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Romans 12:17-21

11th Message

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OVERCOMING EVIL WITH GOOD

SERIES: OVERCOMING WITH GOOD

In many places in the world today Christians are suffering terribly and many are being killed: in Syria, in Egypt, in Iraq, in Nigeria, and just today yet again in Pakistan. These conditions echo the early church, which was a suffering church. But the more Christians the Romans killed the more the church grew. As Tertullian wrote to the emperor, “The oftener we are mown down by you, the more in number we grow; the blood of Christians is seed.”¹ Time and again the blood of the martyrs has proven to be the seed of the church.

The trials and difficulties which we face are insignificant compared to those suffered by the martyrs, whether those of the Roman Empire or those around the world today. But each day we face situations which test our response. Each day we encounter evil in various degrees of magnitude. It could be something as small as being cut off in traffic. It could be a work colleague maligning us. It could be an act of injustice. Each day we must choose how to respond to many different circumstances, ranging from minor irritations to major wrongdoings. How will we respond? Will we respond in kind, following our natural inclinations? Or will we overcome our natural passions, and choose to respond with kindness? Will we repay evil with evil, or will we overcome evil with good? These are not life and death issues for us, but how we respond does reflect our spiritual health. The Christian response to evil is today’s topic as we continue our series on Romans 12, entitled Overcoming with Good. Our passage is verses 17-21 which begins and ends with the theme of evil and good.

I. Respond with Good not Evil (12:17)

Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. (Rom 12:17 ESV)

“Repay no one evil for evil.” Unfortunately the default mode of humanity is to repay evil for evil, tit for tat, to give as good as we get. What is the right response to one who does wrong?

Cain was the first person in the Bible to do wrong to another. Afterwards he feared the consequences. He feared what others might do to him, that he might be killed by whomever found him. But God promised him protection and justice, putting a mark on him and saying, “If anyone kills Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold” (Gen 4:15). Lamech escalated such retribution an order of magnitude, vowing, “If Cain’s revenge is sevenfold, then Lamech’s is seventy-sevenfold” (Gen 4:24). Lamech would respond to wrong with overwhelming force, but this only leads to an escalation of violence and wrongdoing.

Israel’s Law limited justice to a one-for-one penalty: eye for eye, tooth for tooth. Three times the Torah spells out this principle for Israel (Exod 21:24; Lev 24:20; Deut 19:21). For example,

If anyone injures his neighbor, as he has done it shall be done to him, fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth; whatever injury he has given a person shall be given to him. (Lev 24:19-20)

This is an example of *lex talionis*, the law of talion, where the penalty fits the crime. This is retributive justice, exacting retribution on the perpetrator proportional to the crime. Though we view it as harsh it was a great improvement on Lamech’s form of justice.

Jesus proposed a different standard for those in God’s kingdom:

“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.” (Matt 5:38-39)

An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth was no longer appropriate within God’s kingdom. Jesus called his followers to a higher level of behavior, to respond to evil with kindness.

The command to repay no one evil for evil is given two more times in the epistles:

See that no one repays anyone evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to everyone. (1 Thess 5:15)

Do not repay evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary, bless, for to this you were called, that you may obtain a blessing. (1 Pet 3:9)

This three-fold repetition suggests this was standard and necessary teaching within the early church, which further suggests that the early Christians frequently encountered evil and had to consider how to respond to it. Paul faced evil from all sides, from Jews, from Christians and from pagans. Jews caused trouble in many of the towns where he preached on his journeys, and Jews in Jerusalem nearly lynched him when he visited the temple. Christians as well tried to do him harm. From prison Paul wrote to the Philippian,

Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from good will. The latter do it out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. The former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment. What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice. (Phil 1:15-18)

Paul chose to respond to the evil intentions of these rival preachers with good, by rejoicing in Christ.

