

# Overcoming with Good

Romans 12:9-21

Sermons by

Bernard Bell

Peninsula Bible Church Cupertino  
Cupertino, California  
[www.pbcc.org](http://www.pbcc.org)

© 2013 Peninsula Bible Church Cupertino  
[www.pbcc.org](http://www.pbcc.org)

Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version.  
Copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers.  
Used by permission. All rights reserved.

# Contents

	Text	Title	Date	Page
1.	12:9	True Love	7.28.2013	1
2.	12:11-12	Serving the Lord for Good	8.04.2013	5
3.	12:13	Gifted to Give	9.01.2013	9
4.	12:14-16	Blessing the World	9.15.2013	13
5.	12:17-21	Overcoming Evil with Good	9.22.2013	17
6.	12:19-21	Let Justice Roll Down	9.29.2013	21



# 1. TRUE LOVE

Romans 12:9

Are Christians good for society? Until recently this question was not asked: Western societies were Christian societies. But as the West leaves its Judeo-Christian heritage behind and moves into a post-Christian age, there is a growing chasm between Christianity and contemporary culture. Critics denounce religion in general and Christianity in particular as the cause of much that is wrong in the world. *Goodness* and *love* are not words associated with the Church. Instead Christians are viewed as intolerant, bigoted, judgmental and hateful, whether it concerns science, or other religions, or sexual behavior, or a host of other issues. Is Christianity outdated in this multicultural age? Does it have any place in modern society?

Among the most outspoken and aggressive critics of religion have been the New Atheists, such as Richard Dawkins and the late Christopher Hitchens. Dawkins is a retired Oxford professor. As an evolutionary biologist he was perhaps most famous for his book *The Selfish Gene* (1976), but then he ventured into the realm of religion with *The God Delusion* (2006), whose title is self-explanatory. Hitchens, who described himself not as an atheist but as an antitheist, wrote *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (2007). These two books generated considerable attention at the time: Dawkins' book was on the *New York Times* bestseller list for nearly a year and has sold two million copies.

So, does Christianity have anything good to contribute to modern society, or is it implicated in all that is bad in contemporary culture? Christians have adopted a number of different ways to respond to the surrounding culture. One approach is to view the world as a dangerous threat, and so retreat into a safe Christian environment, a sort of walled community of like-minded people. Another approach is to seek power, to try to get Christians elected to political office so as to enact Christian legislation to control the behavior of non-Christians. But history has shown that Christianity and power don't mix very well. A third approach is to adapt one's beliefs to shifting cultural trends. We see this in the liberal wing of the church, especially concerning sexual conduct, where there is no difference between how Christians behave and how the world behaves. A fourth approach is to try to engage with the culture, to view the culture not as a threat but as an opportunity. But how can we engage with the culture on these difficult issues? How should we think and what should we say about divisive issues such as other religions, science, and sexual conduct? Can we be loving and good without compromise? Can we act in such a way that *love* and *goodness* are words that can actually be used of us Christians when non-Christians see our behavior?

To help us think through these issues we have invited a guest speaker to address us in two weeks' time: John Stackhouse, Professor of Theology and Culture at Regent College, Vancouver BC. He is a prominent scholar of religion and contemporary culture, and a frequent commentator on this topic, not only to Christian groups, but also on secular TV and to non-Christian professional bodies. In three evening talks he'll address the issues of other religions, science,

and sexual morals. What's the difference between Jesus and Buddha or Krishna or Laozi? Is it permissible to see a difference in this multicultural, pluralistic age? What about science: is Christianity anti-scientific? Yet modern science arose within a Christian framework. What about our sexual standards: are they really outdated? Why don't we embrace sexual freedom? These are issues that most of you face in talking with your neighbors, or work colleagues, or fellow-students. Before these evening sessions, on Sunday morning he'll address the question of whether Christians even belong in a sophisticated modern society: "Is Dawkins Right? Are Believers Dumb, Delusional, or Dangerous?"

So, are Christians dumb, deluded or dangerous? Or are they good for society? Our summer series, "Overcoming with Good," based on Romans 12, begs to differ with the view that Christians are bad for the world.

In Romans, after eleven chapters of theology, Paul transitions with the word "therefore" to ethical instructions predicated on that theology, appealing to the Roman Christians to live transformed lives. The basis of this appeal is "the mercies of God": it is because of what God has done, as portrayed in chapters 1-11, that we should live differently. The theology is not an end in itself, a resource merely for doctrinal discussion, though there has been plenty of that over the centuries. Theology leads to praxis, to behavior. This transformation is to affect all our relationships: with God, with ourselves, with one another, and with the non-Christian world.

Our relationship with God is transformed: "present your bodies as a living sacrifice...Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind" (12:1-2). As J. B. Phillips memorably rendered verse 2, "Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mould, but let God remould your minds from within." Our relationship with ourselves is transformed (12:3-8): part of this renewed thinking is to realize our place in the body of Christ: "we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another" (12:5). Each of us has different gifts to be used for the common good. I am no longer free to behave however I want: I am to live as part of a body. Our relationship with others is transformed, first with our fellow-Christians (12:9-13), and beyond that with non-Christians (12:14-21). Today we begin to explore this call to transformed behavior with other people; this will occupy us for the next two months.

Verses 9-21 contain a long list of instructions, presented staccato-fashion as if in a long list of bullet items. There are many parallels with the teachings of Jesus. Indeed it was our studies in Luke's gospel that prompted the idea for this series on Romans 12. Paul commences with two general principles that govern the whole list:

**Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. (Rom 10:9 ESV)**

## I. Love

### Let love be genuine.

What is true love? This is what Westley and Buttercup were looking for and thought that they had found. Our society is besotted with love, but people fall out of love just as easily as they fall into love, suggesting they didn't find true love in the first place. So what is true love?

Ancient Greek had multiple words for love, describing four primary types of love. Perhaps some of you have read C. S. Lewis's little book, *The Four Loves* (1960) in which he reflects on these four: affection, friendship, eros, and charity.

Affection (*storgē*) described family love, such as between a parent and child, the love in which a child was raised.

Friendship (*philia*) was love between two people, usually of the same sex, who found they had common interests. Friendship was highly valued in the ancient world. But today it is devalued: we have hundreds of friends on Facebook, people we know only casually, people we can friend and unfriend with the click of a button. Because ancient friendship was usually same-sex it is often viewed with suspicion today as really being homosexual love. For example, Jonathan's love for David (1 Sam 18:1) is frequently so misinterpreted.

Passionate love (*eros*) was between a man and a woman. Eros was the Greek God of desire, as was the Roman equivalent Cupid. Passionate love is notoriously fickle. People fall out of love as quickly as they fall into love. King David's son Amnon was tormented to the point of sickness by his passionate love for his half-sister Tamar. But after raping her his passions turned 180 degrees: "Then Amnon hated her with very great hatred, so that the hatred with which he hated her was greater than the love with which he had loved her" (1 Kgs 13:15). One of the tasks in premarital counseling is to prepare the starry-eyed couple for the day when their passionate *eros* love comes to an end and a more robust love must take its place. One of the problems with self-written vows in a wedding service is that they are often not vows at all, but an expression of the wonders of eros love. The point of pledging one's troth is that the vows be there when the feelings are gone.

Love based on family bonds, on friendship, and on passion are all natural loves. They happen to us somewhat automatically: we are born into a family, we discover friends, and we fall in love. Ideally these loves are reciprocal: the family members, friends, and lovers love one another. Lack of reciprocity strains the relationship. These loves are valuable and an important part of being human beings in relationship to one another. But are these true love?

None of these loves is the love in which Scripture is interested. The New Testament describes a fourth love, a love rather different from these three. This is *agapē* love. *Agapē* love does not begin in ourselves. It is not a natural love. We don't find it in our family bonds, or in our shared interests, or in our passions and chemistry. It begins in God.

Hitherto in Romans, Paul has used *agapē* to designate divine love, God's love for us. God's love for us is unconditional: he doesn't love us because we are worthy of his love, or can reciprocate his love. "God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom 5:8). He loves the unlovely. He loved us when we had no intention of loving him back. In love he has placed us into Christ, his beloved Son. In love, he now numbers us among the beloved. In love, he puts his Spirit in us: "God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us"

(Rom 5:5). Because our own loves are opposed to him, the one who truly loves us, he has filled us up with his own love, his true love. Such love doesn't automatically happen to us, as do the other loves. It must be placed into us by God. This love begins with the triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit who were a community of love in the very beginning. The Father loves us in his Son, and puts his love in us through his Spirit. And now he invites us to pass this love along.

Paul exhorts, "Let love be genuine." The adjective is literally "non-hypocritical" (so "without hypocrisy," NASB, HCSB, NET). We might turn this around and ask what hypocritical love would be. Hypocritical love would be to fail to pass on to others the love which we have ourselves received from God, to fail to love others the way we ourselves have been loved. In the parable of the unforgiving servant, Jesus told of a king who forgave the astronomical debt of one of his servants, but that same servant refused to forgive the very much smaller debt of one of his fellow servants. The king summoned the first servant and said, "Should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?" (Matt 18:33). That is hypocritical love, or rather a hypocritical lack of love. Non-hypocritical love is to love as we have been loved, to be merciful as we have received mercy, to show grace as we have been shown grace, to forgive as we have been forgiven. This is not a reciprocal love. We are not merciful to God as he has been merciful to us. God has no need of our mercy, or our grace, or our forgiveness. But when we love another this way we do it as unto the Lord. There is a triangle: God loves us so we can love others. When we love them we do it in the name of Jesus and are as Christ to them.

So true love, love without hypocrisy, begins with us realizing that we are the recipients of divine love. Luke records how Simon the Pharisee invited Jesus to dinner, but offered him none of the tokens of hospitality when he arrived. Simon's omission was covered by the sinful woman with the alabaster flask. When Simon grumbled, Jesus said to him, "her sins, which are many, are forgiven—for she loved much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little" (Luke 7:47). The woman did not earn her forgiveness by lavishing love on Jesus. Rather, the love she lavished on him showed that she understood that she had already been forgiven much. She lavished such love on Jesus because she had already received lavish love from him.

George Herbert wrote several poems about divine Love, including this one, "Love (3)":

Love bade me welcome: yet my soul drew back,  
 Guilty of dust and sin.  
 But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack  
 From my first entrance in,  
 Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning,  
 If I lacked any thing.

Subsequent stanzas tell how Love answered the protestations of unworthiness:

Love took my hand, and smiling did reply...  
 You must sit down, says Love, and taste my meat:  
 So I did sit and eat.<sup>1</sup>

Having dined at Love's table we are then able to bid others welcome in Love's name. We take our place in a chain of love. Our Scripture reading (John 15:5-13) was drawn from the Upper Room Discourse, Jesus' farewell address to his disciples:

**"As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love,**

just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love... This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you." (John 15:9-12)

We see this chain of love: the Father loves the Son, the Son loves the disciples, the disciples are to love one another. We are now part of that chain: recipients of the Father's love in the Son, enabled by the Spirit to pass that love along.

## 2. Good and Evil

Paul's call to true love forms the basis for all the subsequent exhortations, of which there are many. Before the individual imperatives, he gives another general principle:

**Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good.**

This is followed by ten imperatives (12:10-13), concerning how to show true love and do good within the Christian community, followed by a section on how to show true love and do good beyond the Christian community, even to our enemies.

Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. Evil is anything opposed to divine purposes. Good is that which is in conformity to divine purposes. Evil is opposed to divine love; good is in accordance with divine love. So true love and goodness belong together. We can only hold fast to the good when we are filled with divine love, with true love.

### 2.1 Abhor the Evil

Paul uses a pair of strong verbs. We are to abhor evil, consider it loathsome. It is easy for us to abhor evil in another person, when we read of it in the papers or see it on the news. It is easy for us to commit ourselves to doing no evil. The aphorism *primum non nocere*, "first, do no harm" is common in medical ethics. Physicians take the Hippocratic Oath, swearing "to abstain from doing harm." Google's long-time motto, spelled out in a letter to potential investors prior to going public, was "Don't be evil." The three wise monkeys are part of popular culture: see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil.

But it is another matter when we find that evil arises within us. Further on, Paul says, "Repay no one evil for evil" (12:17). He has to say that because our natural tendency is to respond to evil with evil. The behavior of others so easily arouses negative responses within us. So the abhorrence of evil must begin with our own hearts. In our relationships with both Christians and non-Christians, self keeps rearing its ugly head. Part of spiritual maturity is recognizing the ongoing evil of our own heart. Spiritual theology has long valued the double knowledge: knowledge of God and knowledge of self. The two go hand in hand: we grow in our understanding of the magnitude of God's love, grace, and mercy, and in our understanding of our own depravity. Unfortunately the modern tendency has been to view knowledge of self as the knowledge of how good we are, as a boost to our self-esteem, of how much we are the objects of the Father's affections. Yes, we are the objects of the Father's affections, but not because we are lovable. He loved us while we were yet sinners, when we were scoundrels, and he loves us despite the awful stuff that keeps welling up in our hearts. He has placed us into Christ, and has put his Spirit into us, pouring his love into us, and is transforming us into the image of his beloved Son. We are his beloved children, but we have a long way yet to go. Our abhorrence of evil must contain a healthy measure of abhorrence of what we are capable of. This is why we have to be commanded to forbear one another, forgive one

another, strive to live at peace with one another; such behavior doesn't come naturally.

### 2.2 Cling to the Good

The converse is that we are to hold fast to what is good. We are to cling to the good, as if held by glue. In the Old Testament this is a covenantal term. The man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife (Gen 2:24); he breaks an old relationship, however painful it may be, and makes a new, inseparable one. God called Israel to forsake all other gods and cling to him. Israel was to break her old connections, whatever security they may have offered, and establish a new, inseparable one with God. So now we are to sever our old relationship with evil; we are to leave it behind, forsaking it, viewing it now with abhorrence not delight. Instead we are to form a new, inseparable relationship with the good. This is another way of saying that we put off the old self and put on the new self, that we die to self and rise to new life in Christ.

Yet there is a large measure of discomfort here. Christians are surprisingly uncomfortable about the idea of doing good. I see a number of reasons for this discomfort.

A frequent concern is that it is doctrine that matters the most. Clinging to the good is not about right doctrine but about right practice. Yet so much more attention is given in most churches to ensuring that people have the right doctrine than that they have the right practice. Theology is important, because without a right understanding of God's love toward us in Christ and in us through his Spirit we will be unable to live lives of love. But the goal of right theology is right living as God's renewed people. The church in Ephesus was impressive in exposing false teaching, but along the way it lost its first love; it ceased to be a community of love (Rev 2:4).

A second concern is that doing good is of secondary importance behind evangelism. What matters is to preach the gospel and get people saved. Doing good is a distraction from the most important thing. This attitude is common on the mission field where activity not directly connected with preaching the gospel is viewed as secondary and not worthy of support—though medical work is often exempted from this suspicion. Great good has been done by missionaries who have established not only hospitals and clinics, but also schools, orphanages, relief operations, and many other endeavors.

Connected to this is the belief that the only soul that really matters to God is a saved soul. But we are to love our neighbor first because he is a fellow human being made in the image of God. We certainly hope that he or she will find the love of God and become not just a fellow human but a fellow in Christ. Love your neighbor as a human being, not as a potential scalp. You don't have to have an evangelistic purpose as justification to love your neighbor. Simply love your neighbor.

Another common belief is that the world is headed to destruction, so trying to better the world is counterproductive. We should just allow the world to go its merry way, falling apart, till Christ return.

Another concern is that by doing good we are trying to earn salvation. But this cannot be the case if our doing good is motivated by true love, for true love recognizes that we are first the recipients of love before ever we can give love.

Finally, many Christians are wary of social justice, fearing that this is some liberal, socialist agenda.

Is Christianity the source of the world's problems? It is undeniable that much evil has been done in the name of Christ. Many wars have

been fought under the banner of the cross. There has been much hatred and lack of love. But much good has also been done by the church and by individual Christians. As just one example, William Wilberforce sought to make goodness fashionable. He and the other evangelical Christians of the Clapham Sect did much for the betterment of British society 200 years ago.

The ancient world understood different types of love: the family affection of *storgē*, the friendship of *philia*, the passionate love of *eros*. But it had no understanding of true love, of *agapē* love. Indeed, it viewed such love as weakness:

[C]lassical philosophy regarded mercy and pity as pathological emotions—defects of character to be avoided by all rational men. Since mercy involves providing *unearned* help or relief, it was contrary to justice... This was the moral climate in which Christianity taught that mercy is one of the primary virtues—that a merciful God requires humans to be merciful. Moreover, the corollary that *because* God loves humanity, Christians may not please God unless they *love one another* was something entirely new. Perhaps even more revolutionary was the principle that Christian love and charity must extend beyond the boundaries of family and tribe to

‘all who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ’ (1 Cor. 1:2). Indeed, love and charity must even extend beyond the Christian community.<sup>2</sup>

These words were written by a prominent sociologist of religion, who at the time described himself as an agnostic, but has since come to faith. In studying the early church he encountered the problem of goodness. The world talks much of the problem of evil, and wants to blame God and the church for the evil in the world. But the greater problem is the problem of good. True love shows goodness. It is easy for us to understand affection, friendship, and passionate love. They naturally arise within us. But what can motivate people to love the unlovely, to do good when there is no reward in it for themselves? The ancient world couldn’t understand such behavior. But Christians can love and behave this way because that’s how God has treated us. He has loved us and invites us to love others, clinging to the good. This was radically new in the ancient world. It is a great gift we have to offer the world today: the gift of true love and the gift of goodness. May God so fill our hearts with his love that we are able to pass on these gifts to our neighbors, our work colleagues, and others whom we meet.

1. “Love (3),” *George Herbert: The Complete English Poems* (ed. John Tobin; London: Penguin, 1991), 178.

2. Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1996), 212.



## 2. SERVING THE LORD FOR GOOD

Romans 12:11-12

Twenty-six years ago I started attending PBC in Palo Alto. I found an unremarkable building with little artistic or aesthetic quality. But the auditorium has one remarkable feature: a text inscribed across the wood panelling behind the platform. Over the years modifications have been made, but the text remains, as it has since the building was erected in the 1950s. What text did the elders choose for people to see every week? “You are not your own, you are bought with a price,” from 1 Cor 6:19-20. I don’t know the story behind the elders’ choice of that text more than fifty years ago. I doubt that any church consultant would recommend that text today. It is not a welcoming text; quite the opposite: people have been offended by it! But it is a text close to PBC’s core identity, a text that has had an impact on many people, myself included.

We belong to God. He has liberated us, set us free from our slavery to sin. But our freedom entails a new slavery, a slavery to Christ. We are to present our bodies as a sacrifice, living, holy, and acceptable to God. Presenting ourselves as a sacrifice means that we belong to God. We belong to him by virtue of creation, by virtue of redemption, and by virtue of our self-sacrifice, our surrender to him. We are not our own; we are God’s. But in his service lies our true freedom.

In Romans 12:1 Paul transitions from theology to ethics, from describing the great things that God has done for us in Christ and through his Spirit to the things that we should now do. He isn’t describing how to live our lives so as to win God’s favor, but how, now that we are in God’s favor, we should live as sacrifices presented to him, as those who belong no longer to sin but to God. After two paragraphs of preliminaries (12:1-2, 3-8), Paul begins the detailed instructions in verse 9. These begin with a call to love and goodness: “Let love be sincere. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good” (12:9). As we saw last week, true love is to love others with the same sort of love with which God has loved us, *agapē* love, even if we are never able to love with the same measure of love. We are to be on the side of good.

The rest of Romans fleshes out this call to love and goodness. Paul issues many imperatives on how to live the Christian life in the service of God. The first set of imperatives is a list of ten:

**Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality. (Rom 12:10-13 ESV)**

The ten items have the same grammatical construction—much clearer in Greek than English. This suggests that they belong together as a set. But why these ten instructions, in particular? Is there any discernible order to them? And what do they have to do with love and goodness? The verse division divides them into four sets of 2, 3, 3, and 2, respectively. In this case I think the verse division is helpful.

The first pair and the last pair (10, 13) are about how we treat other

Christians. Their connection to love and the good is clear. The middle two triplets (11-12) are more abstract and general. They seem to have less connection to verse 9, and more to do with the interior space out of which we operate. The Christian who lives according to these six commands will be able to love and do good, and thus fulfill the outer four commands. We’ll look at these middle verses this week, and the first and last pairs in subsequent weeks.

### 1. Good Zeal and Fervent Love

**Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. (12:11)**

#### 1.1 Unflagging eagerness

Do not be slothful in zeal. Don’t hesitate in being eager or diligent to discharge the duties of your new life in Christ. This, of course, assumes that we know what our new life is all about. As Paul wrote earlier,

**Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. (Rom 6:3-4)**

Don’t be timid or hesitant about walking in this newness of life. A characteristic of many new believers is their eagerness for the Lord. They are so transformed by what has happened to them that they are eager to live differently, eager to tell others, eager to serve the Lord. But sadly, too often the eagerness fades away; the newness of life is no longer so new; spiritual vitality is lost. Our Christian faith and life isn’t something that occupies just part of our life, as if it is one among many hobbies. It is something that affects our whole life, and about which we should therefore be eager. We present ourselves as sacrifices to God, living and holy and acceptable to him. It has been aptly said that the problem with a living sacrifice is that it can get back down off the altar. But we are to stay on the altar, offered up unto God, and now belonging to him. Therefore we should be eager to serve him. We should be eager in our pursuit of true love, and in our rejection of evil and promotion of the good. Elsewhere Paul warns, “let us not grow weary of doing good” (Gal 6:9).

#### 1.2 Aglow with the Spirit

Be fervent in spirit. This second command seems similar to the first: do not be slothful in zeal. Zealous people have fervent spirits. But these commands are not necessarily the same. English versions and commentators differ over whether to render “spirit” or “Spirit.” To be fervent in our own spirit and fervent in God’s Spirit can be very different things.

The verb translated “be fervent” means “to boil.” As we saw last week, “God’s loved has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us” (Rom 5:5). When God’s Spirit is in us our hearts are bubbling, not with our own passions but with

God himself. As we sang,

Come down, O Love divine,  
 Seek thou this soul of mine,  
 And visit it with thine own ardor glowing;  
 O Comforter, draw near,  
 Within my heart appear,  
 And kindle it, thy holy flame bestowing.<sup>1</sup>

The Spirit bubbling in us sets our spirits bubbling. Our service, in whatever capacity, should be the overflow of this bubbling action. Being fervent in God's Spirit exercises a control over our own fervor of spirit.

