

Romans
“Overcoming Evil”
Romans 12:14-21

We're in Romans chapter 12 today.

Let's read God's Word together. I'm going to be speaking on verses 17 to 21, but I want to read 14, 15, 16, which we covered last week because of the continuity.

Bless those who persecute you. Bless and do not curse them. Rejoice for those who rejoice and 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 or plan ahead, or think carefully to do what is honorable in the sight of all, if possible, so far as it depends on you. Live peaceably with all. Live peaceably with everyone. 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 doing so you will heap burning coals on his head. Do not be overcome by evil but overcome evil with good. It could be translated, do not be conquered by evil, but conquer evil with good.

Let's pray.

Heavenly father, we thank you for the songs that lead us into worship today. We thank you for the song of your great and abiding faithfulness. That faithfulness remains with us when we trust you and also when we falter. This passage is going to remind us of our failings. Inevitably. And Lord, we thank you that we build our life because you build our life.

How good it is to sing to you of your teachings and your example and your grace. And now, Lord, as we meditate on your Word, give us even more of your spirit so we can heed what you have to say to us in your teaching through the Apostle Paul, through your Word we pray in Jesus' name,

Amen.

And you may be seated.

This is a complicated passage in some ways, so I want to make sure we have the outline and the theme in front of us. This passage teaches us the Lord teaches us in this passage how to overcome evil, how to overcome sin and loss and mistreatment. And he does that through his commands for them, singularly focused here. But also by his example and by his grace.

The commands are don't repay evil for evil. Live in peace as much as possible, leave vengeance or revenge to the Lord, and overcome evil instead of being overcome by it. But at each point

there is an example of Christ and also a teaching of the Bible that leads us to the grace of Christ and God's ways. I want to start by telling you a story about something that happened almost ten years ago.

In 2015, Charleston, South Carolina, a man named Dylann Roof walked into an African-American church and began shooting. He killed nine people in the next few minutes, his hope was to start a race war. He was a self-proclaimed white supremacist, and he thought that the events of Ferguson, Missouri, not all that far from where I live, could be replicated.

And by having more deaths, there would be more tension, and there would be a war that would somehow work to the good of America as he understood it. Well, it didn't work out that way. Praise be to God, because love and grace and mercy prevailed. Specifically the judge. The presiding judge, who set bail a few days after the shooting, decided to give the families of the victims an opportunity to comment before he set bail.

And in God's providence, a woman named Nadine Collier stood up. She had lost her mother, and she addressed Dylann Roof and she said with tears in her eyes, I forgive you. You've taken my mother from me. I will never speak to her again. I will never hold her again. You've taken something so precious from me, but I forgive you. And may God have mercy on your soul.

Now, a number of other people spoke that day. Not everyone said I forgive. Not everyone offered a prayer of mercy, but a number of people did. And their acts of kindness and grace and mercy brought calm to the city. And there was there was no explosion of violence. There was no race war such as Dylann Roof had hoped to see.

Well, Romans chapter 12, verses 14 to 21, addressed this very kind of issue. It says we all experience evil. We experience a suffering evil speech and hatred, even violence comes to many of us. But Paul says we have to bless those who persecute us, bless and do it a curse even as Jesus blessed his tormentors from the cross.

Paul says, don't repay anyone evil for evil, but give thought, give plans. Think carefully about what's honorable and beautiful to all people, even as God thinks about what is beautiful and honorable in response to our own sins toward him. Never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God. Vengeance is mine. God says there is a wrath on the last day, but all people will stand before God and rendered account for what will be done in the body, good or evil.

But God is the judge. We're not. And that will be in the future day. Not today. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. Was there ever a greater example of that than when Christ overcame evil? The evil he suffered, the unjust death he suffered. And yet and yet he overcame it through his work on the cross.

