I was deployed to Qatar with a guy who complained a lot and by a lot I mean complaining represented at least 90% of the words that proceeded from his mouth. If you saw him coming you knew that you were in store for around 10 minutes of straight complaining. He was kind of like the Ancient Mariner wandering the earth telling his tale of woe. And like the Ancient Mariner his complaints had a starting and stopping point. Whenever he was done you were free to go. Sometimes I pondered what it would take for him to greet me with some good news. What it would take to put an end to complaints that seemed to be played on a loop. Was it like a row of falling dominoes, that if you were able to remove one domino the whole process of complaint followed by complaint would come to an abrupt halt? I don’t know if it would have worked for him but I find much of what we hear from Paul today to serve like a pulled domino. For the things suggested by Paul serve to break the chain of anger and complaint. Here is just a snippet, “Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them….Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.”

One of the things that seems to float through pop-Christianity is the idea that if you are Christian your life will be without troubles. And if for some reason you are having troubles it is because you have not prayed right or you don’t have enough faith or some such thing. But that is not what the Bible says. Suffering is kind of assumed. Not all the time but it will come. Same with persecution, weeping and evil. The Christian life is less about magically stopping bad things from happening to us and more about us and how we act. That is, it is not as much about the stuff out there but the stuff inside of us. And if you are like me you kind of wish it where the other way round. Because when another person mistreats me there is a war that goes on inside me. I certainly don’t forget how we are supposed to act but there is another voice that comes and tells me that I don’t need to do what is right because of what the other person has done to me. As C.S. Lewis once pointed out, the problem in the world is not that we can’t agree on right behavior, the problem is the exemptions we give ourselves for not acting right in the moment. And so the question becomes not what should we do but rather how do we make sure that when the time comes we do the things that Paul instructs us to do? That is, how do we work on acting in Godly ways no matter the circumstances?

It is interesting that our society has developed all sorts of way to remind us to do certain behaviors. We have reminders on our phones we can set to tell us to pick up some Count Chocula at the grocery store, my doctor’s office emails me to remind me of my appointment and I now get a text from my dentist to tell me that they will see me the next day. But I have not seen a reminder to tell me to be patient in suffering or not repay anyone evil for evil. So, is this the secret? Do we need to get reminders on our smartphones? It might help. I mean I think much of virtuous behavior comes from us practicing it, like a gymnast practices a vault or a long jumper practices a jump. The most critical piece though is for us to believe it. To believe that what Paul is saying is right. It won’t get rid of the voice telling us to take an amoral shortcut, but it will strengthen the voice that tells us to do what is right. And the more we act like Paul instructs, the more we will influence our society for the good.

I once saw on a television show an experiment where they asked people to add sauces of varying heat to a bowl of chili that was going to be eaten by an unknown person. If I recall correctly, the sauces were given were labeled mild, hot and super-hot (or some such thing). In the first experiment the participants entered a room and were told by a proctor, in a very professional way, the scenario. In this instance all of the participants added the mild sauce. The next time they conducted the same experiment but they let the participants see who was going to eat the bowl of chili through a one-way mirror. But it was not just this. As part of the experiment the person they saw through the one mirror was someone they had already had an encounter with while entering the building. This anonymous person had bumped into them and then acted rudely. In this wave of experiments all of the participants added the super-hot sauce, most likely because they all had very negative views of this anonymous person. There was then one more experiment which was exactly as it had been in the second round except the proctor, rather than being all business, deliberately complemented the individuals who were deciding on the hot-sauce to add. By this simple kindness all of the participants only added the mild sauce. The guy who was supposed to eat the chili had still been a jerk, but by someone being kind to them the chain had been broken. They no longer wished to repay the guy who had been rude to them, but now wished to repay the person who had been kind to them.

Today Paul is telling us how to be like the proctor who broke the chain. Telling us to, “Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them….Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all.” Through this we may be God’s own both now and forevermore.