We are to be enthusiastic, energetic, zealous, fervent people. Unfortunately, "zeal" is a word often at odds with love and goodness. Zealous people are generally not characterized by love and goodness. Zeal and spiritual fervor raise plenty of red flags.

Many people are suspicious of an excess of eagerness. During the great revivals of the last few centuries many churchmen expressed disdain over what they called "enthusiasm." They hoped that the fervor of the new converts would dissipate over time. Today, relatives and friends can be concerned by the enthusiasm of a new believer who has "got religious" or of one who has finally gotten serious about the Christian faith and life. Sadly, all too often these concerns are raised by those who were once enthusiastic themselves but for whom their Christian faith and life have grown tepid.

Much harm has been done by religious people who are zealous, be they Moslems, or Jews, or Christians. Paul himself is a case in point. When he received his rabbinic training at the feet of Gamaliel he was "zealous for God" (Acts 22:3), zealous for the traditions of his fathers as he advanced in Judaism beyond his peers (Gal 1:14). But how was that zeal directed? As he later confessed, "as to zeal, a persecutor of the church" (Phil 3:6). Having found Christ, or rather Christ having found him on the Damascus Road, he came to realize that everything he had gained was rubbish, that all his zeal was misdirected. He had found something of much greater worth:

**But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him. (Phil 3:7-9)**

His eagerness was now focused on Christ. But he saw that most of the Jews were still stuck where he had been: "they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge" (Rom 10:2).

We are to be zealous people, but we are to ensure that our zeal is well-placed, that it is consonant with love and good. As those whom God has redeemed and purified, we are to be "zealous for good works" (Tit 2:14), "zealous for what is good?" (1 Pet 3:13). I fear that much of the zeal in Christian ministry is actually selfish ambition. Indeed James alerts us to this danger, twice warning of the dangerous combination of "jealousy [zeal] and selfish ambition" (James 3:14, 16).

Another danger with Christian zeal is the common premise that if you are really zealous for God you will go into full-time ministry. But this creates two tiers: those who are really serious about God who are in full-time ministry, and those who are not in full-time ministry, who are obviously not really serious about God. An important element of the Reformation was the rediscovery of the priesthood of all believers. Each one of us has a role to play in priestly service to God, the service described in verse 1. God has

gifted each of his people with spiritual gifts to be used in service to him and for the common good. In verses 4-8 Paul has affirmed a role for all God's people.

We can have a zeal for the wrong things. We can be zealous for the minutiae of doctrine, or for church traditions, or for programs, or for a host of other things. To Augustine is attributed the saying, "In essentials unity, in non-essentials diversity, in all things charity." In our zeal we can magnify the non-essentials into essentials, losing all sight of charity.

Churches can be known as places full of religious activity, but often this life is not centered around the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus said to the church in Sardis, "You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead" (Rev 3:1). There are probably many churches like that today. Churches that are full of programs and activities, but have ceased to be about Jesus. Churches that are busy, but not busy with Christ. Churches that are zealous, but not for the Lord.

Zeal can be misplaced. We can find that it is not actually God for whom people are zealous, that the fervor that bubbles in their hearts is not actually the Spirit. How do we ensure that our zeal and fervor are correctly placed? The third command helps keep us in line.

### 1.3 Serve the Lord

Serve the Lord. These words are easy to say; they are part of our regular Christian vocabulary. We present our bodies as a sacrifice, which is our spiritual worship or service. The word in verse 1 is priestly service, service offered to God. But the word here in verse 11 is slavery.

Paul identified himself to the Roman church as the "slave of Christ Jesus" (1:1), though most English versions make the term more palatable with "bondservant" or "servant." But Paul was clear in his own understanding. He now belonged to God, as a slave belongs to his master. But it is a topsy-turvy world when it comes to slavery and freedom in the Christian life. To the Corinthians Paul wrote,

**For he who was called in the Lord as a bondservant is a freedman of the Lord. Likewise he who was free when called is a bondservant of Christ. You were bought with a price. (1 Cor 7:22-23)**

The Corinthian church, as many other churches throughout the Roman Empire, contained both slaves and free men, sometimes their own masters. Paul doesn't mean that the two have to change places, that the slaves become the masters, and the masters become the slaves; that's the dream of many revolutionaries who want revenge. All who are in Christ are simultaneously both free and slave. Christ has set us free from our bonds to sin, death, and destructive life. We at last are free. But free for what? Free to be whomever and whatever we want? No, free to be whom God intends us to be. God has taken ownership of us, so now we are slaves to Christ, our perfect Master. But herein we find our true freedom: "whom to serve is perfect freedom," as the Prayer Book says.<sup>2</sup>

So we have to ensure that in our zeal and our fervor we are actually functioning as the Lord's servants, not exercising our own freedom in a way which rejects the Master. Our willingness to submit to the Lord, as slave to Master, is a good indication of whether the zeal and fervor in our hearts is from God or not. Such submission is not easy, but it is the path to ensuring that our zeal promotes love and the good, that it is good zeal and fervent love.<sup>3</sup>

Here I have found the writings of Eugene Peterson particularly helpful, as have others on the pastoral staff. Over twenty years ago

he wrote three books about pastoral ministry, the third being *Under the Unpredictable Plant* (1992). In 1962 he headed a church plant in a new subdivision on the outskirts of Baltimore. The denomination required him to submit monthly reports. It said it cared about how he was doing as a pastor, but really all it cared about were statistics: attendance, giving, the building fund, and construction progress. Within three years the new congregation was able to complete a building. But then a surprising thing happened: attendance began to decline. Peterson tried to find out why.

I learnt to my dismay that nothing at all was wrong, it was just that there was nothing now to *do*. The challenge had been met successfully. I was advised by my denominational supervisors to start new projects immediately—recapture the people's enthusiasm with something "they could get their hands on."<sup>4</sup>

He learnt that people have enthusiasm more for religious projects than for God. These experiences led to a vocational crisis:

Being a Christian, more often than not, seemed to get in the way of working as a pastor. Working as a pastor, with surprising frequency, seemed to put me at odds with living as a Christian.<sup>5</sup>

Out of this crisis came his idea of vocational holiness which enabled him to reconcile his inner personal life as a Christian and his external vocational life as a pastor.

Our role as pastors is not to run programs, nor to provide you with religious goods and services, nor to give you things to do. It is to help cultivate in you a closer walk with God, a more ready determination to align yourself with God so that you offer yourself in service to him, a fuller participation in the Holy Spirit so it is the Spirit that is bubbling in your heart and overflowing, and a closer participation in Christ into whom you are being transformed. We want you to be energetic and fervent people, but want to ensure that it is the Spirit bubbling in and overflowing your own spirits. And this begins with ourselves.

## 2. Persevering Hope

**Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer.**  
(12:12)

These three exhortations have a different feel than those of the previous verse. The call to zeal and a fervent spirit is upbeat and exciting. The call to rejoice in hope and be patient in tribulation is more downbeat.

### 2.1 Rejoice in glorious hope

Rejoice in hope. We generally use the word "hope" to express merely a wish: I hope he'll call me, I hope she'll write, I hope it will all work out in the end. New Testament hope is not some vague feeling. It is an expectation. It is the certainty that it will all work out in the end. As Julian of Norwich said, "All shall be well, and all shall be well and all manner of thing shall be well." All is not currently well, but it shall be. God has placed us onto the trajectory toward all things being well. He has redeemed us in Christ to be the new humanity: "Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Col 1:27). He has placed his Spirit in us to enable us to live as this new humanity in this newness of life. We are not there yet but we are on the way. The destination is certain, therefore we can rejoice in the present.

As we serve the Lord, loving as he loved us, and clinging to the good, in what is our hope? What trajectory do we see ourselves on? That we will be successful? That we will have a problem-free life?

That God will bless our endeavors? This is not our hope. God may not grant these things. If this is where our hope is placed then we'll be left with shattered dreams, disillusion, and a sense of betrayal. So we have to be very careful that our hope is in the right place. When it is then we can rejoice no matter what.

### 2.2 In trouble stand firm

Be patient in tribulation. Tribulation is not restricted to a seven-year period at the end of this age, a period from which the church is conveniently removed in the Rapture. Tribulation is to be expected in this life, though the tribulation that most Western Christians face is minor compared to other periods of church history or other places in the world today. Some tribulation is a direct result of our following Christ, but plenty of it is due more generally to the broken state of the world. In many places in the New Testament we are told how to deal with tribulation: endure it. This isn't stoicism, showing the stiff upper lip. Nor is it passive, but active. God will not necessarily remove the tribulation from us or remove us from the tribulation. He promises to keep us through the tribulation, not keep us from the tribulation. Patient endurance under such tribulation is itself self-surrendered service unto God.

Rejoicing, hope, patience, and tribulation: Paul has used these four terms together earlier in his Epistle, though some of the words are translated differently (patience as endurance, and tribulation as suffering):

**[W]e rejoice in hope of the glory of God. Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us. (Rom 5:2-5)**

### 2.3 Devoted devotions

Finally, be constant in prayer. In many places in the New Testament we are urged to be devoted to prayer, constant in prayer. We don't keep praying so that God finally hears us and grants our petitions. We keep praying so that we finally hear God. We pray to get our mind, our heart, our will aligned to his, and not vice versa. Prayer is communication between the slave and the Master. We pray so as to align ourselves to our Master. When we see things God's way then we will have hope and endurance. Prayer refreshes our hope and our patience. But there is more to prayer than that. God is also our Father who delights to hear us, his children.

One of the books I have people read is *Green Leaf in Drought* by Isobel Kuhn. It tells the story of Arthur and Wilda Mathews, missionaries in China around 1950. They arrived in China full of energy and spiritual fervor. They learnt the language. They moved far to the west, on the border with Tibet, so they could reach out to the people who came down off the high Tibetan plateau. They found a suitable meeting room and spent effort and resources getting it ready. All this preparation took several years. But it was all worth it for the hope of the ministry they were going to have to the Tibetan people. Just as they were all ready, the Communists took power. They slowly increased the pressure on Arthur and Wilda. They took over the room they had prepared. They restricted the Mathews to their housing compound, and then to the house itself, and then to the kitchen within the house. They prohibited them from having any contact with the Chinese people, the very thing for which they had gone to China and done so much preparation. This was far from easy and the

book does not gloss over the difficulties. The greatest difficulty they had was with the responses of their hearts. They struggled to submit their will to God's will. They struggled with the disappointment of their shattered hopes and dreams. They struggled to rejoice in God when they saw themselves as useless, cut off from ministry and service.

They prayed long and hard, pouring out their struggles to the Lord, but still they struggled. Until at last the turning point came:

A few nights later it came to Arthur like a flash: the Son had left Heaven, not *submitting* to the will of God, but *delighting* in it. Up to now they had been submitting; rather feverishly submitting because they felt they should press His promises... They had been acting like servants who don't want to do it but have to, because they can't get out of it. What a different attitude was the Son's! There came a day in June when together Arthur and Wilda knelt before the Lord and abandoned themselves to live on in that stunted little kitchen as long as He wished them to. And the peace of God poured in like a flood bringing such joy as they had not known before.<sup>6</sup>

Their attitude to being servants changed: instead of trying to submit they learnt to delight. They allowed God to help himself to their lives, and they delighted in him doing so.

