

## **Exegetical Brief: Heaping Fiery Coals on Your Enemy's Head (Romans 12:20)**

*Paul E. Zell*

As a neighbor to that person in need, see your way past the cost or the risk or even the possibility that he is your enemy. Have mercy on him. So Jesus taught in his Parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:25-37). As a child of your Father in heaven, do not love only those who love you. Love your enemies as well. So Jesus taught in his Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5:38-48). On two upcoming Sundays when these passages function as the Holy Gospel, the lectionary in *Christian Worship: Supplement* proposes the very same passage as the Second Lesson. Romans 12:9-21 is the Second Lesson for Pentecost 8, Year C (July 18, 2010) and again for Epiphany 7, Year A (February 20, 2011).

By the twelfth chapter of his epistle to the Romans the apostle Paul has fully proclaimed the Father's mercy. He has announced that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus" (Rom 3:23-24, NIV). Now he urges the saints on the basis of God's mercies to offer themselves up as living sacrifices. Live with a transformed mind, he writes, and verify that you approve of the sincere love (*ἀγάπη ἀνυπόκριτος*) that God wants. Address such love not only to your fellow believers but also to your enemies. "Do not repay anyone evil for evil... Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord. On the contrary: 'If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head'" (Rom 12:17a,19-20, NIV).

That the Father's children are to show mercy to their enemies could not be more obvious. What may not be so clear, however, is what Paul means by the second half of Romans 12:20, *τοῦτο γὰρ ποιῶν ἄνθρακας πυρὸς σωρεύσεις ἐπὶ τὴν κεφαλὴν αὐτοῦ*. Translating is not difficult. The verb *σωρεύω* is used elsewhere for the heaping up of stones, of harvested fruit, and of soil. The noun *ἄνθραξ* is a coal typically used for cooking food or heating a dwelling or purifying metals in a forge. In this case it is modified by the genitive *πυρὸς*. So we could translate *ἄνθρακας πυρὸς* as "burning coals" or "fiery embers." But what does the Holy Spirit's writer intend with his straightforward rendering of Proverbs 25:22?

In the Old Testament smoke, fire, and burning coals may represent God's awesome power (Ps 18:8) and his fierce judgment (Ps 120:4; 140:10; Is 5:24). In the ministry of Jesus, when Zebedee's sons wanted to punish the Samaritans who refused to welcome him, they asked whether they should "call down fire from heaven to destroy them" (Lk 9:54). A few interpreters suggest that this is what the apostle has in mind at Romans 12:20. If you give your enemy food and water, Paul is saying, his guilt is increased. And if his guilt is increased, God's punishment coming down on him becomes more severe. Show him kindnesses, and "you will heap fiery coals on his head."

Our holy and just God reserves the right to punish the wicked severely, if not in this life then certainly in the next. But this interpretation of Romans 12:20b overlooks its surroundings. In this chapter Paul has been urging Christians not to retaliate against evil. At Romans 12:21 he writes, "Do not be overcome by evil, *ἀλλὰ νίκα ἐν τῷ ἀγαθῷ τὸ κακόν*." Ensuring that punishment blazes down on the head of the evildoer hardly conquers evil *ἐν τῷ ἀγαθῷ*.

When the fireplace has gone cold, someone may arrange fresh kindling in a neat pile. He then may crown its head with hot coals. Likewise good deeds kindle warmth in the enemy's otherwise icy heart and

prompt it to glow with love. Or when the flames in the forge have gone out, heaping fiery coals will raise the temperature and melt the metals within. Likewise persistent love for the enemy may soften his hardened attitude and prompt him to admit the error of his ways. In either case the burning coals overcome something bad with something good. Concluding that Paul had such imagery in mind in Romans 12:20, however, seems to be a stretch. Neither comes easily to mind with the metaphor of piling fiery coals on an individual's head.

Fifty years ago Siegfried Morenz, director of the Institute of Egyptology at the University of Leipzig, caused a stir in regard to Romans 12:20. According to an ancient Egyptian story, Morenz reported, when a certain thief returned to the person he had wronged, he was carrying a tray of burning coals on his head. His crimson face below the hot coals was demonstrating his shame over what he had done. Several Bible commentaries have latched onto this story as if it were the best explanation of St. Paul's words and, for that matter, of Solomon's proverb.

Yet was this repentance ritual commonly practiced in Egypt or Israel or Rome? Was Solomon familiar with it? Did St. Paul recognize it? Would these men have proposed burning coals on the head as a metaphor for embarrassment? The interpreter will acknowledge that none of these questions has been satisfactorily answered. In addition, he will bear in mind Siegfried Morenz's objectionable aim: to prove that ancient Egyptian religion and culture made notable contributions to the development of Christian thought. The reader is wise to exercise restraint as to whether this legitimately explains Romans 12:20.

A simpler explanation of the apostle's words may also be a better one. Recall that Solomon and Paul wrote their sacred texts at a time when the typical household was not necessarily equipped to start its own fire. But if you owned a decent flint, you could start your own fire, then deliver fiery coals to your neighbors on a piece of pottery. (Clay dishes used for carrying hot coals on the head have been unearthed.) Should you have more than one household to service and should you heap too many fiery coals on your head, the heat at the crown of the head could become unbearable.

Apply that image to Romans 12:20. Each child of the heavenly Father has been set free to feed his enemy, to give him something to drink, to grant him one unexpected blessing after another. In so doing, he prompts his enemy to feel the heat of his conscience, possibly as never before. Because of his godly behavior, his enemy's thought process is distressed by the stinging rebuke of God's law. Augustine put it this way: "Coals of fire serve to burn, i.e., to bring anguish to his spirit, which is like the head of the soul." Luther suggested that the guilty party's spirit then demands of him, "Why did you hurt this pious man? Why did you persecute an innocent person?"

What then? Might the conscience-stricken enemy hesitate to persecute his benefactor the next time he has opportunity? Could he refrain from abusing others whom he recognizes as saints of God simply to avoid those burning pains of guilt? If so, the believer has "overcome evil with good."

Even better, perhaps the enemy stung by those hot coals confesses his sins against God. Perhaps the soothing balm in his Savior's gift of forgiveness is applied. Perhaps the Christian's worst enemy repents and becomes the Christian's best friend. The apostle Paul makes no guarantee that this will occur. Nevertheless that God for Jesus' sake would show mercy is the ultimate good that conquers evil.

Lord, have mercy upon us and upon our enemies.