So this passage teaches us how to respond when people mistreat us. And if you look at it again, I'll ask you to notice that there is a pair each time in verses 17 and 19 and 21 telling us what not to do and what to do. It begins do not repay people evil for evil, for evil, but instead think about what's beautiful and honorable.

That's verse 17, verse 19. Never avenge yourselves, but do leave it to the wrath of God. Vengeance belongs to him. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil. Conquer evil by good. So we hear what not to do. We hear what to do. Now I don't know how you read a passage like Romans chapter 12 again, if you're here for the first time or listening online for the first time, you think, well, I walked into a bundle of commandments, God telling me what to do.

But please remember that Romans 12 follows Romans three through 11, which celebrate God's grace, that though we were sinners, rebels against God, he loved us while we were sinners, invited us to Christ, and nothing can now separate us from the love of Christ. If he calling him will be saved. That's what the first two thirds of the book of Romans tells us.

It grounds this in grace, and then we get commandments. Now, I don't know, some people, maybe some of you love commandments, you love to be told what to do. You're practically minded, Lord, tell me what to do and I'll do it. And obedience is what you desire, and you just want to know what your duty is, and you're thankful for passages with lots of commands, and others are not so thankful with Pat for passages with lots of commands.

You like other parts of the Bible wisdom, the Proverbs, songs of praise, Psalms of lament, psalms of thanksgiving. And maybe you love the narratives, the stories of what God does in and through his people over the years, or maybe even like the prophets when they take to task the various nations of God. God gives us all these many kinds of speech in His Word. And one of the kinds of speech we hear from him is commandments that tell us what to do. They tell us what to do when we have been wronged, and so we receive what the Apostle has for us. He says, don't repay evil for evil. And we think, you know, Jesus never repaid evil for evil in this life when he was reviled.

The apostle Peter, who spent three years with Jesus, said he did not revile in return when he was cursed, he did not curse. In return, he blessed. Paul says, never avenge yourselves. And Jesus chose not to avenge people. Just think of all the powers he had, all the powers of healing. How easy it would have been for him to blast someone with his eternal power and punish them physically, even during his life, his tormentors on the cross, even now, vengeance is in our culture. In fact, I found out just in the last 24 hours.

There's a new movie out. I don't know if it's good or bad or beloved or not, but this new movie called Vengeance and a lot of people read the novels and watch the TV shows with Jack Reacher and Jack Reacher's team is revenge. There's no problem a little bit of good killing won't take

care of. That's Jack Reacher. It's not the way the Bible thinks of things. It says, do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil. Look good even as Jesus overcame evil on the cross. Well, there are particular commands. And the first of these is we do not repay evil for evil. We bless those who persecute. We don't repay people. We don't live lives in which we seek revenge or retaliation. The father makes his son shine on the evil and the good. He sends his rain on good farmers and bad farmers, godly and godless farmers. And so we to offer a blessing to the people around us, whatever their lifestyle may seem to be. Now, of course, there is a drive for self preservation, and we think when somebody attacks me, I'm going to defend myself.

And I'm not saying you never defend yourself or somebody slanders you. You can say that's false. If someone tries to hit, you can block the blow. And if one nation invades another, that nation has a right to defend itself. But the goal is not to repay evil for evil. The goal is to stop the assault and to protect ourselves.

Don't live with vindictiveness. We discipline ourselves because we see what happens when people don't live that way. And if you just look at geopolitics today, what's happening 30 years ago is the Bosnians and the Serbs at each other's throats. For 50, 60, 70 years, it's been the Palestinians and the Israelis. It's the north and south of Yemen, of Yemen, the Yemeni people.