There are a couple of reasons why I have people read this book. Firstly, can your view of ministry handle this book? The Mathews

were so excited about the ministry for which they were preparing. But it turned out that too much of their identity, hope, and rejoicing was in that, as yet future, ministry. Was their restricted life within the kitchen still service to the Lord? Secondly, can your view of God handle this book? Can God treat his people this way? Is God allowed to help himself like this to people's lives?

Arthur and Wilda were still serving the Lord, even though they seemed to be of no use to him. Actually they were of use, though they did not know it at the time. The Chinese, especially the Chinese Christians, who were about to undergo severe tribulation, got to see how these two faced tribulation, how they overcame with good by rejoicing in hope and being patient in tribulation. Similar testimony was one of the great evangelistic tools of the early church during the Roman Empire.

We are called to overcome with good. These six commands give us a snapshot of the Christian life. When we live life this way we will be inclined to love with true love and cling to the good. How? By our eagerness to walk in newness of life, by the overflow of God's Spirit bubbling within us, by our self-surrendered service to God to whom we belong, by our joy because we know the trajectory we are on and are confident about the end of the journey, by patient endurance in trying times, and by communicating with our Master, allowing our will to be bent to his. May God give us the grace to live life this way so that we are indeed able to overcome with good.

1. Bianco da Siena (d. 1434), "Come Down, O Love Divine," trans. Richard Littledale.

2. Collect for the Feast of Augustine of Hippo, August 28. Cf. "God...whose service is perfect freedom," Second Collect for Peace, Morning Prayer, *Book of Common Prayer*.

3. In "Chapter 72: The Good Zeal of Monks," of his *Rule*, St Benedict instructs on "the good zeal which monks must foster with fervent love."

4. Eugene H. Peterson, *Under the Unpredictable Plant: An Exploration in Vocational Holiness* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 83.

5. Peterson, *Unpredictable Plant*, 2.

6. Isobel Kuhn, *Green Leaf in Drought* (Singapore: OMF International, 1958), 78.

### 3. GIFTED TO GIVE

Romans 12:13

If you watch public television or listen to public radio you will be familiar with, and probably annoyed by, the regular pledge drives. KQED TV has just finished one, and KQED Radio begins its one on Wednesday. If it is any comfort, the KQED staff probably likes these events as little as we do. But they are a necessity.

Many churches also have pledge drives, only they don't call them that. "Stewardship" is the preferred term, whether an annual stewardship Sunday, or a longer stewardship campaign, whose progress is tracked by a thermometer. These stewardship campaigns have generated a whole industry of stewardship organizations which churches can call upon to design and manage their campaigns. No matter whether the stewardship is couched as being all about gratitude, or about giving back, or about God, or about a way of life, it's really all about the money. Just like public media, churches are non-profit organizations which need to raise money.

Stewardship appeals usually include something about the importance of tithing, often with a snappy statement about the value of tithing. Here are a few I found on the internet:

- We give first and the blessings of God follow!
- When we tithe and give, God moves in favor of us.
- To tithe is to show that we care for the church.

Such claims are usually backed up by this verse from Malachi:

**"Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. And thereby put me to the test, says the Lord of hosts, if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you a blessing until there is no more need."** (Mal 3:10 ESV)

People are reminded that God loves a cheerful giver, as we heard in our Scripture reading (2 Cor 9:6-15):

**Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.** (2 Cor 9:7)

Yet stewardship campaigns and pledge drives tend to generate reluctant, compelled givers rather than cheerful givers.

The topic of giving causes much discomfort, much squirming in chairs, shifting of eyes, and embarrassment. I am not surprised: I have done my own fair share of squirming. I think much of the discomfort arises because the topic of giving is so poorly presented. No matter how it is presented, no matter what pious mottoes are used, it really is usually just about fund-raising. And we don't like being hit up for money, whether it is public radio, or someone outside the grocery store, or a Christian organization, or a church, or an individual.

I had a rather abrupt introduction to Christian fundraising just three months after I arrived in the US. I was at another church with a small but lively young adults group. A young man whom I had gotten to know suggested we have lunch, which I was delighted to do. But halfway through the lunch the direction of our conversation

took an abrupt turn. I knew he was in campus ministry, but I didn't know how the system worked. I felt awkward, used, abused. In his defense, he probably felt as bad as I did. A few years later, after I had moved to PBC, I invited a young man to lunch after hearing him talk about how the Lord was leading him. I went into the restaurant with my mind made up about two things: I was paying for lunch, and I was going to support him. This time I was a cheerful giver and willing participant in what the Lord was doing through him as he prepared to go to the mission field.

As we continue in our series on Romans 12, Overcoming with Good, we come to the theme of giving. In verses 10-13 Paul lists ten ways to show true love, to abhor evil and cling to good. We've been working our way through this list; today we come to the final two items:

**Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality.** (Rom 12:13)

We'll look at this pair over the next two weeks: giving this week and hospitality next week.

Paul has already mentioned giving a few verses earlier, in his non-exhaustive list of seven gifts that the body should use:

**For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: ...the one who contributes, in generosity...** (Rom 12:4-8)

We are called to contribute to the needs of the saints and to do so with generosity. Can the Bible help us to an understanding of giving that will enable us to be givers who are generous and cheerful, giving without regret or reluctance? The Bible has a lot of good things to say about giving, but unfortunately most of it lies hidden. The financial pressures of fund-raising have twisted the Biblical message of giving into a preoccupation with filling the offering plate. So I will have to do as much un-teaching as teaching.

#### 1. Old Testament

The topic of giving begins very early in the Old Testament with Cain and Abel. They were the first givers but they were very different types of givers. Both brought an offering to the Lord. Somehow they understood that it was appropriate to give back to the Lord something of what he had given them, the fruit of their field and flock. But the Lord was pleased with only one offering, not the other. And it wasn't just the offering; he was pleased with only one offerer. Abel had brought the best of his produce, the firstborn and the fat portions, while Cain brought just some of his produce. Abel was a giver, a cheerful giver of both his produce and himself. Cain was a reluctant giver, a withholder of himself and his produce.

Cain and Abel represent two different ways of living life, as the seed of the serpent and the seed of the woman. Subsequently, Israel,

as the seed of the woman, was to walk in the way of Abel. Israel was to be a nation of givers, just like Abel.

### 1.1 The Tithe

When we think of Israel giving, we think of the tithe; and when we think of the tithe, we start to squirm. We all know that Israel was required to tithe, but what was the tithe about? The Israelites were to tithe all the produce of their land and their livestock (Lev 27:30). I don't keep any livestock, not even any chickens, but our garden has yielded plenty of produce. I've brought some of it along as my tithe: butternut squash; yellow squash; zucchini and tomatoes (nowhere close to a tithe for these two); chard; peppers; a cantaloupe; pears; raspberries; mint (but no dill or cumin), sage and rosemary; a bottle of home-made wine, and one of rosemary vinegar.

Suppose I'm an Israelite, what am I to do with this tithe? The tithe was used for three purposes. It was given to the Levites, to whom God had given no inheritance, no land and hence no produce (Num 18:21-32). Instead the Levites were sustained by the tithes of all the other tribes who did have land. In turn the Levites were to tithe their tithe and give it to the priests. This allowed both Levites and priests to continue their service to the Lord on behalf of all Israel. The tithe also provided for the resident alien, the fatherless, and the widow, so that they could eat and be filled (Deut 26:12-13).

The third use of the tithe was to celebrate in God's presence. The Israelites were to take their tithe to the central place of worship and there eat it in the Lord's presence (Deut 14:22-23). They were to have a party! But it gets better: if the central place of worship was too far away to carry the tithe, you could sell it, take the money, travel there, and "spend the money for whatever you desire—oxen or sheep or wine or strong drink, whatever your appetite craves" (Deut 14:26). You could turn your zucchini into steak or a nice lamb chop! Now what would happen if everyone were trying to sell their zucchini I don't know; right now you can't even give zucchini away. Whether you brought the tithe from home or brought its monetary value, you were to "eat before the Lord your God and rejoice"—you, your household, and don't forget the Levite who has no portion of his own (Deut 14:26-27).

Though the precise working of the tithe is a little vague, two general principles are clear. The tithe celebrated the Lord's provision for his people, and it was a channel for the Lord's provision to those who had no provision. Though Israel provided for the Levites and the Levites provided for the priests, it was really the Lord's provision with the twelve tribes and the one tribe as his instruments. Likewise with the provision for the resident alien, the widow, and the orphan.

But the tithe was not the only thing the Israelites were to bring to the Lord, to the central place of worship.

**"[T]here you shall bring your burnt offerings and your sacrifices, your tithes and the contribution that you present, your vow offerings, your freewill offerings, and the firstborn of your herd and of your flock." (Deut 12:6)**

Israel was to be a giving people. If God wanted them to bring him all this stuff, then he would ensure that they had the means to do so.

### 1.2 Building the Sanctuary

Note what the tithe was not used for: it was not used for any building. Instead, the tabernacle and the temple were built from the freewill offerings of the people. The tithe was required but the freewill offerings were not. Provision of the materials for the building of the Lord's sanctuary was voluntary, not under any

compulsion.

For the tabernacle the Lord instructed Moses to receive materials from "every man whose heart moves him," from "whoever is of a generous heart" (Exod 25:2; 35:5). And so they came, "everyone whose heart stirred him and everyone whose spirit moved him...all who were of a willing heart" brought materials as a freewill offering to the Lord (Exod 35:20-29). They gave to make a sanctuary, the tabernacle, so the Lord would dwell in their midst.

Several hundred years later David made arrangements for the construction of the temple. Though Solomon was to build it, David provided much of the materials. He also contributed his own personal treasury "because of my devotion to the house of my God" (1 Chr 29:3). Then he called on Israel to offer willingly. So the leaders made their freewill offerings.

**Then the people rejoiced because they had given willingly, for with a whole heart they had offered freely to the Lord. David the king also rejoiced greatly. (1 Chr 29:9)**

In his joy David didn't thank the people for their willing generosity. Instead he thanked God in the words that formed our call to worship today:

**"Blessed are you, O Lord, the God of Israel our father, forever and ever. Yours, O Lord, is the greatness and the power and the glory and the victory and the majesty, for all that is in the heavens and in the earth is yours. Yours is the kingdom, O Lord, and you are exalted as head above all. Both riches and honor come from you, and you rule over all. In your hand are power and might, and in your hand it is to make great and to give strength to all. And now we thank you, our God, and praise your glorious name.**

**"But who am I, and what is my people, that we should be able thus to offer willingly? For all things come from you, and of your own have we given you." (1 Chr 29:11-14)**

David had a big view of God: "yours is the greatness and the power and the glory and the victory and the majesty." He understood that everything came from the Lord in the first place: "O Lord our God, all this abundance that we have provided for building you a house for your holy name comes from your hand and is all your own" (1 Chr 29:16). And so he could freely and joyfully give it back to the Lord. As verse 14 is rendered in the Prayer Book, "all things come of thee O Lord, and of thine own have we given thee." And he thanked God for the ability to give it.

