explicitly mentioned in Revelation 15:3.\textsuperscript{91} There, at the close of the ages, the saints in heaven are found celebrating its promised actualization in the judgments of Christ by singing “the Song of Moses the servant of God and the Song of the Lamb.”

\textit{Conclusion}

In both Christ’s staggering command to “love your enemies” and Paul’s unqualified “bless, and curse not,” are given in explicit form the characteristic ethic of the new era—the age of “grace upon grace,” inaugurated in the coming of Christ. In the explication of these demands is evidenced a marked progress in the ethic of enemy-love. For nowhere in the Old Testament are such commands stated in such language, and so these words may at first seem to supercede the ethics expressed in the Imprecatory Psalms. However, although in this new age the demands of love have been heightened, they are not wholly new demands. The two great commands of both testaments remain the same. But what was embryonic in the Old Testament finds full expression in Christ. Indeed, the New Testament ethic of enemy-love and blessing is intensified, and the implications of that ethic are more extensively explored and applied.

\textsuperscript{91} Concerning this passage, the principal issue of both the preceding and succeeding contexts is the cry for, and the coming of, the promised divine vengeance. This promised divine vengeance is also the premier issue of the latter portion of the Song of Moses in Deut 32 (for earlier debate on the identity of this Song, cf. chap. 4, n. 58). It is of interest to note as well how the Book of Revelation binds the Song of Moses to that of the Lamb, for as the book progresses to its climax it is the Lamb who was slain who returns as the divine Avenger (cf. Rev 5 and 19).
Yet even in the New Testament imprecations infrequently, yet nonetheless, arise. Noteworthy examples are Christ’s own curse of the fig tree as an illustrative imprecation on the iniquitous nation and her religious leadership, to be realized in the destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple. The apostles Peter and Paul were known to utter the curse of eternal damnation on those who sought to pervert and so undermine the gospel of grace. And Paul also did not shirk from pronouncing more physical curses as well. Lastly, the perfected martyrs in heaven likewise call out to God for the avenging of their blood, in language starkly similar to certain imprecations in the psalms. Thus, in some fashion, the utterance of imprecation comports with the ethic of enemy-love and blessing, as expressed in either testament.

The imprecations of the New Testament bear a measure of similarity to those of the Imprecatory Psalms. Like their Old Testament counterparts, the curses of the New Testament are uttered against the stubbornly rebellious as well as those dangerous to the faith or violent against the faithful. Dissimilarities are also manifest. Whereas the curses of the Imprecatory Psalms are predominantly temporal and physical, those of the New Testament are principally eschatological and spiritual in focus. However, the temporal and eschatological, the physical and the spiritual, join together notably in the imprecations and judgments of the Book of Revelation, for there time touches the eschaton.