

How to Overcome Evil

Scripture Text: Romans 12:18-21

Introduction

Last week we read about some things having to do with being a peaceful community. Those who follow Jesus Christ ought to be a peaceful people and demonstrate peace to others. That can be so hard to do, though. Some people will not make it easy. The world is against us, for Jesus said that we will be hated on account of Him. In a way, we should not be surprised when non-believers treat us poorly. They are fulfilling Jesus' words. In fact, the Church was watered by the blood of martyrs (witnesses). The rub is when it happens unexpectedly, or when someone close to us hurts us. That is worse. For instance, when a couple faces divorce, one or both of them will say and do many hurtful things to the other in response to their pain of separation or rejection. The evil of rejection and disloyalty results in anger that provokes a strong reaction. When you are threatened or your self-worth is demeaned, you will want to lash out. Anger can sometimes produce a righteous response, but oftentimes, it will produce only more evil. This passage encourages us to respond to evil and our anger by bringing it to God.

Do What You Can to Be At Peace

The world seems to exist on the idea of retaliation. If you hurt me, I will hurt you back. It seems natural when someone hurts us to pay them back for that hurt. We want instant justice. Retaliation for personal injury, though, is not the way for those who follow Jesus. He told His disciples to turn the other cheek and to go the second mile (Matthew 5:39, 41). Jesus, the Prince of Peace, wants us to be peacemakers who He said are blessed and are called "sons of God" (Matthew 5:9). Seeking peace is necessary for the Church. We must represent our Lord well to the world. When we act dishonorably with others, we hurt the name of Christ and we fail to achieve our mission. Paul, however, did not live in some fantasy world. He did not tell us to do a bunch of things believing that we will always be at peace with others. Paul recognized that sometimes you can do all the right things and some people will just not accept it. Look at the following verse.

Romans 12:18 ¹⁸ *If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.*

Verse eighteen suggests that living peaceably with others might not always be possible. Another way to say this might be "do all that you can do to keep the peace with all people." We have to remember that verse, however, in the context of our duty to hold each other accountable and to exhort others to right behavior. We still must hate what is evil (Romans 12:9) and call people to repentance when necessary. But how do we live peaceably with a world hostile to our faith? We should never back down from telling the truth. Evil must be opposed and righteousness ought to be sought, yet, Christians must be careful not to allow methods and attitudes to alienate them from the world they are called to reach for Christ. We are not the Holy Spirit! We do not have to be offensive. God's Word is offensive enough! The Church is called to be witnesses for Jesus Christ and to shine the light of the Gospel on a dark and hateful world.

We should expect hostility. The Prince of Peace was murdered by hostile people who were hardly at peace with Him. The Apostle Paul was beaten with rods, was stoned and received thirty-nine lashes several times. We are also seeing hostility in this country. As some have recently discovered, you might stand up for the truth and try to peacefully live with others, be that your neighbors, others in the community, or the government, and you will still be persecuted for your faith. It is *impossible* for us to live a Christian life without offending people and creating conflict. The world seems to be easily offended at Christ and Christianity. But there is a distinction between giving unwarranted offense to somebody and a person taking offense at who we are or what we do. It is easy to become fearful and paralyzed because people are offended at what we do or believe. People took offense at Jesus and they took offense at Paul, however, that did not stop them from accomplishing their mission for God. Neither should it stop us.

Do Not Steal God's Vengeance

This passage tells us that it is likely you may do all that you can to be at peace with someone else and they still will not let you. It is likely that you will be hated and persecuted for no good reason. What should you do? Does God allow us to avenge ourselves? You may think that there are situations when someone has done horrible things, maybe some horrific evil or has caused some terrible pain in your life, that to avenge yourself must be warranted. What should you do? Look at the following verse.

Romans 12:19 ¹⁹ *Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord."*

Notice first that Paul addressed the church as "Beloved". Paul knew what it was like to endure pain and suffering. He also likely knew how difficult it is to be a Christian witness in a godless world. Paul empathized with his fellow brothers and sisters and lovingly encouraged them to respond to evil in a Christ-like way. We should not avenge ourselves because vengeance belongs to God. While evil committed against us is painful and deserves justice, evil is ultimately an affront to God. We may feel the effects of evil and we may suffer some injustice or sin, but God is the One Who is truly offended. Sin attacks God's honor and glory, therefore, it deserves God's wrath. The right response to evil is to trust in God's vengeance. We are not to take that from Him.