Israel was to be a nation of givers. They gave to build a sanctuary so the Lord could dwell in their midst. They gave to provide for those who had no provision of their own. They gave in order to have celebratory feasts in the Lord's presence. They gave the several categories of sacrifices and offerings. But all that they gave came from the Lord's hands in the first place. If, by faith, they understood this then they could give freely. If they didn't understand this then they would withhold. It was the story of Cain and Abel being acted out again and again, year by year.

## 2. New Testament

But that was then and this is now. We are not the nation of Israel. The people of God is no longer a national people with a central place of worship. We don't have Levites, a whole tribe set apart by the Lord for his service. The tithe, as understood in the OT, no longer applies. It is never mentioned in the NT except a few negative references by

### 3. GIFTED TO GIVE (12:13)

Jesus to the Pharisees, and a few OT references in Hebrews. But the end of tithing does not mean the end of giving. The principles of giving continue from OT into NT.

The tithe was the Lord's instrument to provide for his people who had no provision. This principle continued in the NT church. God used givers to provide for three categories of people who lacked provision.

One group was the widows. In a patriarchal society, widows without husbands to provide for them were in a vulnerable position. The early church in Jerusalem, probably continuing Jewish custom, provided for them with a daily distribution. It was because a conflict arose between the Palestinian and Hellenistic Jews over this widows' distribution that deacons were appointed (Acts 6). Thirty years later Paul instructed Timothy about the care of widows (1 Tim 5). Primary responsibility fell to relatives. If the widow was younger she was to remarry. If she was sixty or older and of good reputation she could be enrolled, added to the church's register of widows, and thus come under the church's care.

A second group was those preaching and teaching. Jesus sent out the seventy-two without provision. They were to benefit from the provision of whomever welcomed them into their house, "for the laborer deserves his wages" (Luke 10:1-12). Today there are countries with a tradition of hospitality where this sort of ministry is still possible. After the birth of the church, apostles were sent out to preach and to teach. Likewise, they had no provision of their own and, likewise, they were entitled to the support of those to whom they ministered. Paul, however, never insisted on this right, usually, if not always, waiving it. He labored free of charge in both Thessalonica and Corinth (1 Cor 9:18; 2 Cor 11:7; 1 Thess 2:9; 2 Thess 3:8-9). He received support from other churches, especially the church in Philippi which excelled in its giving. Everywhere Paul went the church in Philippi sent gifts to him to support him in his labors. It was while he was in Corinth that Paul worked as a tentmaker with Priscilla and Aquila who had recently come from Rome; they shared the same trade. Paul worked so as not to be a burden to the Corinthians. Though he did not exercise the right to support, he did not begrudge it to others.

A third group was those in material need. When the prophet Agabus prophesied that a famine would befall Judea, the immediate response of the church in Antioch was to raise an offering for the relief of the saints, sending it with Paul and Barnabas (Acts 11:27-30). Some years later the Jerusalem church was again in need. Paul urged the Gentile churches to contribute to a collection for the church. This collection was of such great importance to Paul that he mentions it in several letters and devotes two whole chapters to it (2 Cor 8-9). From these two chapters we learn much about how Christian giving should work. At the heart of giving lies *charis*, a word that is used ten times here. This is not evident in English for the word is translated several different ways: grace, favor, gift, thanks. The use of this word helps understand how giving works. We can discern five stages in the collection for Jerusalem.

Firstly, gift-giving begins with God who is himself a giver. He has given the gift of Christ:

**For you know the grace (*charis*) of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich. (2 Cor 8:9)**

This great gift is the foundation for all other gifts and for all giving. God has also graced the Macedonian churches (Philippi,

Thessalonica, and Berea) more specifically with enabling them to give, so that even in affliction their joy has overflowed in generosity (8:1-2).

Secondly, the Macedonian churches want to pass this gift along, begging Paul for the favor (*charis*) of participation (*koinōnia*) in service (*diakonia*) to the Jerusalem church (8:4). Both the gift and participation in giving the gift are a *charis*!

Thirdly, Paul now urges the Corinthian church to participate in this gift (8:7). Here we get the well-known verse about being a cheerful giver: "Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver" (9:7). Lest they worry that they won't have the resources to contribute, Paul reassures them, "God is able to make all grace (*charis*) abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work" (9:8). And what is the good work? It is giving.

Fourthly, Paul and some others will take this gift to Jerusalem, where it will supply the needs of the saints (9:12a).

There is a fifth and final stage beyond the meeting of needs (9:12b). The result of the giving and the gift is thanks (*charis*). Paul gives thanks (*charis*) to God for putting into Titus's heart an earnestness to get the Corinthians to give (8:16). Paul is confident that when the Jerusalem church receives the gift they will thank God for his grace (*charis*) upon the Corinthian church which has enabled them to participate in the gift-giving (9:14). And finally Paul thanks God: "Thanks (*charis*) be to God for his inexpressible gift!" (9:15) Which gift is this? It is certainly the gift of Christ who, though rich, became poor so we might become rich. But the whole collection has been about gift from beginning to end; every stage is an act of *charis*.

Furthermore, every stage features abundance. The Macedonians' "abundance of joy" has "overflowed in a wealth of generosity" despite their poverty (8:2). Paul challenges the Corinthians to *abound* in the grace (*charis*) of giving (8:7), so that their *abundance* meet others' need (8:14). God *abounds* his grace to the Corinthians so that they might *abound* in this good work of giving (9:8). And finally, this ministry of giving *overflows* in thanksgiving to God (9:12). Grace-filled giving is abundant and overflowing.

Giving is a grace from beginning to end. God gives the gifts: the foundational gift of Christ, as well as the divine enabling to give, both the motivation to participate in the giving and the sufficiency to give. Both the gift and the giving are a grace. So enabled we pass along the gift to those in need. Reception of the gift results in thanksgiving to God, which closes the circle: thanksgiving for the gift and thanksgiving for the divine enabling of both giver and gift. We are gifted to give. This is how NT giving works.

In his book *Free of Charge*, the theologian Miroslav Volf writes that God's gifts oblige us to a four-fold response.<sup>1</sup> I find this very helpful in thinking about how giving works.

The first response is *faith*: God has given a gift but it requires our faith to receive the gift. We need to be receptive to God's grace, to his gift-giving, and to knowing God as a giver.

The second response is *gratitude*: we acknowledge, appreciate and affirm God's gift, just like Abel.

The third response is *availability*: we make ourselves available to God to be channels for his gift-giving grace. But Volf issues a caveat which I find very sobering: "most of us want to be agents, not instruments. We want to act, not to be acted upon."<sup>2</sup> I wonder how many of our fund-raising campaigns arise because we want to be agents not

instruments.

The fourth response is *participation*: we become givers ourselves, participating in God's gift-giving. The NT term for such participation is *koinōnia*.

Our role as pastors is not to coerce you into giving, but, by teaching and encouragement, to get you to see yourselves in this circle of *charis*: of grace, giving, and thanksgiving. To get you to see that God gifts us all to give. To stimulate you to have hearts of vitality and hospitality that willingly participate in God's provision for those who need provision. Then we will participate in the needs of the saints (Rom 12:13). The word for "contribute" in this verse is the verb *koinōneō*; we don't just give or contribute, we participate in the needs of the saints. There is a fellowship between giver and recipient. The collection for Jerusalem is called a *koinōnia*, a fellowship (Rom 15:26; 2 Cor 8:4; 9:13). And when we give it will be "in generosity" (Rom 12:8). The word used here means much more than generosity; it means with sincerity, without regret, with a whole heart. This word is also used of the collection for Jerusalem (2 Cor 8:2; 9:11, 13).

But what about the financing of the church? What about all the things that stewardship campaigns are trying to raise funds for? The NT is silent on such matters. There were no church buildings! The churches met in houses. How should we fund church buildings and operations today? Here we need to use some plain common sense. We are a non-profit organization with certain facilities that we deem necessary for operation. It is up to us as the participants in this organization to contribute the necessary financing. That's about all that needs to be said on the matter. This is not what NT giving is about.

I close with a few remarks about PBCC's policy on giving. This is not an exhaustive list, but it will shed a little light on how we function. Most of these policies go back to the earliest days of PBC over sixty years ago.

Firstly, we carry no debt. This means the church is not saddled with interest payments or trying to pay down principal. This frees us to spend money on people.

Secondly, we have no budget. When I tell people this they usually respond in disbelief asking, "How can you function without a budget?" Very easily, actually. No budget means no budget committee with ministries jockeying for line items. And on the heels of budgets come pledge drives. But this doesn't mean we don't know what we're doing. We track expenses by category, so we know where the money goes each year, and we assume that expenses will continue year by year.

Thirdly, pastors and elders do not know what anyone gives. No records are kept, except those required by law. Receipts are issued for gifts of \$250 or more, as required by the IRS, but only our bookkeeper sees those.

Fourthly, if a shortfall develops, then it is time to do some belt-tightening, trimming expenses and asking what the Lord would have us cut. The priority is to make sure all the bills are paid, then pay the staff. If necessary, the pastors take a pay cut.

Fifthly, elders don't make decisions based primarily on finances, but on seeking to know what God is doing, trusting that if it is the Lord's work then "God's work done in God's way will never lack God's supply."

Sixthly, the church cares for those who lack provision of their own. This gets to the heart of what the OT tithe and NT giving were about. There are several categories of such people:

One category in need of provision are those the elders set aside to full-time or part-time ministry; the church provides for them. This doesn't mean that these paid people do all the ministry. It is a recognition that they should be freed up from making provision for themselves in order to devote themselves to ministry.

A second category in need of provision are those with practical needs. They are served by the deacons, and it is not just the deacons; many of you have made yourselves available to be called upon by the deacons. The deacons have done amazing work under the leadership of Bill Harman who has just retired after 13 years. George Stoyko, who has long served as a deacon, has been asked to assume leadership. The deacons have access to the need fund, used to help those who need provision. You have been generous givers to this need fund.

A third category in need of provision are those designated by the elders as PBCC missionaries. They have gone out to various parts of the world, near and far. Without their own provision they are dependent on the provision of God's people, and so we participate in their need. We encourage you to get to know these missionaries so that you give willingly to them, being a channel for God's provision, and so that there be a fellowship between giver and recipient. Now 4% of our general fund goes to support these missionaries.

You are a generous people, for which we thank God. You give generously to the need fund. You open your hearts and your wallets when we present opportunities for you to participate, whether it be the orphanage in Mexico, MegaVoice players for the Tarahumara Indians, meal packages for pastors in Indonesia after the economic collapse of that country, the ministry of VisionTrust in Liberia, various endeavors in Romania, or reconstruction on the Gulf Coast after Hurricane Katrina. The Lord moves your hearts to give and in that we rejoice.

The Lord has gifted us to give. He gives us both the resources and the motivation to participate with him in his provision for those who are in need of provision. Thanks be to God for his amazing gift!

