

Dr. Craig Keener, Romans, Session 13,

Romans 12:14-14:1

6-min. Video Overview

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What if I told you there's an ancient guide for navigating our modern world of conflict? Well, in this explainer, we're going to dive into exactly that: a really radical, ethical framework from the Apostle Paul's letter to the Romans. And let me tell you, it presents some of the most profound and frankly difficult challenges for how we live our lives today, from dealing with our personal enemies all the way up to our deepest political divides. So let's just jump right in with a tough question, one that gets right to the heart of it.

I want you to think about the person who has wronged you the most, your worst enemy. Got them in your head? Okay. How are you supposed to treat that person? Most ethical systems have some kind of answer, but the one we're looking at today is on a whole other level.

And there it is. The very first command is an absolute gut punch to our natural instincts. It's not just tolerate them or ignore them.

It's bless them, as in you have to actively wish them well. This single sentence right at the start sets the stage for a truly radical way of seeing the entire world. Okay.

So let's just tackle this head on. The core command is to actively love your enemies. But I mean, how is that even possible? And what does that actually look like in the real world? To really get this, we need to see what it's not.

You know, other big philosophies at the time, like stoicism basically taught non-retaliation. The idea was, Hey, you can't control other people. You can only control your own reaction.

So just don't fight back. Makes sense. But this command goes a massive step further.

It isn't passive. It's an active, positive blessing. It demands you take action toward the very person who is persecuting.

And if you're thinking that sounds impossible, here's what it can look like. This is the actual prayer of a man named Sunday Agoon. And get this, when he prayed these words, he believed the very people he was praying for had just murdered his family.

Just let that sink in for a second. It's a staggering, almost unbelievable example of what it means to take this command seriously. Now it is really important to get this right.

The point isn't to be a doormat, not at all. The goal is transformation. The author quotes this old proverb about heaping burning coals on an enemy's head.

And yeah, that sounds like some kind of subtle revenge, right? But it's actually the opposite. It's a metaphor for how overwhelming, unexpected kindness can create this burning sense

of shame that melts away hostility, breaks the cycle of hate, and maybe, just maybe, turns an enemy into a friend. Here's one more powerful, real-life story.

During a war, the wife of theologian Craig Keener was a refugee with barely enough food for herself. And then she saw a captured enemy soldier who was hungry. So what did she do? She fed him.

It's the whole principle in its purest form. You see a human need, even in an enemy, and you meet it. That is how you overcome evil with good.

So if that's how you're supposed to treat a personal enemy, how does this whole framework apply on a bigger scale? This is where the letter shifts from the personal to the political, exploring our relationship with the government and the state. And yeah, this is where things get really complicated. So the text advocates for a general principle of submission to governing authorities.

Now, that word can make us pretty uncomfortable, and it's absolutely critical to understand this does not mean blind, absolute obedience. Think of it more like a default posture of respect, which is meant to maintain social order and, for the early community, to avoid giving the authorities a reason to crack down on them. And, you know, there was a very practical reason for this.

Even a flawed government like the Roman Empire provided some benefits. It built roads, which allowed for trade and communication. It provided a system of law that, while definitely imperfect, was still a whole lot better than total anarchy.

The author acknowledges that government can be a force for good. Which, of course, brings us to the essential question. Is this loyalty absolute? If the state commands you to do something evil, what then? Well, the answer from the text is a clear no.

I mean, remember, the central story of this faith is about state-sanctioned injustice, the crucifixion. So there is no way this ethic could ever be a command to just endorse evil. Okay, so we've talked about loving enemies and respecting governments.

These kind of seem like separate, really complex rules. But what if they're all just different expressions of one single unifying principle? Think about some of the most well-known ethical rules out there. Don't murder.

Don't steal. Don't commit adultery. Don't be jealous and want what your neighbor has.

These are all specific rules that tell us how we should behave toward other people. So the question is, is there a single idea that holds all of these together? A core concept that, if you really get it, makes all the other rules just kind of fall into place? And the answer is just one single word: love. The argument is that if you genuinely love your neighbor, you simply won't murder them.

You won't steal from them or want what they have. Love isn't just another rule on the list. It is the one principle that fulfills all the others.

This just reframes everything. Our duty to others isn't some checklist of things to avoid. It's a single, positive, ongoing debt that you can never fully pay off.

The debt to love. It's a lifelong project, not a task you can just check off the list. So what happens when people who are all trying to live by this principle of love still end up in conflict with each other? We're now shifting from those external conflicts to the internal ones, the disagreements that happen inside the community itself.

And look, these were not abstract debates. The community in Rome was fiercely divided over real-world stuff. Some people were convinced they should only eat vegetables to make sure they were following kosher laws.

Others felt totally free to eat meat. They argued about which days were holy and which ones were not. These were big deals.

The text uses a really key concept here, causing someone to stumble. Now this doesn't just mean offending someone's personal taste, like you play music they don't like. In this context, stumbling is a much higher-stakes term.

It means doing something, even something you feel you have the freedom to do, that could actually cause another person to abandon their core convictions and fall away from their faith. So the crucial point is this. On these secondary, debatable issues, the solution isn't about proving you're right.

The solution is to prioritize the person over the point. The main command is to welcome and accept one another, not to win arguments over things that aren't central to the faith. So the final section brings all of this together with a powerful and really urgent metaphor.

It's a call to shift our entire perspective on how we live in the here and now. You can feel the author building this incredible momentum. The night is nearly gone.

The day is almost here. Therefore, the time for just sleepwalking through life is over. It's time to wake up.

And this is the climactic call to action. You see, waking up isn't passive. It means actively preparing yourself.

Just like you get dressed for the day, you're told to clothe yourself with the armor of light, to live out these principles of love and integrity as your defense against the darkness. And that leaves us with the final question. In our own world, filled with its own conflicts, its own divisions, and its own darkness, what does it truly mean for us to stop sleepwalking and start living fully awake?