

Romans 12:9-21

Overcoming Evil

Main idea: When we sinned, God didn't let us have it, but He let us have Him.

A church treasurer and a deacon were discussing with the new pastor what he would receive for his salary at the church. The deacon said, "I have an idea" and took off his belt and laid it on the ground, making a circle. Then he said, "Okay. So we throw all the offerings up into the air and whatever lands inside this circle is his salary." The treasurer replied, "Nonsense. We should be more generous than that! When we throw the money in the air, whatever lands outside the circle should be his salary." And the pastor responded, "Guys, we should trust the Lord with this! When we throw the money up in the air, God will take whatever portion He wants. And whatever lands on the ground, I'll humbly receive."

Now, I find that joke to be a little offensive. It implies that pastors are manipulative, money-hungry shysters. I'm offended by that implication. So when I read the joke online, I wanted to email the website owner, demanding that he take the joke off his website! I wanted to let 'em have it! I wanted to let him know that most pastors just want to share the love of Jesus with people, and we don't care about money, and that this joke perpetuated an unfair stereotype of me as a pastor, and he should feel ashamed of himself for speaking against a man of God, and he really ought to be more afraid of the wrath of God.

But I didn't do that. When I read the joke, I just laughed, because it's funny. And, I prayed, because sometimes I'm tempted to be a manipulative, money-hungry shyster.

What do you do when you're really offended? What do you do when someone offends you and you want to pay them back? Do you let 'em have it?

I'm actually kind of shocked that anybody even likes using social media anymore. It seems like people today just really like offending others and even kind of secretly like being offended by others. And when we're offended, we seem to really like going on a rant to let 'em have it.

And I think I get it. When we see evil in the world, we want to stand up for what's right and good. We want to overcome the evil.

So what should we do when we're offended? And how do we go about overcoming evil with good?

Romans 12:9-21. Please stand with me for the reading of God's word.

Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. 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. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight. Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. 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." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. (Romans 12:9-21)

The word of God for the people of God. *Thanks be to God.*

I once read this love letter somewhere online.

Dearest Jimmy,

No words could ever express the great unhappiness I've felt since breaking our engagement. Please say you'll take me back. No one could ever take your place in my heart, so please forgive me. I love you, I love you, I love you!

Yours forever, Marie.

P.S. Congratulations on winning the state lottery.

Our Scripture passage this morning begins by saying, "Let love be genuine."

There's a lot of selfishness in the world today that pretends to be love. One of the most unconscionable examples of this is the sex industry. Whether it's prostitution, pornography, or sex trafficking, it's clear that a lot of people who need real love settle for fake love that they can buy and abuse.

But even if we aren't tempted in any of those areas, I think it's also important to ask ourselves this: how often is our love not genuine? You know, we say that we love the lost, but I think most often, the lost people around us see it as a fake love. I mean, if we really loved the lost, we'd go where they go. We'd empathize with their pains. We'd pick up our cross and follow Jesus,¹ and Jesus was called the friend of sinners.²

John wrote:

Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth. (1 John 3:18)

In other words, let love be genuine. Love is not merely what we say and feel, but what we do. Jesus did not merely say that He loved us, but He came and gave His life as the ransom for sinners.³

So as believers in Jesus, we're called to live lives of love.⁴ The rest of this passage talks about that. Look at verse 10.

Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. (Romans 12:10)

This is talking about how we're to love one another in the church. We're to have a brotherly affection for one another. It's talking about the kind of relationship in which you stick together no matter what. That's part of what it means to be a church. It's to be a family. And it says that we're to outdo one another in showing honor. So even though we're not really in competition with one another, there's nothing wrong with trying to be the most affectionate. Be the most loving. Show the most honor and respect.

¹ Matthew 16:24-26

² Luke 7:34

³ 1 Timothy 2:6

⁴ John 13:34

That's part of why every November, our family gives everyone at church a gift. October is Pastor's Appreciation month, and you all do a pretty good job of showing me appreciation, and I thank you for that. So we see November as our turn to try to outdo you. And you all make it pretty hard! But I think we upped our game last year with these Grace Baptist coffee mugs. I'm not saying it's a competition, but I'm just saying, we might be in the lead!

