

**Sermon for Sunday, November 21, 2010**  
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**How Can We Overcome Evil?**  
**Romans 12:17-21**

Three thoughts: First, moral evil disrupts peace. Second, accidental evil brings pain. Third, even perceived evil brings pain, even if none is actually there.

I know a man who often acts as if he has something to prove. He may ask, "Doing any hiking this year, Dan?" Before I can answer, he's telling me, "I'll be hiking in the Alps this Christmas; from there, I go on to Kilimanjaro for a month. January is the best in Central Africa."

He knows he does this and one day we talked about it. He said it runs in his family a bit (as it does in mine). He traced it back to a matriarch born in 1880, died in 1980, who had a pernicious habit of finding time alone with her children and grandchildren and telling them they didn't measure up. She had two granddaughters, sisters who both were bright and attractive. But one was little smarter and one a little prettier. She told one, "It's too bad you aren't as bright as your sister. We'll make sure she goes to college, but it would be a waste to send you." She told the other, "It's too bad you're not pretty like your sister. You may never find a husband and you'll certainly never build a home the way she will."

She passed this poison to her children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Some of them finally compared notes and began to root this out and bring peace to their families. I can't say this matriarch *was* evil, but she did sin. Pernicious comparisons can poison a family and rob it of peace.

James 3:17-18 says God's wisdom "is first of all pure, then peace-loving." By putting "pure" first, James says we have to seek righteousness first. To have peace, we have to be willing to battle sin.

Sin causes the greatest disruption and sometimes one sin or evil habit causes years of distress. But other troubles (natural evils) disrupt peace too.

Accidental and "natural" evils also destroy peace. Drought and famine, disease and storms destroy peace, but so do accidental human evils. Example: A certain young adult man took a common early-career path. He was not a believer, but he was moral, and wanted to be a loving husband and father. He worked hard in his profession and kept getting good offers. He followed them from city to city, taking his family with him. Every move was good for his career and helped him provide for his family, which he so wanted to do. But he failed to realize that every move ripped up relationships his wife and children formed in each new town. It was especially hard on his son, who resented his father's decisions. He knew his father meant no harm, so he kept it to himself, yet he pulled away from him for years. In time, they talked it through, were reconciled, and now have peace. Good, but accidental evils do destroy peace.

Real evil destroys peace. Tribal warfare, land grabs, and the lust for power have plagued humans for millennia. In the last century or so, advances in weapons and communication have let these evils gain greater scope.

But we also lose peace when we perceive evil that isn't there. Innocent remarks, stray comments, tiny missteps feel like major insults and evils. Our own insecurity, envy, and discontentment can rob us of peace. We often rend our peace when we try to read other people's motives. I know the pastor of a healthy, small town church. The church and the pastor love one another, but there was some resistance when he lengthened the worship service by fifteen to twenty minutes, from 10:30 to about 10:45.

One man who sat near the back of the church seemed especially unhappy about the change. Each week, he stood up at precisely at 10:30, straightened his jacket and pants, and walked out of the service during the sermon. In the pastor's words:

"He never said anything, but I could feel his displeasure over the longer services. Sometimes I had to stifle my anger at his weekly display. Then one week, I changed the order of worship and put the sermon first. The man still left at 10:30, but later that day his wife called."

"Pastor, you can't imagine how happy my husband was today. You see, he has to report to work at 10:45 on Sundays. He waits until the last possible minute each week and it grieves him that he can never stay till the end of your message. Today he heard the whole sermon and he is so pleased. I had to tell you."

Guessing other people's motives is a prime way to subvert our peace. By some perverse impulse, we often make the most negative, self-damaging guesses. We are less susceptible to self-damaging fears when we rest in the Lord. Isaiah says, "In repentance and rest is your salvation, in quietness and trust is your strength (Isa. 30:15-17).

We are most likely to deprive ourselves of peace when we're not repenting, not trusting God, when we forget he is our God and we are his people. I suspect that both the pastor and the often-moving businessman were similar: their work became a god because it gave them wealth and achievement.

Conclusion: We experience pain and loss of peace at least three ways. First, real evil brings pain. Second, accidental evil brings pain. Third, perceived evil disrupts peace, even if there was no actual evil. So then, what do we do when we experience evil? Our passage has several commands: Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Do not take revenge. If your enemy is hungry, feed him. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

But I can't explore those yet. I would be a poor pastor if I did. First, we must go to the gospel, because its root, reason and source of the ability to obey these commandments. They aren't advice or free-standing decrees or Kantian categorical imperatives that insist that we live this way to construct a sustainable society.

