How to Overcome Evil

# Scripture: Romans 12:3, 9, 14-21

# Key Thought: Paul gives us three balanced yet practical ways to overcome evil with good.

# Intro:

Did you get to see the video I mentioned? It was one of those good news moments that they put at the end of newscasts. It didn’t start out with good news. A 78 year old widow was mugged as she got into her car at the cemetery where she had been grieving at the grave of her recently deceased husband of 60 years. The thief took her purse and $700. However, the police caught him and put his mug shot on TV. His 15 year old son saw the picture and knew it was his Dad. The boy’s parents had divorced when he was two and his dad seldom made contact; and his dad had been in and out of jail. But just recently his dad had given him $250 for a band trip he really wanted to go on. The boy, named Christian Langford, decided he had to do something about this. So he asked to meet the widow in a church parking lot. There he started by apologizing for what his father had done. Then he took out the $250 and gave it to the widow, telling her that he just would not feel right knowing it might be hers. She accepted the money, but then the spirit of giving prompted another special act. She turned around and gave it back to Christian for his band trip.

It is a great story, but it illustrated perfectly the principle that Paul is teaching us about overcoming evil with good. The repayment by Christian had given the widow an entirely new feeling in her heart. Instead of despair about the world, there was hope. Christian had overcome evil with good.

This messages is the beginning of a new sermon series for October called How to Overcome. It just happens that we begin with another message from the great chapter that we have been studying during September, Romans 12.

In this chapter we can glean some very practical and balanced advice about how we can overcome evil with good.

As I read the chapter over and over for this last series, I was impressed by the balanced advice given to us in it. Often we take one phrase from Scripture and run with it without doing the hard work of looking at the wisdom of an opposing perspective. In this chapter, Paul gives us two sides of several important Christian living scenarios. Keeping both in mind is needed to open the way for God to work in the lives of others.

# Recoil from what is evil, but don’t curse those who do evil.

Romans 12:9 tells us to “Hate what is evil, cling to what is good.” The Greek word translated as “hate” is not just a word dealing with our affections toward something as it sounds like in English, it is also a word dealing with our actions regarding something. It means to dislike something enough that we move in the other direction. CJB translates with the phrase “recoil from what is evil.”

We usually use the phrase “recoil from” regarding something dangerous like a snake or poison ivy.

So when we see something that is evil, we are to shy away, to keep away, to step back from it. But at the same time, we are not to curse those who do evil, even or especially when the evil is done to persecute us (v. 14).

But just separating ourselves from evil helps us avoid evil but doesn’t overcome evil. Something more is needed, something that can open the way for God to work.

We need to be able to hate evil deeds, hate evil systems without hating people. At first this seems impossible and even seems nonsensical. And it is a change, an advance, when compared to the piety of the OT. David in the Psalms thought it a pious deed to hate those who did not follow God. You can find Psalms cursing the enemies of God and the king. But in the NT we are not to curse those who persecute us as David often did in the imprecatory Psalms. Jesus instead asked us to rise above revenge thinking and pray for those who persecute us instead of cursing them. This opens the way for God’s love. It is the way of the cross.

Think of it another way. When you are cursing your enemies, what feelings are ruling inside your heart? Rage, bitterness, anger, revenge—right? If you can get to the place with God’s help where you are praying for your enemies, forgiving them instead, what feelings are ruling in your heart? Peace, submission to God, release of anger? Which way is better for your health; mental and emotional and physical? Think some more. When you are cursing your enemies what feelings are ruling their hearts? Anger, bitterness, rage? When you refuse to curse and stretch to forgive, what feelings rule the other person’s heart? Wonder or shame or ease of tension? Any of those can be the soil for God to work.

# Hold fast to what is good, but don’t claim to be wiser than you are.

The first part of the next set of balancing admonitions is an important one too. We begin with the last phrase of the same verse we started with in point one, verse 9. Paul admonishes us not just to love what is good, but to cling to it or hold fast to it. It is increasingly true that people who have lost connection with the word of God and the people of God also lose perspective on what is truly good. So Christians need to hold fast to what they understand to be good, proper and right.

Now here is where the problem usually come in. When we as Christians look at ourselves as being really good and very much in the right, then we often also “look down our noses” at the other persons in the same way the Pharisee did in the story that Jesus told (Luke 18:10). Remember, the Pharisee who stood up and prayed saying, “I thank you that I am not like this tax collector here.”

But to keep us from this error, in this same chapter, Paul has also given us other admonitions to help us. Verse 3 comes to mind. “Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought.” Or how about the last part of verse 16, “Do not be conceited.” Or in NRSV “Don’t claim to be wiser than you are.”

Holding to the good without humility only sets the heels of those who disagree. But with humility, dialogue and learning can take place. Again, space is created where God can work.

So we need a balanced mindset that is able to be firm and able to defend what is good while at the same time being appropriately humble about our own level of wisdom. Knowing what is good does not mean we know it all; and being appropriately humble does not mean that we surrender our God-given Scripture-informed idea of what is good.

that is not an easy balance to maintain, but I believe that is what Paul is calling for.

# Do not avenge yourselves, but seek opportunity to “feed” the enemy.

For the third balanced set of commands, we begin in verse 19. “Do not take revenge.” This not entirely a new teaching in the New Testament. The code of Leviticus prohibited revenge against fellow Israelites. Lev 19:18 "'Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord.” NIV But certainly in the NT it is no longer limited to one’s own group but is a general command. Not taking revenge may well keep us from sins of violence and anger, but it does not overcome evil in the situation or in the other person.

This is why Jesus takes it further.

This is the balance part. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus challenged us, Mt 5:43-45 NIV

"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' 44 But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45 that you may be sons of your Father in heaven.”

Paul helps us with some practical advice as to how to put Jesus’ challenge into practice. He says, if your enemy has a need for food, feed him.” Do not withhold good that you can do even from an enemy. We can generalize it and say, if your enemy has a need, try to meet it. If your enemy sees you going out of your way to help, they probably will no longer be your enemy.

The children’s sermon illustrated this point perfectly, didn’t it? I think as adults, we can make the translation of the story into the circumstances of adult lives quite easily. For example; who do we lend things to? Only best friends right? Maybe not if we follow Paul’s encouragement. When a neighbor that we have had a disagreement or two with has a lawnmower breakdown do we mow lawn for him with ours or just let his lawn grow so our lawn looks real good compared to his?

But this is how we overcome evil. This is how we can make an opening so God is able to work to transform hearts one at a time.

# Conclusion

So if you have been thinking your Christianity was too simple, too routine, then I encourage you to accept the tough challenge of Paul, “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”