

068 How Shall We Respond to the Evil that Surrounds Us?

Romans 12:14, 17-21

Message by Dr R Bruce Montgomery ~ Grace Church ~ 3/12/17

Introduction

I want to begin with the story of one of my current day heroes in the faith.

Some of you may have heard of John Perkins and know of The Voice of Calvary and Mendenhall Ministries, which he founded. A Christian minister, bible teacher, and civil rights activist, he has received national recognition including thirteen honorary doctorate degrees for his leadership in race relations.

John – an African American - was born in Mississippi in 1930. At the age of 17, at the encouragement of his family after his brother Clyde was shot and killed by a policeman, John left the south and moved to California.

While in California he became a Christian, and in 1960 he returned to Mississippi because he felt God calling him to preach the gospel to the poor black people he had been raised with, and help them be developing black leadership.

Ten years later, on February 7, 1970 – a Saturday night – a van full of black college students who had been taking part in a civil rights march was pulled over by the highway patrol in Brandon, Mississippi, and the students were arrested and thrown in jail.

John and two of his associates went to post bail. When they arrived at the jail they were surrounded by five deputy sheriffs and several highway patrolmen who arrested them and began to beat and torture them.

Perkins had not been speeding, taking drugs, or resisting arrest. He didn't have a police record. All he had done was go to post bail for the students, but he was known as a black leader and he was hated.

Perkins, along with some of the others, was beaten most of that night. They stomped on him and kicked him in the head, ribs and groin.

One officer brought a fork over to him and said, “*Do you see this?*” Then he jammed it up his nose. After that he shoved it down his throat.

For part of that terrible night Perkins was unconscious and so mutilated that the students who were watching over him in the cell thought he was either dead or about to die.

It was inarguably a particularly vicious, violent, racist form of evil. Yet an amazing thing happened that night in John Perkin's heart. Up to this point he had been preaching exclusively to black people. Actually the doors of white churches were closed to him, and that was all he was “allowed” to do. But the beatings gave him a new vision. He wrote:

For the first time I saw what hate had done to these people. These policemen were poor. They saw themselves as failures. The only way they knew how to find a sense of worth was by beating us. Their racism made them feel like “somebody.”

When I saw that I couldn't hate back. I could only pity them. I said to God that night, “God, if you will get me out of this jail alive . . . I really want to preach a gospel that will heal these people too.”

God did spare his life. It took a period of time for him to recover, both physically and emotionally, but during that time God taught him that the same gospel that frees blacks also frees whites.

He later said, “*Now that God had enabled me to forgive the many whites who had wronged me, I found myself able to truly love them. I wanted to return good for evil.*”

And he did! His ministry is proof of that desire, and is continuing and has branched out. It is a striking case of a believer refusing to be overcome by evil, but instead overcoming evil with good, which is the topic of our passage in **Romans 12**.

After dealing with our relationships with fellow believers in genuine love, a subject we looked at in the last two sermons, in the verses we are going to look at this morning Paul turns his attention to relations with outsiders, particularly those who don't like Christians and do all they can to make life miserable for them.

Not everyone is going to be excited about what God is doing in your life, and in the church.

The verses we are going to look at this week are about how to deal with people when they do you wrong.

Romans 12:14 Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Romans 12:17 Do not repay anyone evil for evil.¹ Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody.

Someone has done something to offend you – maybe they’ve accused you of something you didn’t do, or blamed you for something that was their fault, or perhaps taken something that was yours – and now you have the chance to get even. What do you do?

Our human nature whispers in our ear, “*Pay them back! Get revenge! Do to them before they do it to you again!*”

Too many people live their lives that way. It is a huge contributing factor that leads to rampant violence, hatred, animosity, discord.

Paul’s advice is straightforward enough: **do not repay anyone evil for evil.**

The starting point of revenge is often cursing. *The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*: “Curses, found in almost religious history, are utterances that are designed to bring harm by supernatural operation.”

¹ **Evil = kakon.** Broad range of meanings in classical Greek – just plain “bad” or wicked in a moral sense. Idea of destructive, causing harm. Also used to refer to something that is useless, unsuitable. In the Old Testament it refers primarily to the evil which objectively hurts one’s existence. It is a concrete term -not some abstract, theoretical principle, but moral behavior.

In the New Testament the word is used with meaning evil, bad, destructive, damaging, unjust. 26 of 50 occurrences in New Testament are by Paul, 15 of which are in Romans. For Paul the problem of evil lies in the fact that people often do evil against their will, and it rules him. Our evil nature shows itself in evil acts. It separates us from God and brings us under judgment. Every hope of conquering evil by our own strength is blasted. The solution to the problem of evil isn’t to be found in a human struggle, but in Christ’s victory over evil on the cross and in the resurrection.