No, these commands stand in the fourth movement of Paul's magnum opus. Romans is Paul's theological symphony, his epic song or poem. Romans 12 has no new themes, only old ones, deepened. Paul prepared to talk about finding peace in Romans 5, which described the gospel – the gospel of peace.

## The root solution for pain and evil

### The gospel of peace

Let's distinguish objective peace with God, and subjective feelings of peace. Objective peace is available to all who trust God. Peace is the birthright of every believer. Romans 5:1: "Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." In Scripture, peace is first "an objective status or condition". Romans 5:10-11 says, "When we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son."

God offers peace through the gospel. He atoned for our sin through Jesus' life and death. Isaiah 53:5 prophesied: "He was pierced for our transgressions... the punishment that brought us peace was upon him...by his wounds we are healed."

Peace is the heritage of every disciple. Paul calls his message "the gospel of peace." The Lord is "the God of peace" because he grants us peace (Eph. 6:15, Rom. 15:33). He says that "the kingdom of God is righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit," because God fills us with peace as we trust him (14:17, 15:13). We have peace, therefore we should live in peace.

By contrast, *subjective* peace, the peaceful feeling, comes and goes. Everyone longs to feel peaceful, but we often to pursue it the wrong way, as an end in itself. We seek peace in vacations and weekend getaways: Florida in the winter or the mountains in the summer. We think we'll find peace if we escape the pressures of work or hard relationships.

We tell ourselves that "I'll feel better when things get back to normal." But a certain level of chaos is normal, the way most of us live. We may wait decades till things get back to normal. Peace is more than absence of conflict or stress. It is wholeness, sanity, calm, well-being, in every circumstance, even hard times.

We should enjoy peace. When God's Spirit is ours "the fruit of righteousness will be peace... quietness and confidence forever. My people will live... in undisturbed places of rest" Isa 32:15-18. Let's consider how we might claim this.

First I want you to pray and meditate. Let me suggest that you pray and meditate on this, with Scripture in one hand and experience in the other. For if you pray solely about your experience, you may sink into your sorrows or become angry at those who marred your peace. And if you consider nothing but Scripture, you may not take your own experience seriously. Consider: Two people can face the same event, but experience it very differently.

- Two people go to the hospital. One panics, filled with fear, resentment. The other says, "Clearly, this is where God wants me to be."
- Two see their income threatened, one worries miserably, the other is calm.
- Two are overworked. One works a bit longer, turns out the lights, and leaves it to the Lord. The other works till midnight, sleeps five and a half hours and goes at it again.

Why are people like this? Who are you? Do you pray about it? Examine yourself for sin? Do you have weak faith? Do you ask God to teach you to rest in him, find peace?

I admit that I have a hard time with topic three, overwork. I find too much of my identity in my work performance. Show me a problem, and I want to analyze it, rule out one set of solutions and sketch another. If there is too much work, I tend to think, "I need to work harder."

I'm tempted to work first, then pray. This is the kind of thing we must confess to God and pray over. We must pray honestly, confess our sins, and ask him to calm us, so we can receive the peace he offers.

- He loves us, so don't panic over illness.
- He cares for us, so don't torture yourself over your income.
- He is sovereign, so don't assume the solution is to "work harder."

### **God's counsel for overcoming evil**

Context: In Romans 12, Paul wants to convey the depth of God's mercy, then devote our mind and will to him. Then we can develop a sober self-concept. We'll love each other in God's family. We'll see that we depend on each other. Then we will use our gifts to serve others; we'll let them serve us too. We will be sincere, devoted, and affectionate in love. Now Paul adds, we will also serve our enemies. In this context, the context of the gospel, Paul states God's will.

### **Don't repay evil for evil; do what is right**

Don't retaliate or seek revenge when someone does evil. This command is difficult for two reasons: we have a natural desire for justice and we have a strong instinct for self-preservation. Jesus never struck back in word or deed, never used his powers to harm his foes. We follow his example. There's a time for retribution, for punishing evil. It belongs to the state, as Romans 13 says. But we do not retaliate.

Instead, we plan or take care to do what is good or right before all people. The word "right" means good, honorable, morally beautiful. This is more than moral goodness, more than managing a bad situation. When we suffer evil, we should seek the ideal response, one that people can admire.

We should do good in the presence, in the sight of all. This cannot mean that secular people set the standard and we adhere to it. No, human minds are darkened, so we will not always *agree* about what is good. So the world is not the standard of moral excellence, but it is the audience for it. And we should aim to do the good that everyone recognizes. How?