God's wrath is His strong righteous anger that is directed at sin for the purpose of just punishment. It is both God's passionate resistance to every will which is against Him and also His just attack on it. God not only hates evil, which we should, too (Romans 12:9), but He also acts rightly to remove it. The first chapter of Romans revealed that God's wrath is poured out on all mankind. Paul wrote that God's wrath is "revealed against all ungodliness" and then said that we are "storing up wrath...on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed." (Romans 1:18; 2:5) Some claim that the God of the Old Testament was wrathful while the God of the New Testament is loving. That is wrong! Just read the Gospel According to John or the book of Revelation. The Gospel is not merely about love, grace and mercy, but also about the wrath of God. Why do you think it is "good news"? It is news about our salvation from God's wrath.

Paul stated that vengeance belongs to God, which is actually a quote from the Song of Moses in Deuteronomy. In that passage Moses revealed that sometimes, God allows us to come to a very low place to show our utter dependence on Him. Sometimes, God allows the evil and suffering in the world to persist to show that He alone is God Almighty and He alone is just to resolve it in His perfect time. That power does not belong to the individual. When the day is darkest and the enemy is strongest, then will God's true people show themselves. On that day, will the Church shine all the more brightly and the truth of God's Word be heard all the more clearly, and God will receive all the glory. At the end of Moses' song, he wrote the following.

Deuteronomy 32:43 ⁴³ *"Rejoice with him, O heavens; bow down to him, all gods, for he avenges the blood of his children and takes vengeance on his adversaries. He repays those who hate him and cleanses his people's land."*

The point of this passage and Paul's encouragement to us is that God hates evil and He will destroy it. We need to trust Him! When you suffer or endure pain, or when someone hurts you, can you say, "I trust God?" Do you believe that after all your efforts to be at peace with others, that God is with you and He will repay evil? Be like the psalmist who though he wondered "how long will the wicked triumph," still declared, "When there is a multitude of worries within me, Your comforts delight my soul" (Psalms 94:3, 19). This is about trusting God to have the final say. Oftentimes, we want so badly to have the final word, to end the conflict on our terms, but in matters of evil, God has the final word. Do you trust Him to make all things right and to avenge evil? Christians are not called upon to help God carry out divine retribution. God does not need us to help Him do this. He has promised to take care of it. We only need to trust Him to do it.

Overcome Evil With Undeserved Kindness

So if vengeance belongs to God and we are not allowed to repay those who hurt us, but we should trust God to deal with evil, how should we live with it? Do we retreat from it and allow it to have its way? Do we cower in defeat and suffer the hurt, ridicule and shame of this world? To that, Paul provided the following guidance.

Romans 12:20-21 ²⁰ *To the contrary, "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head."* ²¹ *Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*

Oftentimes we want to fight fire with fire — tit for tat, eye for eye, tooth for tooth. That does not work, though. Everyone knows that the fire department uses water to fight fire. Should we do differently? Do not let an evil person turn you into him by repeating his evil. If you really want to get an enemy's goat, put out their fire by throwing undeserved kindness on them. If you really want to do good, be nice to the person who treats you poorly. Mean people hate that. In terms of justice for personal injury, we ought to pay evil back with good. As the saying goes, kill them with kindness; however, it must truly be kind, rather than just acting kindly. We must have genuine love for others. Thus, Paul exhorted his readers to feed their enemy and to give them something to drink.

The best way to remove an enemy is to turn him into a friend. Our most powerful weapon against evil is doing good. To respond to evil with evil is not to overcome it but to be overcome by it. Being kind to someone who has hurt you is like piling burning coals on their head. Most scholars think Paul is teaching that we ought to do good to people so they will feel ashamed and guilty and then repent. That is possible and we should want them to repent. In the Old Testament, though, “burning coals” would often represent punishment. Another way to look at this is that Paul is repeating verse nineteen — *vengeance belongs to God, He will repay*. Christians are to do good to those who wrong them, recognizing that God will ultimately punish those who refuse to repent. As evil people fail to repent and respond to good, they are storing up more wrath of God. God is faithful to His children. He takes care of His own and when you suffer evil in this world, know that His mercies are new every morning (Lamentations 3:22–23).