It was the Hutus and the Tutsis slaughtering each other. We see where retaliation and vengefulness leads. We even see it in our own political debates, political parties trying to get even with each other at times. I got caught up in it once, a long time ago. I was, headed a long time ago, maybe 15 years ago, I was headed to Brazil on a mission trip, and,

And I traveled from where I then lived Saint Louis up to Chicago. And I'm going to fly down to Rio and, couldn't get on the plane. I've got my boarding pass, I've got my passport, and the flight attendant says, I'm sorry you can't get in this plane. I said, why can't I get in this plane? He said, well, there's been a bureaucratic tit for tat, and Brazil thinks we did something to them. And we think Brazil did something to us. And now you pretty much can't get back and forth from Brazil to America without a certain piece of paper. I said, well, I had no idea. He said, well, too bad you're not getting on the plane. And so the trip was canceled, didn't get there because somebody said, you wronged us and we have to have a little bit of revenge.

The Bible says, think about what's honorable, what's beautiful. Plan to do, what's beautiful to the other person. Do good. The passage says, inside of all. Now that's a little bit tricky because you think to yourself, well, it's pretty hard to do what's good in the side of all, because various people have different ideas about what's good or beautiful, what the good life is all about.

And so, in fact, Paul's not telling us literally that you must do things that please absolutely everyone since their standards vary. But he's saying there is such a thing as a beautiful life, and that beautiful life does commend itself to people publicly. there is a friend of mine and was

actually in a group of pastors, along with pastor, reader and me, and he was a pastor of a large church, kind of like this one a couple thousand people.

But, being a large church pastor really didn't fit him his nature very well. He's very gifted, a wonderful speaker, but he really like to give care one on one to people. And as a large church pastor, he found that difficult. But when he semi-retired, he opened his home, not a big and beautiful home, but he opened his home to several men who were broken hearted, broken down, caught in sin. Lives had gone amiss. Single men, not even all of them Christians. Over the span of several months, he invited people into his house to mentor them. And I have to tell you, that made his life, which is already a beautiful life, that made his life even more beautiful, as he loved people one on one and had the opportunity to love people from his heart.

So we can live a beautiful life. Jesus is our example here. He never repaid evil for evil. He never retaliated in any way. Paul next says, we need to live at peace with everyone and says specifically live at peace if possible. So far as it depends on you. Now we have to ask why that's there a double qualification if possible, as far as it depends on you and if you've been at war with someone, you know why.

It has to be said? Because some people do not want peace. If possible, make peace. But some people love war, they love strife. They want to keep the battle, the assaults going as long as they possibly can. Some people like to fight. It energizes them. Some people get depressed, and instead of taking medications or doing things like go out and walk in nature, which is so much better than the drugs they're offering, instead of going out for a walk, instead of finding out what's wrong, they medicate themselves to rage.

They go pick a fight so they feel alive. Unfortunately, pastors have conversations with people in churches who have to live through this. You know, today there is an emphasis on a cutting toxic people out of our lives and avoiding people who don't give life to us. And sometimes, tragically, this happens even within a family, so that maybe a grandparent makes a comment to a parent about the way to raise or take care of children.

Which, by the way, is something I never recommend anyone to do. But sometimes people do it anyway, and the parents overreact and say, you know, if you're going to be that way, I'm cutting you off from our family, our children, your grandchildren, and they won't respond. And they come to me and other pastors and say, what are we going to do?

How can we how can you make peace? And the answer is, it's hard when somebody wants to make war. There are things we can do. You can write letters, you can send texts and emails. You just keep on doing it. Keep on showering, love. Of course you can pray and so forth, but some people do not want to have a reconciliation.

They would prefer. And some people are blind. Bullies, abusers, violent people. I find that honestly, the more godly and kind hearted and Christ honoring a person is, the faster they are to repent. Sometimes even here. Some of you said, Dan, I'm so sorry for what I did to you. I said, I have no idea what you're talking about. You didn't offend me in any way, but tender hearted people are quick to see that they might have done something that could have hurt someone. And evil people, violent people, angry people think everybody wrongs them. And if you say to them, you know, what you did wasn't right, they deny it. They get angry at you.

There are better ways to live our lives. People who do things as terrible as punching a child, destroying property and making nothing of it, saying preposterous things like he or she never complained above or claiming they were mistreated. The more godly we are, the quicker we are to repent. And so it's not always possible to make peace with everybody.