1. Miroslav Volf, *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 42-52.

2. Volf, *Free of Charge*, 49.



## 4. BLESSING THE WORLD

Romans 12:14-16

It has been an unusual week in politics. The news has been dominated by Syria and its chemical weapons. Ten days ago the President was poised to launch a military attack on Syria, but then agreed to consult Congress. Subsequent events were rather surreal. On Monday PBS broadcast an hour-long interview by Charlie Rose with the Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in Damascus. The interview had taken weeks to arrange, and by the time it was actually conducted last Sunday, the situation had become interesting, to say the least. It was surreal to watch Rose ask Assad how he would respond to a US military strike against his country. On Tuesday President Obama addressed the nation to present his case for intervention. The speech might have seemed a good idea when he announced it the previous Friday, but the situation was very different by the time he delivered the speech on Tuesday. Russian President Vladimir Putin responded with an Op-Ed in Thursday's *New York Times*, speaking "directly to the American people and their political leaders." Yesterday, after intense negotiations in Geneva, the US and Russia agreed a plan to deal with Syria's chemical weapons. The world breathed a sigh of relief and stepped back from the brink. An extraordinary week indeed!

I don't have a plan for Syria. I don't know what the solution is. I grieve over what is happening in that country, over the tremendous number of displaced people, over the refugees crowding into surrounding countries. I grieve particularly for the Christians. For several decades Syria had been one of the safest places in the Middle East for Christians. They flourished there, but in the last two years they have suffered greatly.

I was interested by some of the remarks that Obama made in his speech. He dealt with some of the objections people were raising to a military strike on Syria: "Why should we get involved at all? ...Why not leave this to other countries?" He answered these objections by stating that, though "America is not the world's policeman...the world is a better place" because the US has borne the burden of enforcing international agreements. Of course there are many who now wonder if the world is indeed a better place because of US intervention over the last decade. But in the end the basis for his appeal to action was to "make our own children safer." He ended with these words: "That's what makes America different. That's what makes us exceptional. With humility, but with resolve, let us never lose sight of that essential truth."<sup>1</sup> In his Op-Ed Putin called him on this appeal to American exceptionalism: "It is extremely dangerous to encourage people to see themselves as exceptional, whatever the motivation."<sup>2</sup> It was again surreal to read Putin speaking to this country about respect for democracy and international law, and about the dangers of nationalism!

These comments by Obama and Putin about exceptionalism set me thinking. The Bible makes just this claim for God's people. The Old Testament claims that Israel was exceptional. As God told them at Sinai:

you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all

the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. (Exod 19:5-6 ESV)

Thereafter the world would be divided into two peoples: us and them; Israel in covenant with God, and all other nations outside that covenant. The great divide between Jews and Gentiles runs also through much of the New Testament. But the same New Testament applies the language of exceptionality to the church, deliberately echoing God's language at Sinai:

**But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession. (1 Pet 2:9)**

The world is still divided into two peoples: us and them. But the lines have been redrawn, or perhaps better, refocused. Inside is the church, Jew and Gentile together by faith. Paul's favorite term for this is "in Christ." Those "in Christ" are the new humanity, who have entered into the age to come—an exceptional people indeed. Outside are those who are still dead, who are still in the old age, still "in Adam."

What are the responsibilities of this exceptional people toward the rest of the world? How should "we" behave towards "them"? We explored this topic a little in February when going through Luke 6.<sup>3</sup> We return to it now as we make our way through Romans 12. We will dwell on this topic for the last three weeks of this series entitled "Overcoming with Good."

So far Romans 12 has addressed life within the Christian community. Most versions introduce a paragraph break at verse 14 as Paul turns his attention to behavior towards outsiders. He does so with a word play that is not evident in English. The last in a list of ten commands (vv 10-13) is "seek to show hospitality," which could be rendered "pursue hospitality." The first command of the new paragraph is "Bless those who persecute you," where persecute is the same verb "pursue." We are to pursue hospitality, but how are we to respond to those who pursue us inhospitably, with evil intent? This new paragraph is not just about how we should relate to Christians, but about how we should react to those who are hostile to us. Paul's instructions are still under the rubric of verses 9-10, "Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good." How do we show true, genuine, non-hypocritical love and goodness in reacting to those who are negative towards us in word and deed? This is Paul's concern for the rest of the chapter (vv 14-21). Today we look at verses 14-16.

### 1. Bless Your Enemies (12:14)

**Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.**

Paul surely has in mind the teaching of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount:

**'You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of**

your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have?" (Matt 5:43-46)

Or, as we encountered it in February in Luke's Sermon on the Plain:

**"But I say to you who hear, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you." (Luke 6:27-28)**

Peter gives similar instruction, as we heard in our Scripture reading:

**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)**

What does it mean to bless and to curse? The Greek word translated "bless" literally means "to speak well," used in our English words "eulogy" and "eulogize." But that is not how the word is used in the New Testament. We are not being called to eulogize our enemies, to simply say nice things about them. Behind this word lies the Old Testament understanding of blessing. God is the fount of every blessing. When he blesses someone or something he is endowing an abundant and fruitful life. "Flourishing" is now a popular way of describing such life. When we bless God we thank him for giving us flourishing life. When we bless someone else we invoke God's blessing on them; we petition God to give them a flourishing life. So, blessing our enemies is a form of prayer, as the parallelism of Luke 6:28 makes clear: "bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you." What do we pray? We don't pray that God would judge them, which is our natural inclination. We pray that God would save them and give them a flourishing life. Such prayer, difficult though it may be, allows us to acknowledge that what they have done is evil, but not respond in evil ourselves. It allows us to overcome evil with good. But does the blessing stop there, with petition to God that he intervene in the lives of our enemies and save them? Many Christians have sought to go beyond prayer, responding with goodness: with acts of kindness, generosity, hospitality, and love, and thus themselves be God's instruments of blessing into the world, into the realm of "them."

Why should we bless them? Because God does so: "he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust" (Matt 5:45). God cares not just for his own exclusive people, but for all the people he has made. He cares for them with his common grace which is non-exclusive. When we do likewise, we are acting like God and are his children: "so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven."

The opposite of "bless" is "curse," in which we invoke God's judgment on the one who has wronged us. This is our natural response, our default mode. James writes about the unruly nature of our tongue:

**With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers, these things ought not to be so. (Jas 3:9-10)**

In our better moments we know this; we recognize the contradiction between blessing God on a Sunday morning, and cursing another driver on the way home. We resolve not to react negatively to people, but then we're cut off again on the freeway and we can't

help ourselves.

So, we are called to bless not curse. We are called to have kind intentions towards those who are outside the realm of "us"; to have kind intentions to those who do not have kind intentions to us. Our example is Jesus:

**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)**

We see this behavior particularly upon the cross when he prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). Paul and his companions lived this way:

**When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; when slandered, we entreat. (1 Cor 4:12-13)**

The world interprets such behavior as weakness. Gentleness and meekness were not virtues in the ancient world, but character flaws. Paul elaborates, "We are fools for Christ's sake... We are weak... We have become...like the scum of the world, the refuse of all things" (1 Cor 4:10-13).

Such is the life we are called to. Refusal to respond in kind—not just non-violent resistance but actively seeking the welfare of the enemy—may be viewed as weakness. But Christ-like behavior pleases God, and God has great power to change hearts.

## 2. Compassion (12:15)

**Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.**

In verse 15 it is usually assumed that Paul returns to discussing behavior within the Christian community. Solidarity in joy and sorrow is certainly part of Christian community, of *koinonia*, of fellowship, of participation with one another. But might Paul not still be referring to our attitude towards non-Christians? Might he not have in mind a verse from Proverbs?

**Do not rejoice when your enemy falls,  
and let not your heart be glad when he stumbles,  
lest the Lord see it and be displeased. (Prov 24:7-8)**

There is no place for *schadenfreude*, rejoicing over the misfortune of others. It is an offense to attribute natural disasters such as Hurricane Katrina or the Haiti earthquake, or other calamities such as the AIDS epidemic, to divine retribution for specific sins, the usual bogey men being abortion, gays and lesbians, or policy on Israel. Pat Robertson has been the most prone to making such statements but he is by no means alone. We interpret such events as evidence of the general brokenness of the world groaning in travail. Into this travail we are called to weep with those who weep. So we weep for the Syrian Christians who are suffering greatly in that country's civil war; they are our brothers and sisters. But we also weep for the millions of displaced people, no matter their creed, and ask what we can do for them.

As the Roman Empire fell into decay, the Christians cared not only for their own but also for their pagan neighbors. In the fourth century the Roman Emperor Julian the Apostate complained, "These impious Galileans [impious because they didn't believe in all the Roman gods] not only feed their own poor, but ours also."<sup>4</sup> He tried in vain to introduce a pagan philanthropy. Rodney Stark writes,

the apostate emperor Julian agreed that Christians 'devoted themselves to philanthropy' and urged pagan priests to compete. Julian soon found that the means for reform were lacking. Paganism had

#### 4. BLESSING THE WORLD (12:14-16)

failed to develop the kind of voluntary system of good works that Christians had been constructing for more than three centuries; moreover, paganism lacked the religious ideas that would have made such organized efforts plausible.<sup>5</sup>

Paganism lacked the engine for philanthropy, for caring for others, because classical philosophy regarded mercy and pity not as virtues but as weaknesses. The early church had this remarkable testimony; they were the only people who had it within them to care for those who were in hardship.

#### 3. A Mind for the Lowly (12:16)

**Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight.**

Like verse 15, verse 16 is also usually applied to life within the Christian community. But might we not apply this outside the community as well? It is a verse about how we think. How do we think about ourselves, and how do we think about other people? The temptation, if you are the special people, is to think of yourselves as special, to be proud, haughty, arrogant. We are not to think this way. Instead, we should associate with the lowly. Paul uses an unusual verb here, which the lexicon defines as “to adjust to a condition or circumstance.”<sup>6</sup> The proud need to adjust themselves, accustom themselves, to relating to those of low status. High-fliers are called to adjust themselves to the lowly. Once one has made this adjustment it is then easier to bless and to extend care beyond one’s own.

God calls his people to be the new humanity, to be the exceptional people, not just for our own sakes but so that we might be a blessing to the world. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus uses three metaphors: the salt of the earth, the light of the world, and a city on a hill.

**“You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people’s feet.**

**“You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.”**  
(Matt 5:13-16)

Jesus was addressing Jews. This had been God’s intention for

Israel, but it had failed in that calling, as indeed God knew it would. Israel lacked the inner transformation to live life this way, as a light to the nations. But God still intends this for his people, for those who are now “in Christ.” Furthermore, he has put the right engine inside us, transforming us so that we can actually live this way.

How are we to live life this way so as to be a blessing to the world? Where can we find the strength to extend our love beyond our comfort zone? We can rely on human resolve, on our own good intentions, but that will not get us very far—a week, or a day, or just a few hours.

The way that Romans 12 is organized shows us how to live this way. We begin with God’s mercies (v. 1). Paul has taken the first eleven chapters to expound these mercies. We were once like those outside of Christ, estranged from him, dead in our trespasses and sin. But God has had mercy on us and has brought us into his people. Secondly, in light of God’s mercy to us, we present our bodies as a sacrifice, living, holy and acceptable to God (v. 1). We are then priests in his service, available for him to use as he wills. We are his instruments for him to use in blessing the world. Thirdly, we act with genuine love (v. 9). With our hearts filled with the *agapē* love that can come only from God, we seek to extend his love into the world.

On Thursday NASA announced that the Voyager I spacecraft launched in 1977 had finally left the solar system for interstellar space. It actually crossed the boundary just over a year ago but it took a while to determine exactly where the boundary had been crossed, where the influence of the sun at the center had ceased.