Lastly, while overcoming evil with good does include acts of kindness toward those who wrong us, it may sometimes include the government punishing evil. Paul explained later in Romans chapter thirteen that the government is “God’s servant for your good”. It is an avenger who carries out God’s wrath on evil. Sometimes, leaving evil to the wrath of God means allowing others in authority to respond to that evil. God gave us government to enact justice and avenge evil. That is the proper place for repaying evil. When the government leads poorly or enacts unjust laws, though, the people will suffer and evil will prevail. In those times, we must turn to God, pray for our leaders and trust God to ultimately wipe away all our tears, when there will be no more mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the evil things will have passed away (Revelation 21:4).

Six Ways to Show Genuine Love to a Difficult Person

Before I close, I want to provide six practical ways, and there may be others, to show genuine love to others and to live peacefully with difficult people. Keep in mind, that God may have deliberately placed a difficult person in your path.

1. *Pray for your own heart.* Ask God to soften your heart towards this person, to put off anger and irritability, to put on meekness and kindness, to understand this person’s struggles and meet them with compassion (Colossians 3:12–14).
2. *Pray for them.* Ask God to be at work in their hearts, drawing unbelievers to himself and sanctifying believers to become more like Jesus (Philippians 1:9–11).
3. *Move toward them*, not away from them. Although the tendency might be to avoid difficult people, they are exactly the people we need to intentionally move toward. Find ways to engage them in conversation. Love them, no matter, if they hate you for it.
4. *Find specific ways to bless and encourage them.* Write them a note of appreciation. A good way to show them love is to tell them you are praying for them...and then actually pray for them! Do not say it if you are not going to do it. The truth is we all need prayer!

5. *Give them grace*, just as God extends grace to you. Remember that God has lavished His grace on you in spite of your own sins. Ask God to help you bear with them, forgiving them, as He has forgiven you (Colossians 3:13).

6. *Realize that you too could be the difficult person in someone else's life!* You might not even realize that you are a thorn in someone's flesh. Don't ignore your own sins and shortcomings. Pray for God to open your eyes and for Him to change your evil ways.

So when you face that difficult person, ask God for His grace not to run away from them, but to keep engaging in love with that hard-to-love person. It is the Christ thing to do. God will be honored and our hearts will find deeper satisfaction as we seek to love people just as Christ loved us when we were his enemies (Romans 5:6-8).

Conclusion

In closing, Christians often suffer hatred and persecution from society. We ought to expect it. When we face evil from a world hostile to us, what should our response be? The common response is to retaliate, but as we read in this passage, Christians are called to serve and minister God's grace to a lost and hostile world. As much as it is possible, we are to live at peace with everyone. God is Lord, He is sovereign, He is the Judge, and He is the administrator of righteous wrath. Our role is to display God's grace and love in our lives, and the best example of this is our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

The truth is, and we often forget this, the victory over evil has already been won. God conquered evil on the cross of Jesus Christ and He purchased peace for the world. The giant has been slain, the serpent's head has been crushed, and the prisoners have been set free. You might say, "It sure seems like the battle is still going on." That is partly true, for we live in a world eagerly waiting for its redemption (Romans 8:19-22), but sin and death was defeated with the resurrection. When Jesus died for our sin and then rose from the dead, He defeated Satan and proved that the evil, pain and suffering of this present world will be wiped away. We can be assured that God has avenged evil and He will avenge it on the last day.

But the question may be, "Do you have the peace of God?" Do you have this hope that disciples of Christ ought to have? If not, you can have it. You just need to receive God's grace and forgiveness. The offer is available to whosoever will turn from their sin and turn to Jesus Christ. You can know the peace of God by accepting the Prince of Peace, Jesus Christ, and confessing Him as your Lord and Savior. For those who have trusted in Jesus Christ, maybe you need help to live out the Gospel of Peace. Maybe you need strength to not retaliate, but to respond like Christ. Turn to Him for strength. Pray that God will give you a Christ-like spirit to love others as He has loved you. Be an agent of peace and trust God to make it happen. This is good news. Thanks be to God. Amen!