All I'm saying is that God calls us to love one another. Here's how and why. Verse 11.

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

We love best when we do it in service to God. And we love best when we remember how easy it is to be lazy about it.

[Pictures of the Huff family holding a sloth]



On my family's last vacation, we were able to hold a sloth. It was only a very small part of our vacation, and each of us only got to hold the sloth for about a minute, and yet it was an interesting experience. We learned that sloths spend about 90% of their lives hanging upside from trees, so you know they're strong. And they have these huge claws at the end of these long, slender arms that they can use to move from limb to limb. And yet, they're also extremely slow. They're so slow, in fact, that when we held them, we were told to stay as still as possible, because if we moved them too quickly, we could hurt them, because sloths just aren't used to being moved around.

So sloths are kind of a contradiction. They're strong, yet weak. They're athletic, yet fragile. And the Bible tells us, "Don't be slothful in zeal, but be fervent in spirit."

So when it comes to loving others, don't be a sloth. Don't be slow about it. You have the potential to love in extraordinary ways! Don't put that off. Be fervent to love, and engage your whole spirit in loving others as God loves you.⁵

And we're to do this, as it says at the end of verse 11, in service to God. The greatest commandment, according to Jesus is this:

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.
(Matthew 22:37)

Then Jesus also said:

⁵ 1 John 4:19

A second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. (Matthew 22:39)

For some strange reason, we sometimes illogically separate serving God and serving people. But I think Paul was saying, and Jesus was saying, that we serve God by serving people. Paul tells us a great way to do that in verse 13.

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

One way that we serve the Lord is by being generous. And this isn't just talking about giving to church. That might be part of it, but contributing to the needs of the saints means being there for one another, too. When you hear about a need someone has, seek to meet it. When you hear that someone is sick, make them a casserole. That's what Baptists do! In other words, as it says in Philippians 2:4:

Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. (Philippians 2:4)

So we ought to have a very special relationship with one another in the church. We're one body.⁶ I would never seek to harm my own body, but should always take care of it.⁷ And we ought to do the same for one another.

But lest you think this is just about loving the people in the church, Paul then pivots to also talk about how to treat those outside the church. Verse 14.

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight. (Romans 12:14-16)

Can you imagine what the world would look like if the Church actually did this? What if we loved, really loved, those who said anything negative about us? What if we stopped trying to be right all the time, and just tried to show people God's love? What if instead of constantly arguing with our culture, we just tried to be Jesus to them? Rejoicing with them when they rejoice, and weeping with them when they weep? Wouldn't it be awesome if we, too, could be accused of being a friend of sinners?

Now, it's true that we're called to be holy, and that means that we should be separate.⁸ But that doesn't mean physically separate, or even emotionally separate. It means separate in our godliness, even while we're surrounded by ungodliness, so that we would be a light to the world.⁹ And if we're really going to be the light of the world, then we need to take the light of Jesus into the darkness.¹⁰

Verse 17.

Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. 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

⁶ Romans 12:5

⁷ Ephesians 5:29

⁸ 1 Peter 1:16

⁹ Matthew 5:14-16

¹⁰ John 8:12

burning coals on his head." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. (Romans 12:17-21)

God says, "Vengeance is mine." He is the only One who was the right to dole out vengeance. And He could have shown vengeance to everyone. For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.¹¹ And the wages of sin is death.¹² So when we sinned, God could have immediately shown us all vengeance in sending all of us to hell.

But instead, to overcome evil, He took the vengeance upon Himself. Instead of taking our lives, He gave His life.¹³

But this doesn't at all take away from God's justice. It's true that God punishes wrongdoing. He doesn't let it slide. But God doesn't punish wrongdoing in a vindictive way. He chastises those whom He loves.¹⁴ And He ultimately punishes wrongdoing by allowing Himself to be nailed to a cross, declaring, "Vengeance is Mine."

