

Romans 12:20

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Therefore if thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink: for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head.

Analysis

Therefore if thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink: for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head. Paul goes beyond passive non-retaliation to active enemy-love, quoting Proverbs 25:21-22. **If thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink**—meet your enemy's basic needs with practical generosity. The Greek word echthros (enemy) denotes personal antagonism, not mere strangers. Paul commands kindness toward those who actively oppose you, echoing Jesus: 'Love your enemies, do good to them which hate you' (Luke 6:27). This is cruciform ethics: Christ fed us while we were his enemies (Romans 5:10).

The mysterious phrase **thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head** (ἄνθρακας πυρὸς σωρεύσεις ἐπὶ τὴν κεφαλὴν αὐτοῦ, anthrakas pyros sōreuseis epi tēn kephalēn autou) has sparked debate. Some see judgment—your kindness increases your enemy's condemnation if he persists in evil. Others see transformation—burning coals of shame melt hostility into repentance. The second interpretation fits the context better: enemy-love aims at reconciliation (verse 18), not vindictive satisfaction. Your unexpected goodness confounds your enemy's expectations, creating cognitive dissonance that may lead to conversion. Either way, Christians respond to evil with good, trusting God with outcomes.

Historical Context

The Proverbs citation reflects ancient Near Eastern wisdom's surprising ethic: enemy-love isn't just New Testament novelty but Old Testament revelation. Egyptian texts similarly encouraged kindness to enemies. However, Greco-Roman and Jewish cultures both practiced honor-shame retaliation—insulted parties demanded satisfaction. Jesus and Paul radicalize the tradition: enemy-love isn't strategic manipulation (heap coals to get revenge) but genuine compassion aimed at redemption. Early Christians' refusal to retaliate impressed even pagan observers, who remarked on believers' forgiving martyrs.

Related Passages

Revelation 20:12 — Judgment according to deeds

Matthew 25:31 — Final judgment

Study Questions

1. Who is your 'enemy'—someone who has wronged you, opposes you, or actively works against your flourishing—and how can you practically 'feed' them?
2. What motivates your kindness toward enemies—genuine love seeking their good, or strategic manipulation hoping to shame them?
3. How does Jesus's enemy-love on the cross (feeding us while we were enemies) reshape your willingness to love your enemies?

Interlinear Text

έὰν	οὖν	πεινᾶ	ό	έχθρός	σου	ψώμιζε	αύτοῦ	έὰν
if	Therefore	hunger	G3588	enemy	thine	feed	him	if
G1437	G3767	G3983		G2190	G4675	G5595	G846	G1437
διψᾶ	πότιζε	αύτοῦ	τοῦτο	γὰρ	ποιῶν	ἄνθρακας	πυρὸς	
he thirst	drink	him	in so	for	doing	coals	of fire	
G1372	G4222	G846	G5124	G1063	G4160	G440	G4442	
σωρεύσεις	έπὶ	τὴν	κεφαλὴν	αύτοῦ				
thou shalt heap	on	G3588	head	him				
G4987	G1909		G2776	G846				

Additional Cross-References

Matthew 5:44 (Parallel theme): But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you;

Luke 6:27 (Parallel theme): But I say unto you which hear, Love your enemies, do good to them which hate you,

2 Kings 6:22 (Parallel theme): And he answered, Thou shalt not smite them: wouldest thou smite those whom thou hast taken captive with thy sword and with thy bow? set bread and water before them, that they may eat and drink, and go to their master.

1 Samuel 26:21 (Parallel theme): Then said Saul, I have sinned: return, my son David: for I will no more do thee harm, because my soul was precious in thine eyes this day: behold, I have played the fool, and have erred exceedingly.

Psalms 140:10 (Parallel theme): Let burning coals fall upon them: let them be cast into the fire; into deep pits, that they rise not up again.

Psalms 120:4 (Parallel theme): Sharp arrows of the mighty, with coals of juniper.