If they denied that anything was ever wrong. People are blind. I'm going to run two stories together. They both happened and I'm changing both of them for simplicity. There is a man who, decided he was allergic to his wife in the 25th year of his marriage. He told her that he was allergic to her, and she had to leave the house so we could live in peace so we could live without allergies. He had found somewhere on the internet some statement, somewhere that it's possible to be allergic to your spouse. And apparently it's true. One in 100,000 or 5 million people are actually allergic to their spouse, but it shows up within the first few months of marriage, and you have to do very specific things. He did not do specific things that did not show up in the first few months of marriage.

He was wrong. The people who told her, I said, look, you're abandoning your wife. You're abandoning your marriage. You are not allergic to your wife. And he would want he wanted no part of it. He did not want to live at peace.

Jesus wept over Jerusalem when he walked toward the city. Initially, Luke chapter 19 says that he wept and said these words, would that you had known the things that make for peace, but now they're hidden from your eyes. May God open our eyes to see the way of peace. Certainly the way of peace is not by seeking vengeance.

Vengeance is mine, says the Lord. Quarrels occur, accidents occur. There are many things that can take peace away from us, as the truth of the matter is one of the greatest ways we take peace away from ourselves is by exaggerating tiny little or mid-size faults or problems. May God give us tough skin and tender hearts, tough skin to resist the idea that someone offended me, that somebody made a little joke that could possibly wound me in some way. Let it go. They were just making a joke. They're not trying to hurt your feelings. Don't rob yourself of peace.

The pastor told me about the way he had robbed himself of peace in his church. A lovely mid-sized kind of small church in a very small town, growing beautifully. And no one went to Sunday

school in his church. And he thought, we're just not having enough time together. And so we're going to lengthen our worship service. We used to worship from 915 to 1030, and we're going to go to 1045. And he said, this is the way it's going to be. I'm leading you in this manner. And they said yes. And most people thought it was fine, he said. But there was one guy who sat in the back of the sanctuary last row. And every Sunday morning at 1030, he would stand up. When the service used to end. He'd straighten out his jacket, straighten out his pants and walk right out of the building. He did it week after week or months. The pastor said to me. Sometimes, when he put on his little display of dissatisfaction with the longer worship service, I could barely stifle my anger. In the middle of the sermon, at his demonstration of his displeasure. And then he said, one day we changed the order of the service at our church, and I put the sermon way at the beginning, and I got a call from his wife that day, and the call went like this.

Pastor, pastor, you cannot imagine how happy my husband is today, because, you see, he has to report to work at 1045 every Sunday, and he stays in church until the last possible moment when he has to run to his car and go and get to work. But today he heard your whole sermon is broken his heart for months that he never gets to hear the end of your sermon. He finally heard the end of your sermon. He is so pleased. I just had to call and tell you.

We do things like that to ourselves, don't we? The way of peace is to think the best. It's the way of peace is not to have nothing ever go wrong. The way of peace is to remain calm and integrated when things are going wrong. Don't tell yourself the fiction that you know everything will be back to normal. Little while things will never get back to normal, there is no such thing as normal.

There's no such thing as is objective, calm day after day. To stay calm. That's possible even when things go the wrong way. Paul also says, leave revenge to God. Let God avenge the Bible says it's terrifying thing to fall into the hands of an angry God in your sin, in your rebellion. And the passage tells us to leave it to the wrath of God, because God is the mighty judge of all the earth.

He says, vengeance is mine, I will repay. It's emphatic in the original language I myself will repay. But that also means you are not the one who possesses the right to revenge. The desire for revenge makes us stupid. Now, I tried different examples at different times, but I'm pretty sure this one's going to work. You've all heard of Warren Buffett, right?