Jesus said, "If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him [voluntarily] two miles." And "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matt. 5:41, 43). If someone shouts at you, be kind, gentle. That is beautiful. The son of the man who moved too often broke off all contact with his father for a year. The father sent him a stream of cards, letters, emails, and melted him with his love. That is beautiful too.

### **Live at peace with all, if possible**

The core command is "Live at peace with everyone." But Paul adds a double qualifier because of the challenge: "If it is *possible*, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone" (Rom. 12:18). The qualifiers are necessary because some people prefer war to peace.

We also have to contend with what I call the ninety-five percent rule. When two people are in conflict, each will ordinarily admit that they contributed to the problem: "I'll admit that 5% of the problem is probably mine, but the *other* 95%... you better talk to him [or her] for that."

Further, Jesus said, "Blessed are the peacemakers" but we sometimes need constructive conflict to achieve real peace. Jesus made peace through conflict. He said, "I have come to

bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!" Luke 12:49. Paul later says, "Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification." Not just peace, edification (Rom. 14:19). To achieve real peace, we may have to foment therapeutic disruption. Sometimes godly strife must precede lasting peace. Then, after we advocate godly peace, others have to decide if they want to find real peace or to avoid issues. Peace-making requires several willing partners.

To return to estranged family and friends: I urge the willing husband, wife, parent, child, friend to woo the unwilling. Shower them with kindness. If they won't talk, keep sending letters, emails, facebook notes. Most people want to be loved. Kindness just may melt them. A few choose to be bitter. We can't *make* peace. We do what lies in our power and leave the results to God.

### **12:19-20 Don't take revenge; leave that to God**

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. It is his prerogative, not ours (as many Scriptures say: Deut. 32:35, Jer. 5:9, 23:2, Hos. 4:9, Heb. 10:30; Rom 13).

Through Rom 12:17-21, Paul links positive and negative commands. Do not avenge yourselves but leave room for "the wrath" – God's wrath toward sin. Now God's wrath isn't like ours. He isn't out of control, yelling, veins popping. He *grieves* at sin. Jesus sighed and groaned over sin when he walked with us (Mark 7:34). Yet God is just. He does requite evil. Vengeance or punishment belongs to him. We must let God be God, and refuse to take judgment into our own hands. Cast our cares on him, take our case to him, and "leave... retribution to him."

Jesus is our teacher. He said, "If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the left also" (Matt. 5:39). That's just what he did when his tormenters mocked and struck him. There is yet a place for justice on earth. The magistrate has authority to do justice. He is "God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer" (Rom. 13:4).

So we do not take vengeance. Instead, "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink." We win our enemies with love. "In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head" (Rom. 12:20). There are two options for the meaning of this strange metaphor:

1. Do good and so increase your enemies guilt and eventual punishment. But this is contrary to our passage and all Scripture. It makes goodness a weapon.
2. Kindness will cause the enemy to feel shame and that may lead to real contrition – or at least a troubled conscience. Of course, some people quickly push such thoughts aside and remain hostile.

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

When we confront evil, Paul prohibits four things. Do not curse; do not repay evil for evil; do not take revenge; do not be overcome by evil (12:14, 17, 19, 21). We must not answer evil with more evil, must not retaliate or seek vengeance.

Paul also has a positive plan. We don't fight, we don't hide. We "bless those who persecute" and "do what is right." We live in peace, and feed our enemies (12:14, 17-20). In all of this, we overcome or conquer evil. How?

How can we find strength for this? First, we know this is how God treated us. He overcame evil – our evil - with good. He forgave our sin, that vast debt. He wooed us with love and left his example. He never retaliated. But above all, we must stay close to him in faith.

We need to examine ourselves and confess that we easily forfeit peace. We take a light-hearted jibe as an assault. A forgotten birthday or unsent invitation becomes a terrible sin. Pray with me: Lord, forgive us for our self-centered thoughts, for thinking "they did it on purpose." Grant us thick skin and a tender heart. A memory that is bad enough to forget little slights and a memory of your life that is strong that we can love when we face full-blown evil. When wrath springs up, let us remember that you will repay.

Jesus overcame evil on the cross and will one day complete its eradication. So now it is possible to overcome evil with good. May the gospel grant us freedom. As the Lord overlooked our offenses and made peace with us, may we overlook sins and pursue peace. So let us pray, strive to obey, and plead for the Spirit's grace when we falter.