

Overcoming Evil with Good

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Romans 12:9-21

⁹ Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; ¹⁰love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. ¹¹Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. ¹²Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. ¹³Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

¹⁴ Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. ¹⁵Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. ¹⁶Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. ¹⁷Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. ¹⁸If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. ¹⁹Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.’ ²⁰No, ‘if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.’ ²¹Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Matthew 16:21-28

²¹ From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. ²²And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, ‘God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.’ ²³But he turned and said to Peter, ‘Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling-block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.’

²⁴ Then Jesus told his disciples, ‘If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ²⁵For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. ²⁶For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?

²⁷ ‘For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done. ²⁸Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.’

When I advertised this week’s sermon on Facebook this past Thursday, as I do each week, I cheekily renamed it “When bad PEOPLE happen to good people.” The fact is, while we may know of or read of some people who do despicable things, there is really no such thing as a 100% bad person, just as there is no such thing as a 100% good person. After all, we don’t live in a world of superheroes and villains where good and evil are as clear as black and white. For the sake of today’s sermon, those “bad people” are the ones who do hurtful things despite our hopes and expectations otherwise.

Paul says outright that they are those who persecute. He implies that to be evil would be to weep when others rejoice and rejoice when others weep; to avoid the lowly and claim to be wiser than one is; to repay evil with evil, to choose to live at war with one another, to avenge oneself. He encourages us,

“Do not repay evil with evil, but take thought of what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.” These words of wisdom are reminiscent of Jesus’ suggestion to turn the other cheek. And it is here that I must make something abundantly clear.

For years and years and years, texts like these have been used as permission for people to abuse other people, not because that permission is given to the abuser, but because the abused seem to be told that the Christian thing to do is to take what is given you in the name of peace. This is **not** what this Scripture nor Jesus’ words about turning the other cheek are about. If Jesus had condoned people suffering abuse, he would have never intervened with the woman about to be stoned. To turn the other cheek means do not further the fighting with retaliation. “If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.” Sometimes, it is not possible. Sometimes living peaceably is not possible, for sometimes defense is necessary for us to be good stewards of the gifts of our bodies and our lives. With that clearer, there is another matter of misinterpretation to clarify.

There is a verse in the letter to the Romans which seems so incongruent in the way it has been interpreted: “if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.” Paul is actually quoting Scripture here, referencing Proverbs 25, a chapter entitled “Further Wise Sayings of Solomon.” Why would Paul, or Solomon, be maliciously kind? As a young girl, I could have come up with one good reason - my younger brother. I was the “good” kid - not that my brother was bad - I was the kid who you could leave alone to entertain herself, who did my chores mostly without argument, who didn’t question. Khris, well, he wasn’t that kid. And so, sensing him being on the brink of getting in trouble, I became the extra good kid, enthusiastic to be helpful or out of the way as needed, all because I knew my behavior would eventually elicit a comment to him: “Why can’t you be more like your sister?” That was pretty good attention as far as I was concerned, so being extra good made it extra bad for him. An excellent reason, I thought.

This, however, was not what Paul and Solomon were saying. Being extra good on our part does not make our enemies look even worse in God’s eyes, does not give God even more reason to condemn them. Heaping burning coals seems like a horrible punishment to any of us, in our context. If we look to the biblical context, though, we find a different story. In Isaiah 6, Isaiah is telling God of his unworthiness as a prophet, for his lips are unclean. We read, “Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: ‘Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.’” A burning coal, like the fires that purify silver, was understood for cleansing, for renewing. To heap burning coals on one’s enemies is to help make them better.