You see, when we sinned, God didn't let us have it, but He let us have Him. And when you want to avenge yourself, and you want to let 'em have it, remember that. Remember that when we offended God, God didn't let us have it, but He let us have Jesus.

It appears that avenging ourselves is evil, and it's the evil that we're never to do. Verse 17 says: "Repay no one evil for evil." Verse 19 says, "Never avenge yourselves." So what should we do when we're offended?

Well, to show us what we're to do when we're offended, Jesus allowed Himself to be nailed to a cross, where He suffered for our sins. Jesus showed us that when we offended Him, He died for us.

Maybe when we're offended by our culture, instead of letting 'em have it by going on a rant, we need to humble ourselves and feel their pain. Maybe instead of letting 'em have it, what we really need to do is to allow ourselves to love them.

In his book "The Myth of the Greener Grass" by J. Allan Peterson, there's a story about a wife who went to a psychologist full of hatred toward her husband. She told him, "I not only want to get rid of my husband, I want to get even! Before I divorce him, I want to hurt him as much as he has me."

The psychologist suggested an ingenious plan. "Go home and act as if you really love your husband. Tell him how much he means to you. Praise him for every decent trait. Go out of your way to be as kind, considerate, and generous as possible. Spare no efforts to please him, and to act like you enjoy him. Make him believe you love him. After you've convinced him of your undying love and that you cannot live without him, then drop the bomb. Tell him that you're getting a divorce. That will really hurt him."

With revenge in her eyes, she smiled and exclaimed, "Beautiful, beautiful. Will he ever be surprised!" And she did it with enthusiasm, acting as if she loved him. For two months she showed love, kindness, listening, giving, reinforcing, sharing. And two months later, when she didn't return, the psychologist called her and said, "Are you ready now to go through with the divorce?"

¹¹ Romans 3:23

¹² Romans 6:23

¹³ 1 John 3:16

¹⁴ Hebrews 12:6

"Divorce?" she exclaimed. "Never! I discovered these last two months that I really do love my husband." Her actions had changed her feelings.

So if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. And maybe our actions at first are done out of spite, like wanting to heap burning coals on someone's head. But as we truly love them, our hearts will change, and we'll love them as God loves them.

You see, maybe the evil we need to overcome isn't somewhere out there in the world, but right here, in our hearts.

Jesus said:

For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses. (Matthew 6:14-15)

We like to put qualifications on that. We like to say, "Yeah, but first they need to repent and ask for forgiveness!" But that's not what Jesus said. Jesus said, "Forgive."

I don't get on social media as much as I used to anymore because I get offended every time I do. And it's not that I get offended much by the people we as Christians often disagree with. It's more that I get offended by how Christians often respond to them, because we often don't do a very good job of being Christlike. And it's not really that I think I can do much better, because otherwise I'd step into the conversation more, but I just get offended that we don't do a great job of representing Jesus.

Now, this doesn't mean that we should act like sin is okay. We shouldn't have the attitude that sin doesn't matter. No, Paul wrote in verse 9, "Abhor what is evil." We should hate evil because God hates evil. But I think so often, we get so fixated on hating the evils of others that we forget to hate our own evils.

Maybe I'm offended by a joke that implies that pastors are manipulative, money-hungry shysters because so often, we are. Or at least we're tempted to be. And the Bible tells me to abhor what is evil. So rather than being offended by the joke, maybe I just need to laugh it off, let go of the evil in me and hold fast to what is good.

God is good.¹⁵ And God has shown us how to love.

Listen, if we're ever going to overcome the evil that's in the world, we're not going to do it through judgment, but through love. God demonstrates His love toward us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.¹⁶

That's how God will overcome the evil in the world, and that's how God overcomes the evil that's in our hearts.

¹⁵ Psalm 100:5

¹⁶ Romans 5:8