The second half of the verse shows what we are to do instead: “give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all.” The word translated “honorable” also means “good.” Instead of responding with evil we respond with what is good and beautiful. We can’t just rely on our instincts to respond this way. Our natural response is to return evil for evil. Paul tells us to give thought to our response, to think about it ahead of time. We have to prepare ourselves to do good, because our natural response is to respond in kind, repaying evil with evil. Every day our own behavior shows this to be true! Even when we think about it ahead of time, we still may not respond the right way; we still may find our natural passions arise and overwhelm

our best intentions. Resolving ahead of time to respond with good may not always help us to actually do so, but without such prior resolve our odds of responding in a way that is good and beautiful are much worse.

Furthermore, we are to respond to evil with good not just to our friends, to our fellow Christians, to those we like, but “in the sight of all.” Paul doesn’t give us a sliding scale; he doesn’t allow us to respond less well to those who do more evil. We are to purpose a response of good no matter who has done the evil. This doesn’t mean that all people will appreciate our behavior, or thank us for it, or even recognize it as good. They may interpret it as weakness and take advantage of us. Even other Christians may take advantage of us, as Paul found. Writing to the Corinthian church he defended his ministry: “When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; when slandered, we entreat” (1 Cor 4:12-13). Did the Corinthian church respect him for this? No: “We are fools for Christ’s sake, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honor, but we in disrepute” (1 Cor 4:10). Paul’s problematic relationship with the Corinthian church is a frequent theme in his two letters. He did not behave like their super-apostles. Other texts make it clear that the early Christians might suffer for doing good. Peter asks, “who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good?” but warns of “those who revile your good behavior in Christ,” and concludes, “it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God’s will, than for doing evil” (1 Pet 3:13-17). The behavior of Jesus, in refusing to respond to evil with evil, was not recognized as good by the onlookers.

As we purpose to respond with good we have two audiences: humans and God. We do good in the sight of all people, but the audience that really matters is God. He sees how we respond. He sees the good we do even if people do not. It doesn’t matter whether people judge our response to be good, true and beautiful. What matters is that God sees it to be so.

2. Be Peaceable (12:18)

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

A fundamental principle of Christian ethics is to be peaceable. Behind Paul’s use of the word peace no doubt lies the Hebrew word *shalom*. This entails far more than the absence of hostility. It signifies a positive well-being, a flourishing. We’re called to live this way with all people, again not just with our friends and fellow Christians.

Paul qualifies the command with two concessions: “if possible, so far as it depends on you.” It may not be possible to live peaceably. The other party may not respond in kind, may reject the good with which we respond to their evil, may reject our overtures of peace. In the case that peace is not possible we have to ensure that we are not the obstacle, that for our part we are seeking peace.

A good example of such determination to live at peace is Daoud Nassar and The Tent of Nations. Last November I met Daoud, a Palestinian Christian who lives near Bethlehem. In 1916 his grandfather bought a one-hundred acre property. In 1991 the Israeli authorities declared it to be state land, and have been trying to confiscate it ever since. The land is on the West Bank, in occupied territory, but it has the misfortune to be located in the Gush Etzion bloc, a district that has great emotional significance for Israeli Jews, though the significance dates to 1948, over thirty years after Daoud’s family acquired their property. Daoud’s land is surrounded by Jewish settlements, and Israel wants the land for further settlements. Under

Daoud’s leadership, the Tent of Nations operates the property as both a working and an educational farm. At the entrance to the site is a large stone on which are painted these words, “We refuse to be enemies.” This serves as a motto for the Tent of Nations. The battle for the land has gone all the way to the Israeli Supreme Court. Through it all, and for over twenty years, Daoud has sought to live out verse 18: “If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.” He refuses to respond as an enemy. Since learning about the Tent of Nations I have frequently borne this motto in mind: “We refuse to be enemies.”