It seems fitting on this weekend when the Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial was to have been dedicated, that we learn from some of his wisdom. In a sermon entitled “Loving Your Enemies” he said,

Now there is a final reason I think that Jesus says, "Love your enemies." It is this: that love has within it a redemptive power. And there is a power there that eventually transforms individuals. Just keep being friendly to that person. Just keep loving them, and they can't stand it too long. Oh, they react in many ways in the beginning. They react with guilt feelings, and sometimes they'll hate you a little more at that transition period, but just keep loving them. And by the power of your love they will break down under the load. That's love, you see. It is redemptive, and this is why Jesus says love. There's something about love that builds up and is creative. There is something about hate that tears down and is destructive. So love your enemies.¹

Return kindness when there is hatred, good when there is evil; “just keep loving them.” We are challenged to let go of our own “need,” really our own want, for vengeance. Both Paul and Matthew tell us that vengeance is God’s. That verse in Paul, “for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord,’” is oft-quoted to dissuade someone, even ourselves, from lashing out, acting up, doing something foolish, by assuring them, and us, that **God** will get those people for what they’ve done. As words to help someone cool off, this understanding is fine.

As theology, as a study of how and who God is, we need to dig a little deeper, take less comfort in God’s retribution and punishing judgment as we like to think of it. The same God who Matthew says “will repay everyone for what has been done,” is the God like the father in the story of the prodigal son, is the God like the woman who upturns her whole house for just one lost coin and then celebrates with a party when it is found, is the God through Jesus who dined with thieving, conniving, self-serving tax collectors. In remembering that **this** God is the God of judgment, rather than be disappointed that vengeance cannot look like the vengeance, the payback, we would mete out, take comfort and be grateful of God’s mercy, for God “will repay everyone for what has been done.” Everyone: the people who have cheated us, the people who have tricked us, the people who have hurt us, our friends, our children, us.

If we are to be grateful that God is merciful to us, who are we to resent someone else for receiving the same unmerited grace from God? The reasons for which God’s grace to us is unmerited may differ from someone else’s reasons, but God’s grace is unmerited for us both. If we wish for God to punish according to someone else’s wrongs, then we must be willing to be accountable for our own wrongs and accept punishment fitting the times we’ve said hurtful and

¹ http://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/23924.Martin_Luther_King_Jr (A Knock at Midnight: Inspiration from the Great Sermons of Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr.)

hateful things, the times we've refused to forgive, the times we've ignored a person in need, the times we have passed judgment. Thanks be to God that our God is a God of mercy upon us *all*.

In those times when we let go of our want for vengeance and our hope that God's vengeance would look like ours, we begin to be the type of followers Jesus desires. We heard in Matthew, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." Some have interpreted this as a call to a monastic life. Denying oneself by only having what you need and dedicating one's life to prayer and service is admirable, but not all are called to live out their gifts in this way. Denying our urge for vengeance and trusting repayment to God's hand is a way of becoming obedient to God's will over our own. And it's not just denying our urge for vengeance on the one who wronged us. Denying the desire to justify bad behavior towards others because of bad behavior we have experienced is a way of being obedient. If we take our bad day out on someone else, we are responding to evil with evil.

Jesus continues, "For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it." Many, many followers have been martyred for these words, giving up their lives for the sake of the gospel. Again, this is not the only way to live faithfully to this text. Think back to the junk drawers of our minds from last week - should we cling to our lives the way they are, allow our minds to be filled with the things of the world, we have little room for God. If we lose this life, if we let go of this life filled with the small things that don't matter, then we find a life in Christ, a life in God - one far more valuable than a life filled with stainless steel refrigerator doors and the right words said at the right time and even the "perfect" Christmas.

When Paul talks about overcoming evil with good, it helps to know some about the original Greek. There is more than one word for "evil" in Greek. At the very beginning, when Paul says "hate what is evil," he uses the same word, *πονηρόν*, *pōnerōn*, that is used to reference who we might call the devil, the Evil One. Every other time he uses a form of *κακός*, *kakōs*, a word that is at the root of our word cacophony. Paul's call to us is not easy; just like the junk drawers that need to be emptied over and over, so we need to try over and over to follow Paul's words. "Hold fast to what is good." "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." Strive to overcome the cacophony of irrelevancies and insignificances in your mind to make room for good, to make room for God.

Let us pray: Lord, silence in us any voice but your own, that, hearing, we may also obey your will.
Amen.