At the center of our universe is the Lord Jesus Christ. Around him are gathered those who are “in Christ.” Beyond there is a boundary between “us” and “them,” between those “in Christ” and those not. Unlike most churches, PBCC does not have formal membership. Membership draws a clear line between those who are in and those who are not. Much attention is focused on drawing that line in the right place and ensuring its security. But inside the boundary, individual members can be moving closer to Christ at the center, or staying still, or drifting further away, while those beyond the boundary may be moving inwards towards Christ. God’s desire is surely that the boundary be permeable so that those beyond the boundary be attracted in towards the one who is at the center, the Lord Jesus Christ. We are to be a blessing to those beyond the boundary.

1. Barack Obama, “Address to the Nation on Syria,” September 10, 2013.

2. Vladimir V. Putin, “A Plea for Caution from Russia,” *The New York Times*, September 11, 2013.

3. Bernard Bell, “Loving Them (Luke 6:27-38),” February 10, 2013, Cat. No. 1918.

4. Charles Schmidt, *The Social Results of Early Christianity* (2d ed.; London: Isbister, 1889), 328.

5. Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1996), 189.

6. “συναπάγω,” BDAG.



## 5. OVERCOMING EVIL WITH GOOD

Romans 12:17-21

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.”<sup>1</sup> 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 Philippians,

**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 them-

selves 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 Ja-

panese 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.<sup>2</sup>

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).



## 6. LET JUSTICE ROLL DOWN

Romans 12:9-21

One month ago the country marked the fiftieth anniversary of the March on Washington and Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech, calling for an end to racism. King addressed the question, "When will you be satisfied?" and answered, "[W]e are not satisfied and will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like water and righteousness like a mighty stream." Such was the dream of the prophets, for here King was quoting from Amos, words which we heard in our Scripture reading (Amos 5:14-15, 18-24), and again in Sandra McCracken's song, "Justice Will Roll Down," sung as our offertory.<sup>1</sup> Amos 2700 years ago, Martin Luther King fifty years ago, Sandra McCracken three years ago: these and many others have raised their voices calling for social justice.

Our Scripture reading began,

**Seek good, and not evil,  
that you may live;  
and so the LORD, the God of hosts, will be with you,  
as you have said.  
Hate evil, and love good,  
and establish justice in the gate;  
it may be that the LORD, the God of hosts,  
will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph. (Amos 5:14-15 ESV)**

You may recognize these words for Paul echoes them in Romans 12, and we have read them repeatedly over the past three months in our series on this chapter entitled, "Overcoming with Good." The second half of this chapter is bracketed by the call to hate evil and love good, to overcome evil with good:

**Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. (12:9)**

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

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

Though Paul does not use the language of justice in this chapter, many Christians who have read the chapter pursue its call to overcome evil with good into the realm of social justice. I therefore thought it appropriate that we end this series with a sermon on this topic. This will not prove popular to all Christians. Many conservative evangelicals are wary of social justice; I know that some of you are. Three years ago Glenn Beck spoke out against social justice:

"I beg you, look for the words 'social justice' or 'economic justice' on your church Web site. If you find it, run as fast as you can. Social justice and economic justice, they are code words. Now, am I advising people to leave their church? Yes!"<sup>2</sup>

So I give you fair warning! If you feel the need to run for the doors, now is the time! On the other hand, the high school group is here this morning specifically to hear this message.

What is social justice? At its most basic level it is about ensuring the basic human rights and recognizing the dignity of all members of society, especially those who are disadvantaged and vulnerable.

But, since it has become such a popular term and so many people and organizations have taken up the banner of social justice, it can mean almost anything you want it to mean. It has become a slippery term. Some view social justice as the creation of an egalitarian society in which wealth is redistributed by the government. Hence the assertion by Beck and others that it is a code word for communism or big government.

Today we associate "social justice" with liberal, left-wing causes, but for a long time the concept was the preserve of Christian groups, and particularly the Catholic church. It was within Catholic circles that the term was first used in 1840. But the idea is firmly rooted in the Old Testament, where it is most frequently referred to with the word pair "righteousness and justice." We have already seen this pair in Amos:

**But let justice roll down like waters,  
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. (Amos 5:24)**

What do these two words mean? We tend to think of justice as legal proceedings, and righteousness as our standing before God. But especially when used as a pair, these words concern the functioning of society. Justice refers to both the "restoration of community order" and the "constant preservation" of that order as expressed in *shalom*,<sup>3</sup> where *shalom* is best understood not just as peace but as wholeness, well-being, and flourishing. "Righteousness relates to wholeness in relationships at every level of community and is measured by the well-being of all parties.... Justice and righteousness describe persons and behaviors that seek wholeness and well-being for all, that seek equity in all social interrelationships, and that do not seek advantage at the expense of another's disadvantage."<sup>4</sup> Thus a society in which there is justice and righteousness is a flourishing society in which all the component groups are participating in that flourishing. Bruce Waltke writes that "the righteous...are willing to disadvantage themselves to advantage the community; the wicked are willing to disadvantage the community to advantage themselves."<sup>5</sup>

So, "righteousness and justice" is all about ensuring the flourishing life of the whole community. This understanding of righteousness is reflected in the long-standing use in the Jewish community of the word *tzedakah*, the Hebrew word for "righteousness," as the term for charity. *Tzedakah* is an obligation: those with resources are obligated to provide for the poor within the community, but it is also seen as a privilege. This is "righteousness," right behavior within community.

The Biblical concept of social justice is rooted in two fundamental principles: the character of God and the dignity of humanity. Justice and righteousness are rooted in God's character, celebrated frequently by the psalmist. In the last verse of our call to worship we read, "He loves righteousness and justice" (Ps 33:5), or we might translate it, "He loves social justice." "Righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne" (Ps 97:2; cf. 89:14). He is "Father of the fatherless and protector of widows" (Ps 68:5). God cares for the weak, the vulnerable, and the oppressed. This stands in marked contrast to the gods of the surrounding cultures; they favored the privileged elite: the king and the priests.

Secondly, the Bible affirms the dignity of all people, which is fundamental to the concept of social justice. All are made in the image of God (Gen 1:26-27). No matter how much that image is marred, there is still a core dignity to every human being. Again this is in marked contrast to the ideas of the surrounding cultures in which it was only the king who was in God's image. The concept of human rights is based on the understanding of the value of every human being. It derives from Genesis 1, not from the Enlightenment, not from human rationality.

God made humanity in his image. But subsequent chapters of Genesis show the rapid deterioration of humanity into social oppression, into "might is right." We see this in Cain's murder of his brother Abel, in Lamech's escalation of violence, in universal wickedness in the days of Noah, and in human autonomy at the Tower of Babel. Then God stepped in and said, "Enough!" He called Abraham to be the founder of a new flourishing humanity. It was against the backdrop of the wickedness of Sodom and Gomorrah that God said concerning Abraham:

**I have chosen him, that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice. (Gen 18:19)**

Abraham and his family were to be an alternative society, living life a different way from that which prevailed in surrounding cultures; they were to be a society characterized by social justice. Centuries later God delivered his people from bitter oppression and harsh servitude in Egypt where they had suffered great social injustice. He entered into covenant with Israel to be his people, a people characterized by social justice. This would be best expressed in how they treated the vulnerable in their midst. Particularly vulnerable were the foreigner, the widow, and the fatherless, frequently mentioned as a trio of the disadvantaged. The law provided multiple mechanisms for their care. The tithe provided for those who had no provision of their own, primarily the Levites, but also the poor and vulnerable. The tithe facilitated the participation of the foreigner, the fatherless, and the widow in the life of the community. A second mechanism was gleaning: the margins and corners of fields were to be left unharvested so that the poor could glean. The poor were provided not only with their food, but also with the dignity of working for their food. A third mechanism was the Sabbath year: every seventh year the clock was reset with a release of slaves and debt. We might wonder why there even was slavery within Israel. This slavery was not the same as that under the Roman Empire or that of African-Americans, both of which relied upon the kidnapping of people in one form or another, for which the Torah specified a harsh penalty. It was more akin to indentured service; Israelites who fell into debt sold themselves into slavery, to serve another, in order to pay off their debts. A fourth mechanism was the year of Jubilee: every fiftieth year, in a more comprehensive reset, all land reverted to its original owners, to the tribe to which it had been allocated as an inheritance. Again it was because of need, because of poverty and indebtedness that people sold their land.

These four mechanisms enabled the poor and vulnerable to participate in community life. The Law called Israelites not to oppress or wrong the foreigner, the fatherless, or the widow (Exod 22:21-21), nor to pervert their justice (Deut 24:17). The call to love the foreigner was predicated on the memory that the Israelites had once been foreigners in Egypt.

Any society has people who are vulnerable. Israel would have been no exception. Widows and fatherless children were a fact of life. God

provided not by eliminating the death of fathers and husbands but by commanding his people to care for the people rendered vulnerable by such death. Israel would always have the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow among them. Later texts added other categories of vulnerable people: the poor, the needy, and the oppressed. In what seems like a contradiction the Lord told Israel,

**But there will be no poor among you...For there will never cease to be poor in the land. (Deut 15:4, 11)**

There always would be the poor, but the Israelites were to care for them so they didn't remain poor. It is as if the Lord allowed the presence of the poor and vulnerable in order to test Israel. God cared how the Israelites behaved, not only individually, but especially corporately, as a community. He called Israel to a life of ethical monotheism. Monotheism: the belief in one God and loyalty to him alone. Ethical: loyalty to this one God affected every aspect of one's behavior.

As Israel developed, the one charged with leading the people in social justice was the king. David was the paradigm. After consolidating his rule over the whole kingdom, he "administered justice and equity [righteousness] to all his people" (2 Sam 8:15; 1 Chr 8:14). Solomon followed in his father's footsteps. His wisdom was tested by a difficult case early in his reign, that of the two prostitutes disputing over a baby. Solomon so masterfully decided this case that "all Israel heard of the judgment that the king had rendered, and they stood in awe of the king, because they perceived that the wisdom of God was in him to do justice" (1 Kgs 3:28). The Queen of Sheba famously visited Solomon in Jerusalem. At the end of her visit she praised God for putting Solomon on Israel's throne: "he has made you king, that you may execute justice and righteousness" (1 Kgs 10:9; cf. 2 Chr 9:8).

But sadly it was under Solomon that injustice took root in Israel. Under subsequent kings social justice among God's people deteriorated. Sadly, as went the king so went the people, for good or, more usually, for ill. A notable example of social injustice is Ahab's seizure of Naboth's vineyard, which involved killing Naboth on trumped-up charges brought by two scoundrels (1 Kgs 21).

As injustice grew within Israel and Judah God sent prophets to confront the leaders with their behavior. God was just as concerned about social injustice as he was about idolatry. These prophets did not mince their words; they lambasted the leaders using gruesome imagery. Among the most vivid is this from Micah:

**Hear, you heads of Jacob  
and rulers of the house of Israel!  
Is it not for you to know justice?—  
you who hate the good and love the evil,  
who tear the skin from off my people  
and their flesh from off their bones,  
who eat the flesh of my people,  
and flay their skin from off them,  
and break their bones in pieces  
and chop them up like meat in a pot,  
like flesh in a cauldron. (Mic 3:1-3)**

And yet Israel continued its religious activities. Isaiah, Amos, Micah, and other prophets all decried these religious activities and meaningless worship since they were not accompanied by justice and righteousness. We saw this in our reading from Amos: "I hate, I despise your feasts" (5:21).