Jesus said, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God” (Matt 5:9). One organization taking this call seriously is Peacemaker Ministries, founded in 1982 “to equip and assist Christians and their churches to respond to conflict biblically.” Many of us have been in churches riven with conflict and know how much such a ministry is required. So necessary has such a ministry been that Peacemakers has since expanded overseas.

3. Leave Vengeance to God (12:19-20)

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.” 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.” (12:19-20)

If we refuse to respond to evil with evil, determine ahead of time to do good, and do everything we can to live in peace, does this mean that we don’t take evil and justice seriously? No, evil is evil and ultimately justice must be done. But we allow others to execute such justice.

Paul writes, “never avenge yourselves.” Perhaps it is because such counsel is so difficult that he adds, “beloved.” In talking about vengeance we must distinguish between revenge and avenge. Both involve response to a real or perceived wrong. Revenge is an act of responding to evil with evil, usually in anger. Avenge is the proper execution of justice. In the case of a wrong there is a perpetrator and a victim, the wrong-doer and the wronged. Revenge is striking back at the wrong-doer, either by the wronged or by one acting in his name. Avenging is done not by the victim, but by a third party who has the authority to act in the name of justice. Vengeance involves retributive justice: the wrong-doer must pay a penalty for his wrongdoing. But there is a problem with retributive justice. It does nothing to reverse the wrong itself: it does not undo the harm to the victim, or establish peace, or conquer evil with good. The first crime in the Bible is Cain’s murder of his brother Abel. Beyond the punishment of Cain, what is ultimately needed is the restoration of Abel, but he is dead. In his case restorative justice requires resurrection.

We are not to avenge ourselves. We are not to take matters into our own hands and seek revenge. That would be to respond to evil with evil. Using two “but” clauses, Paul shows what we are to do instead. One action is passive, the other active. Passively, we are to leave vengeance to God. Actively, we are to do good to the enemy. Paul backs each one up with a quote from the Old Testament.

Instead of avenging ourselves, we leave vengeance to God and his wrath. “Vengeance is mine, I will repay” is a quote from Deuteronomy: “Vengeance is mine, and recompense” (Deut 32:35). In that context God promises Israel that he will ultimately vindicate them against their enemies, on whom he will bring calamity. God will judge every act of wrong-doing. He will exact retributive justice. Every act

of injustice will earn its just reward. Ultimately this justice is hell, removal from God's presence of those who do not avail themselves of God's mercy. Such justice lies in the future, eschatological justice at the end of time. There are consequences for evil behavior.

In the meantime God uses the instrument of the state to exercise justice. Paul immediately follows his call to overcome evil with good and leave justice to the Lord with a discussion of the role of the state. The ruler "is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer" (Rom 13:4).

David showed how to overcome evil with good by leaving vengeance to the Lord when he was pursued by Saul. Though Saul was in his hand not once but twice, David refused to act against him for he was still the Lord's anointed. He would wait for the Lord to deal with Saul. After David had spared his life in the cave at Engedi, Saul said to him,

"You are more righteous than I, for you have repaid me good, whereas I have repaid you evil." (1 Sam 24:17)

As always, Jesus has set us the example:

When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. (1 Pet 2:23)

Jesus did not try to vindicate himself, but entrusted himself to his Father's vindication. His Father did vindicate him, but not before he died. Jesus did not save himself, and his Father did not save him. But God did vindicate him: in resurrection and in enthronement at his right hand.

Just as for Jesus, our vindication may not happen in our lifetime. The positive side of our vindication will be our resurrection. We have already experienced resurrection: we have died to the old nature, and been raised to newness of life, as symbolized in baptism. But there still awaits us the resurrection of the dead, our re-embodiment into eternal glory in God's presence. The negative side of vindication is final judgment of God's enemies, which will be removal from his presence. Leaving matters in God's hands is hard to do. It is hard to take a long-term view and allow God to exercise justice in the future when we want it now.