Warren Buffett has a company called Berkshire Hathaway, which is kind of a joke because Berkshire Hathaway is the least of his investment. And here's how the story goes. He tells it this way in 1964, when he was 34 years old and getting going pretty well, he approached the owner of Berkshire Hathaway wanting to buy some shares. And he did.

And he bought it because he knew that the owner of Berkshire Hathaway was an erratic man who would want to buy the shares back to him pretty soon for more money. And it turned out exactly the way Buffett expected, bought the shares and the boss wanted to buy them back, and they agreed on a handshake agreement that the price would be \$11.50 a share. And then the paperwork arrived a few days later. And in those days, they used to do one quarter and three eighths and so forth, and the sale price was \$11.38, not 11.50. Buffett was so incensed that he resolved to buy every single share of Berkshire Hathaway so he would have the privilege of firing that man, which he did, and it became the worst investment of his entire life because it was in the textile industry, which is on its way down and has never recovered since, he said it was the biggest mistake of his entire life.

What's the positive program? Look at verse 21. To the contrary. Instead of avenging yourself, if your enemy is hungry, feed him. If your enemy is thirsty, give him something to drink, for by so doing you will heap burning coals upon him. Now Jesus actually said something similar in the sermon on the Mount. He said, if someone forces you to go one mile and that would have been a Roman soldier or a pressing Israel who had the right to impress or to temporarily seize an Israeli citizen, if someone forces you to go one mile with them, carrying their gear, then Jesus said, go to miles with them.

Give them a gift. Now when this happens, when this happens. It's possible for the person who receives this gift to be thankful. It's also possible that they won't be thankful. You can't really tell for sure, but what you're doing is trusting God to do what is just to do what is right to protect you. We have within us, in the world the desire to protect ourselves.

And it's good to protect ourselves. It's good, however, to also trust the authorities God has given in this world the magistrate. Again, if one nation invades another nation, that nation has every right. It's in fact good for them to defend themselves. But you do it with inward love toward the other nation. You don't delight in killing the invader, and you know in your heart that it's good to use the authorities that God has appointed in this world to stop evil.

Think about World War II, how much better it would have been if the French had actually fought and repulsed the Germans, not only for the French, but for the Germans. So far, fewer people would have died. It's good to use the appointed means, but we, one by one, are not the ones appointed to avenge ourselves on others. If your enemy is hungry, feed him. If thirsty, give him something to drink. And so doing you will heap burning coals on his head. People wonder what that means. Sometimes people say it means that by doing good to somebody, it will show how evil they really are. It will bring more fire upon them because you were kind to them and they didn't respond in kind.

And that's, you know, that's a possible interpretation. But it does sound a little bit mean spirited, doesn't it, that I'll do good to you so that you'll suffer all the more. And so most interpreters say that's not what it means. It means something else. It has to do with a cultural value. And that is, heaping coals was a metaphor in various places at the time for bringing shame to people.

And then it would mean something like this when someone mistreats you and your kind in return, your very kindness helps them to see that their unkindness is wrong and they will at best, at best, be sorry, be ashamed of themselves and come to repent in due course. So be kind to them that you can win them by kindness, that your very kindness functions as a rebuke for them. And overcome evil with good. Conquer evil with good.

Number of years ago, a Christian novelist named Walker Percy wrote a book called The Moviegoer, and in it he created a character who loved to recount traversal periodicals. This is 30 years ago or more. Before the internet really existed. You had to work to find fights between people ideologically and in the novel, he says this, I don't really know if I'm a conservative or a liberal, but I love the hatred that liberals and conservatives feel for each other. I'm enlivened by it. People who are nice are dead to me. He was way ahead of his time. How people seem to love to fight in the media today. And Paul says no, don't curse, don't repay evil for evil. Don't seek revenge, don't store up. Don't meditate on the wrongs people did to you.