It is abundantly clear that social justice was an important aspect of life for God's people, and that social injustice was a major cause for God's judgment on his people. God finally judged his people for

## 6. LET JUSTICE ROLL DOWN (12:19-21)

three reasons, three sets of sins. The one we most commonly think of is their religious sin, their idolatry: forsaking the Lord and pursuing other gods. Secondly was their political sin: relying on foreign powers rather than on God for their protection or deliverance. Thirdly, and just as importantly, was their social sin, their social injustice.

This failure of Israel's leadership to exercise social justice generated a longing for a future king who would do so, a Messiah who would rule in righteousness and justice. For example in this well known text:

**For to us a child is born,  
to us a son is given;  
and the government shall be upon his shoulder...  
Of the increase of his government and of peace  
there will be no end,  
on the throne of David and over his kingdom,  
to establish it and to uphold it  
with justice and with righteousness  
from this time forth and forevermore. (Isa 9:6-7)**

These are but a few of the many examples I could cite of the importance of social justice for Old Testament Israel.

Turning to the Gospels we find that Jesus shared this concern for social justice. He announced such at the beginning of his ministry, in the synagogue at Nazareth, reading from Isaiah:

**The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me  
to proclaim good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives  
and recovering of sight to the blind,  
to set at liberty those who are oppressed,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. (Luke 4:18-19, quoting  
Isa 61:1-2)**

Then he said, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

Jesus showed compassion to the poor, the weak, the vulnerable. This is an aspect of his ministry that Luke was particularly interested in. Just like the Old Testament prophets, Jesus criticized the scribes and Pharisees for being very religious but ignoring social justice. He accused them of devouring widows' houses (Mark 12:40; Luke 20:47). They gave money to God but didn't care for their parents, "thus making void the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down" (Mark 7:9-13). They tithed their mint, dill, and cumin, but neglected justice and the love of God (Matt 23:23; Luke 11:42). Therefore all their religious observances were meaningless in God's eyes.

In the parable of the sheep and the goats, Jesus commended those who cared for the vulnerable in his name:

**"I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me... Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me." (Matt 25:35-36, 40)**

So we see that social justice was just as important for Jesus as it had been for the Old Testament prophets, and as it was in the Torah, Israel's law. These three sources are frequently cited as the justification for social justice today, for the church and individual Christians to be involved in social causes, in helping the weak and the vulnerable in society. All of these texts were addressed to Israel. Even Jesus was addressing the Jews and conducted his social ministry among Jewish society. But we are not Israel. How do we responsibly apply these texts to our current age?

God called Israel to a life of justice and righteousness within the covenant community, within the people of God. The covenant community today is the church. So the immediate parallel to the Old Testament call to social justice is to care for the vulnerable within the church. The early church started doing so right from the beginning:

**And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship (*koinōnia*), to the breaking of bread and the prayers... And all who believed were together and had all things in common (*koinos*). And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. (Acts 2:42, 44-45)**

The early church was a fellowship, a *koinōnia*. This doesn't mean that they stood around and drank coffee as you will do after the service. Fellowship, *koinōnia*, means a close participation in one another's lives, having things in common (*koinos*). In this early fellowship needs were met from within. Widows were cared for through a daily provision (Acts 6). It was to oversee the logistics of this care for widows that deacons were first appointed. A generation later Paul instructed Timothy that widows over sixty could be enrolled (1 Tim 5:9), evidently in a register of those provided for out of church funds.

Another aspect of care was relief sent to those in need. When the prophet Agabus from Jerusalem prophesied before the Antioch church that there would be great famine, the disciples in Antioch "determined, everyone according to his ability, to send relief to the brothers living in Judea." They sent Barnabas and Paul as their representatives to take this collection to the elders in Jerusalem (Acts 11:27-30). Later Paul gathered a collection from numerous Gentile churches for the relief of the Jewish believers in Judea (2 Cor 8-9). As we saw a few weeks ago, he called this collection a *charis*, "grace" and a *koinōnia*, "participation." These are examples of charity and social justice within the church. This would have had a powerful impact on the first-century world for it was radically different from the behavior of Roman society.

So, the church's first responsibility is that it cares for its own. Since the church cuts across all lines of class, wealth, position, there will inevitably be needy and vulnerable people within the church. For us, our deacons continue to do a great job helping those in need. They are enabled to do so by the need fund to which you so generously contribute. This is charity, but it's also a form of social justice, enabling the flourishing participation of the vulnerable in our church community.

But since early on the church and individual Christians have sought to extend care to the weak, needy, and vulnerable beyond the Christian community. History is full of the charitable deeds of the church. The early church during the Roman Empire practiced charity beyond its community. It cared for people during plagues that swept the empire. It rescued abandoned baby girls from the trash heaps. When Julian the Apostate sought to create a pagan philanthropy akin to Christian philanthropy he found he couldn't. Pagans had no interest in caring for the weak; it was only the Christians who did so. Throughout much of the so-called Dark Age, as civilization collapsed in western Europe, and during the Middle Ages, it was the monasteries, and later the convents also, which extended care to the surrounding communities. Throughout the centuries Christians have established schools, orphanages, hospitals, almshouses for the poor, and many other institutions.

Two months ago when we started looking at the call to overcome evil with good I asked, "Are Christians good for society?" The testimony of history is that Christians have brought much benefit to society. But the church has also been guilty of abuses, especially

when it has accumulated power and wealth. The medieval church became fabulously wealthy on the backs of the poor. Indulgences were sold to those who could ill-afford the money. In its worst moments the church has been as guilty as was Old Testament Israel. And just as for Israel, injustice within the church has generally arisen from having too much power.

In its better moments the church has been charitable, and Christians have given generously to those in need, both fellow Christians and non-Christians. But social justice goes beyond charity. Social justice seeks to redress injustices that abound in the world. Here is where the concept gets controversial for Christians. Social justice has proven polarizing. On one side are liberal, left-leaning advocates of social justice, including more liberal evangelicals. They tend to see a larger role for government with a more aggressive intervention in society. But, especially among non-Christians, there is naiveté about sin, and an overconfidence in ability to transform behavior. This makes many conservative Christians uneasy.

On the other side are fundamentalists and conservatives who tend to stress personal salvation. The needy can be helped by personal charity, but one should be careful not to detract from the real mission of Christians and the church which is to preach the gospel and get people saved. Furthermore, the world is headed for destruction, so we shouldn't care too much about the world anyway. Social injustice is blamed on the breakdown of families, so the solution is to get Christians into political office to enact laws to prevent this, and then come down hard on those who break the laws, exercising retributive justice.

Amidst this polarization there has been an increasing interest in social justice within the evangelical mainstream over the past two or three decades. A role model for many is William Wilberforce. In 2007 Wilberforce received renewed attention on the occasion of the two-hundredth anniversary of the abolition of the slave trade in Britain. Wilberforce was born into the nouveau riche; his father had made a fortune in trade. With too much money for his own good, Wilberforce was an indolent student. At 21 he won election to parliament by outspending his rivals, and embarked on a career as a self-seeking politician. But at the age of 25 he was converted and became a changed man. He sought the counsel of John Newton, the converted slave trader, who encouraged him to stay in politics and use his position for good. He introduced into parliament a bill for the abolition of the slave trade. Both he and the bill were met with ridicule. Eleven times the bill was defeated, but Wilberforce persevered. After twenty years the bill was finally passed in 1807. Thus the slave trade was abolished. Wilberforce pressed on, introducing a bill to abolish slavery itself. Twenty-six years later a bill to this effect finally passed the Commons three days before he died in 1833. Wilberforce used his wealth and position to promote the welfare of those without wealth and position. The fight against slavery was just one of many causes that Wilberforce engaged in, together with a group of Christian friends whom we now know as the Clapham Sect.

Slavery has been abolished, but, sadly, slavery is abundant in the world today. One of its most pernicious forms is human trafficking for sexual slavery. One Christian organization fighting this today is the International Justice Mission (IJM), "a human rights agency that brings rescue to victims of slavery, sexual exploitation and other forms of violent oppression." It was founded in 1997 by Gary Haugen, who still serves as its CEO. He was a lawyer at the US Department of Justice, investigating police misconduct, and served as the UN chief investigator in the aftermath of the Rwandan genocide. IJM got its start like many other Christian organizations

promoting social justice: Gary saw injustice, was moved to compassion, realized he had expertise and position to do something about it, and acted. He pulled together a team of lawyers, human rights professionals, and public officials to use their knowledge, expertise, and position to move beyond charity to seek to confront abuse and rescue its victims. On Thursday, October 17, PBCC will host a dinner with Gary Haugen, so you can learn more about IJM.

In talking about social justice people often distinguish between the deserving poor and the undeserving poor. It's acceptable to help the deserving poor, but the undeserving poor don't deserve our help and any such help is wasted on them. But Christians have reached beyond the deserving poor to the undeserving poor. A great example of this is CityTeam. On Friday night PBCC hosted a graduation ceremony for fourteen people who had completed the year-long addiction recovery program. This auditorium was filled with more than 300 people who, it's fair to say, would not normally be in here. Here's a great example of a Christian organization that goes beyond charity. Charity would be to hand a dollar or two to someone on the street, knowing that the recipient would likely misuse it. Social justice seeks to restore wholeness and flourishing, to rebuild lives shattered by their own poor choices. It was moving to see mothers, fathers, sisters present certificates to family members, acknowledging how much pain the addict had caused the family, but rejoicing in restored relationships. One graduand asked that her certificate be presented by the judge before whom she had appeared in drug court!

In talking about social justice it is easy to feel guilty and overwhelmed, to feel that the need is so great that it is beyond anything we can do. How are we to practice this? And why should we as Christians care? We are called to overcome evil with good. At the head of the passage in Romans 12 is the exhortation, "Let love be genuine" (9). Under this heading follows a list of thirty imperatives, concluding, "Overcome evil with good" (21). The great resource that we have as Christians is *agapē* love, self-giving love that gives to help others. Glenn Beck was fearful that social justice meant that the government would take from him. But Biblical social justice is not about taking; it's about giving, freely and sacrificially, from hearts filled with *agapē* love.

At the head of the chapter is the call to transformed lifestyles, which is the only way we can live like this. We start with the mercies of God who reached out to us when we were undeserving. He lavished his love on us and has restored us. We now present ourselves as living sacrifices, available to be his instruments in the world. We no longer conform ourselves to this world, which looks out for its own selfish desires and fears others taking. Instead we are transformed by the renewing of our minds so that we might embrace the will of God. We can then reach out to others as God's instruments of blessing to the world, overcoming evil with good. May God give us the grace to each play our part in this ministry.

1. Sandra McCracken, "Justice will Roll Down," track 4, *In Feast or Fallow* (2010).

2. Tobin Grant, "Glenn Beck: 'Leave Your Church,'" *Christianity Today* March 12, 2010.

3. G. Liedke, "טש שפּט to judge," *TLOT* 1394.

4. Bruce C. Birch, "Justice," *Dictionary of Scripture and Ethics* (ed. Joel B. Green; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), 435.

5. Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 1-15* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 97.