The active alternative to avenging ourselves is to extend care to our enemy: "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink." Here Paul quotes from Proverbs 25:21-22. There are two examples in the Old Testament of doing just this. In the days of the prophet Elisha, the Syrian army attacked Israel. Elisha prayed that the Lord would strike them with blindness, then he led them into Samaria, Israel's capital, where he prayed again that the Lord would restore their sight. Seeing his enemy delivered right into his hand, Israel's king wanted to kill them, but Elisha told him, "Set bread and water before them, that they may eat and drink and go to their master" (2 Kgs 6:22). In a later war, Israel defeated Judah, killing many men and bringing women and children back to Samaria as captives. The prophet Oded rebuked the army for killing so many men and for enslaving the women and children. Certain leaders reacted against the army and heeded the word of the prophet:

[They] took the captives, and with the spoil they clothed all who were naked among them. They clothed them, gave them sandals, provided them with food and drink, and anointed them, and carrying all the feeble among them on donkeys, they brought them to their kinsfolk at Jericho, the city of palm trees. Then they returned to Samaria. (2 Chr 28:15)

A more recent example comes from the Second World War. Ernest Gordon was a young Scottish lieutenant captured by the Japanese and put to work on the Death Railway between Thailand and Burma. He told his story in a book, subsequently made into the movie *To End All Wars*. In the POW camp Gordon came to faith in Christ, but struggled over the gospel's call to forgive our enemies. This would mean forgiving the Japanese captors. Near the end of the war, as a group of Allied prisoners were being moved from one camp to another, their train ended up on a siding alongside a train full of wounded Japanese troops who were suffering terribly. He described what happened:

These were the enemy, more cowed and defeated than we had ever been. Without a word, most of the officers in my section unbuckled their packs, took out part of their ration and a rag or two, and, with water canteens in their hands went over to the Japanese train to help them. Our guards tried to prevent us... But we ignored them and knelt by the side of the enemy to give them food and water, to clean and bind up their wounds, to smile and say a kind word. An Allied officer from another section of the train had been taking it all in. 'What...fools you all are!' he said to me. 'Don't you realize that those are the enemy?' 'Have you never heard the story of the man who was going from Jerusalem to Jericho?' I asked him. 'But that's different!' the officer protested. 'That's in the Bible. These are the swine who've starved us and beaten us. They've murdered our comrades. These are our enemies.' ...I regarded my comrades with wonder. Eighteen months ago they would have joined readily in the destruction of our captors had they fallen into our hands. Now these same men were dressing the enemy's wounds. We had experienced a moment of grace.²

The justification that Proverbs gives for treating our enemy this way, which is then echoed by Paul, is that by doing so we "will heap burning coals on his head." This is a confounding statement which has produced several interpretations. Three different explanations are offered for the meaning of the burning coals heaped on the head: that they mean divine judgment, or shame, or repentance. Perhaps which option you pick says more about you and what you want to happen to the enemy than about the text. One interpretation is that the burning coals are divine anger. Treating our enemy well magnifies his sin, his culpability before God, and his liability to divine judgment. This is the way most of us want to interpret it. Though we do good we still want judgment! But this is perverse logic, and it doesn't fit the tenor of the passage. It would not be overcoming evil with good. It would not be seeking to be at peace. A second interpretation is that the burning coals heaped on the head represent shame which may lead to repentance. A third, more recent option draws on Egyptian imagery in which a basket of burning coals on the head figures in a ritual of repentance.

I don't know which is the right interpretation; scholars are divided. But it is important to recognize the context. We shouldn't want our enemy to come under divine vengeance. God will execute final judgment, but in the meantime our goal surely should be to win the enemy over to be a friend, to draw him into the circle of peace, of *shalom*, of flourishing.