I talked to a woman one time who said, you know, I received this terrible letter from a family member of mine. It was just so hurtful. And I just read it over and over again, and I can't believe she said these words to me. I said, how old is the letter? She said, you know, I forget the number, but it's, you know, a year or two. And she'd read it dozens of times. I said, my friend, burn the letter. Reading again and again about what this person said is going to do you no good. My most my most candid counsel, having been wronged myself by people, sometimes grievously, most unfairly, is that it's very difficult when somebody wrongs you to say the words "I forgive you" when somebody wrongs you maliciously, deeply, terribly wrong, deeply wrongs you. It's very hard to say the words I forgive and to fully feel it over and over again. People say, well, I've forgiven him, but I feel like I have to forgive him again or I've forgiven her, but I just I'm not sure if it's real, if it's so common that I want to offer you a suggestion. And that is instead of asking, did I forgive him or her, I find ways to give thanks for that person. Find ways to praise God for what is good in that person, even though they wronged you. And that can put to rest by thanking God for that person. They can to some degree put to rest the anxiety, the hurt, the pain that we feel.

That's one way to overcome evil with good. Instead of replaying harms. Of course, in all this, Jesus is our model and our example. Jesus, when reviled, did not revile and return Jesus when

so horribly treated by Roman and Jewish authorities, did not return evil for evil. In fact, he died in the cross for many of the same people who tormented him.

And Jesus did find ways to live at peace with the people around him. He did not find vengeance in this life upon people who was tender and kind, and he was gracious, and he certainly overcame evil, the most grievous evil that the world has ever known, killing the most innocent and beautiful and wonderful person as if they were a common criminal on the cross. In the most dreadfully painful way, Jesus overcame that evil by his resurrection. This is what we celebrate as Christians. And so it's not just a series of commands. It's a picture of the life of Christ and how we can live in him. Now, you can't really preach this sermon or hear it, I suppose, without having a sense that we fall short of this.

I don't know if there's any possible way we could say that we keep all of these commandments when people wrong us. We do wish for revenge, at least sometimes. When people want to fight, we want to fight back, at least sometimes when we have an opportunity to do unto others as they did to us, we think, yeah, I could, I could do that.

And so this passage, as much as any in the whole Bible, teaches us to turn to God, to turn to Christ for his mercy and for his grace, because we don't keep these commandments. And our hope is not that we would be good enough or slowly become better and wiser, and a just a kinder sort of person, or a more mindful person, or somehow work up a thicker skin.

The way forward is to say, Lord, thank you for these commands. They're good. They're healing. If I could follow them, my life would be better. But I admit to you that I did not. So I cast myself upon your mercy and ask you to forgive me and set me on the good path again. And if you're a Christian and you've come here today, you may need to say for the hundredth or thousandth time, Lord, forgive me, Lord, show your mercy to me.

And if you've never done that, this might be a good day to do so. To say, you know, God, I hear these. I hear these commandments, I hear these teachings, they're contra to my nature. But I want to be a different kind of person. And the way you do that is by saying, not, I'll be better, but Lord, forgive me. Make me your child. Give me your spirit and help us all. We pray to live in your good and godly ways.

Let's pray together.

Father, we thank you for all parts of your Bible. We thank you for the Proverbs in the Psalms that give us wisdom and songs to sing. We thank you for the stories of your work and the lives of the heroes of the faith and the life of Jesus our Lord and the lives of the apostles.

We thank you for those stories in which we can find both warning and signs of great spiritual health, and we also thank you for commands. The Lord. Sometimes we need commands. We

need to be told that what we're prone to do, and that is seek vengeance, defend ourselves, to fight back, to defeat evil by brute force. That these are not good ideas is not the way of peace, not the way of holiness.

So, Lord, lead us to repent. Give us wisdom together to walk in your ways and show us one more time that we live by your life, that we need to be forgiven when we've fallen short, and that you have done all that it takes to forgive us in your death and your resurrection. And Lord, help us therefore, to put our trust in you and to seek your spirit that we might live with and for you.

We pray in Jesus name.

Amen.