4. Overcome Evil with Good (12:21)

Paul concludes by stating the general principle:

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. (12:21)

Today's passage is bracketed by verses 17 and 21. In each verse the word "evil" is mentioned twice and the word "good" once (in v 17 "good" is translated as "honorable"). Furthermore, each word is used in verse 9: "Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good." We are in a battle of good versus evil. It's not a battle to see whether good or evil will triumph in the world. We know that God is far stronger than any evil set against him. It's a battle within us over how we respond to all the people and circumstances we encounter every single day. Each day we encounter evil in greater or lesser magnitude. Each day we have to choose how to respond: to respond in kind, as is our natural inclination, or to resist the temptation and instead respond with grace, kindness and do what is good. To overcome evil with good is to show genuine, non-hypocritical love that is true to *agapē*.

We are unable to live like this on our own. It is not within our fallen nature. But it is the life to which God calls us, and since he calls us he will equip us and enable us to live this way. He has given us the pattern, the Lord Jesus Christ, who lived this way. Through the death and resurrection of Christ he has overcome evil with good. And he has put his Spirit in us to empower us to live this way, after the pattern of Jesus. If we persist in responding to evil with good, we overcome. This is victory.

Secular governments have recently been interested in instituting justice that seeks to overcome evil with good. A recent example is the Truth and Reconciliation Commission established in South Africa after the end of apartheid and after Nelson Mandela became president. This Commission, under the leadership of Archbishop Desmond Tutu, sought restorative justice rather than retributive justice. Its goal was reconciliation between perpetrators and victims of wrong-doing. The intent was for perpetrator and victim to face one another and tell the truth. The perpetrator would confess his wrong-doing. The victim would tell the perpetrator how he or she was wronged. This was painful: the motto for the commission was, "The truth hurts, but silence kills." That this approach should even be attempted is testament to the stature of Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu.

Similar commissions have been attempted in other parts of the world. Most recently Canada has adopted this approach to deal with the mistreatment of First Nations children, the native peoples of Canada. For over a hundred years all native children were forcibly removed and placed in Indian Residential Schools far from home. Initially the government ran these schools, but finding it too expensive, asked the church to run them. The last school closed only in 1996. Hearings have been held in Vancouver the past few days. This morning a Walk for Reconciliation is taking place in Vancouver, the first such walk in Canada. Many churches and some of my friends are participating in this walk. Martin Luther King's daughter, Bernice, will address the crowd. Why are churches participating in this walk—not just liberal churches, but also evangelical ones? Over the last twenty years most Canadian denominations have apologized for their role in these schools. Churches are participating in the walk because so much of the wrong was done in the name of Jesus. Christians are walking in solidarity with the survivors, and to present a different face of the church to victims who were hurt by those who said they were acting in Jesus' name.

We are called to overcome evil with good. This was the motto of my boarding school in England: *in bono vince*, "overcome with good." I saw it every day. It was one thing to see this motto as a teenager, but it is quite a different matter to try to live this way as an adult. It is a demanding lifestyle. How can we possibly rise to this high calling? Let me remind you of the first two verses of Romans 12. The chapter begins "by the mercies of God": God has overcome our evil with good; he has overcome our hostility with peace; we have been reconciled and restored. He has accomplished restorative justice, and we no longer have to face his vengeance. Secondly, we have presented our bodies as a sacrifice: we belong to God, are priests in his service, instruments for his purposes. One of those purposes is to extend his *shalom*, peace, flourishing into the world. Thirdly, we are called to not be conformed to this world, whose pattern is to return evil for evil. Instead, fourthly, we are to be transformed by the renewing of the mind, so that we can think ahead about how to respond to evil with good. When we live this way, following in the footsteps of Jesus, empowered by his Spirit, then we are conquerors. May God give us the grace to live this way.

1. Tertullian, *Apologeticum*, chapters 37, 50, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1994 [1885]), 3:45, 55.

2. Ernest Gordon, *To End All Wars* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 197-198. Previously published as *Through the Valley of the Kwai* (London: Collins, 1963) and *Miracle on the River Kwai* (London: Fontana, 1965).