I hope you and I don’t traffic in black magic and malicious incantations. But how many of us can truly say we’ve never wished harm to come on the person who has injured or offended us?

How we choose to respond verbally is an indicator which we will do next. If we want to obey the command to avoid returning evil for evil we have to start by bringing our tongues under control

The first preventative measure to keep retaliation from festering is to bless the offending party. Greek word for “bless” means “to speak well of.” We get our English words “eulogy” and “eulogize” from it. A term we often use in memorial services. But shouldn’t wait until a person’s life has ended to speak well of them.

You can’t keep people from saying bad things about you or doing bad things to you, but you can control this one thing: you can remain “above board,” refusing to provide fuel to justifiably fan the flame of their hatred.

It’s very dangerous to become consumed by a desire for revenge and respond to hate with hate.

It can take over your heart and dominate you. Not only will you become like the ones you hate, you will be judged! Right after the Lord’s prayer which we often pray on Sunday mornings, we read **Matthew 6:14,15 For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. ¹⁵But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.** So don’t let that happen! Look past the offense done to you to discover what good we can do, so our actions are more than merely reactions.

As followers of Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, our behavior should be guided by godly character, not driven this way or that by every insult or offense we encounter.

Romans 12:18 If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.

Paul is a realist. He knows some people are determined to be our enemy no matter how blamelessly we choose to live.

Paul's has two simple pieces of advice on how to live at peace with others. The first is to simply let it go and leave it in God's hands!

Romans 12:19 *Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge, I will repay," says the Lord.*

Punishment for sin is God's business, not yours, not mine. The point of turning the pay back over to God isn't that *"He can hurt them a lot worse than I can!"*

It's good to remember that God's wrath is never retaliatory or spiteful. Unlike us, God is never capricious, arbitrary, partial or unfair in his dealings with people.²

God's righteous wrath is never aroused by irrational or selfish emotions, but by a genuine concern for people who are suffering from injustice, selfishness, greed, lust, envy, jealousy or lack of self-control.³

God always hates sin and cannot tolerate evil! His divine wrath is a term used in Scripture to describe his strong, ongoing constant opposition to all that is evil.

A God of love must hate anything that would bring harm on those he loves, he must take action to protect the innocent.

Concerned for our wellbeing, God is repulsed by anything that destroys our physical health, our mental and emotional wellbeing, our relationships with others, and above all our spiritual condition.⁴

During this age of grace God's wrath pursues the sinner, confronts him or her with the consequences of sin, chastises him and makes his life miserable. Why? To bring them to repentance.

² He is *the same today, yesterday and forever*. He never changes, and he always acts consistently with his holy will and righteous character.

³ It should therefore not surprise us that he values inner authenticity in people and hates hypocrisy – both religious and non-religious.

⁴ He always has our best interests at heart. As we discovered in our in depth study of the Ten Commandments a couple of summers ago, the purpose behind the Moral Law is that we might be protected and blessed to the fullest extent possible.

To give him, to give her an opportunity to respond in faith to God's grace freely extended.⁵

When we take revenge into our own hands, we may be actually standing between God and his beloved whom he is pursuing to bring to himself.

Eventually this age of grace will end and the time of judgment will begin. Who are we to presume to take the Creator God of the Universe's place in sitting in judgment in the life of another creature? There is someone in heaven eminently more qualified than you or I to pass judgment! Leave the job to him.

No wrong ever committed against you, not even in the darkest hour of any night, has ever gone unnoticed by God. It is recorded in a book of heaven. God not only knows every bad thing that has been done for you, he sees the evil of the wrong far better than you do. In his purity and righteousness he hates the evil of the wrong done to you 10,000 times more than you do. And he claims the right to settle claims for you.

The big issue is, do you believe he will? When you are really wronged and evil is done against you are you willing to trust him to take care of it instead of letting it fester and seethe and chew at your insides?

The second piece of advice for living at peace with everyone is found in **verse 20**. Instead of revenge (which people expect) we are to do the unexpected and offer forgiveness and grace. It catches our would-be enemies off guard, and they don't know how to react!

Romans 12:20 *On the contrary: "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head."*

Unfortunately for us, Paul uses a figure of speech that is unfamiliar to us.

If I say someone has *a bee in their bonnet* – you know that I'm referring to someone being extremely cranky or upset about something.⁶

⁵ **II Peter 3:9 . . .** *he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.*

I can refer to: *Keeping the ball rolling, being in the same boat, having a cow, beating around the bush* and you all know what I mean. But someone unfamiliar with the English language would be puzzled, just like we are at the image of **heaping burning coals** on someone's head.

While everyone in Paul's day would have gotten it, we have to do a little digging to get an idea of what he's driving at.

At first read the phrase conjures up negative connotations. It sounds like vengeance or retribution. Like saying, "*Let the fire fall!*" These negative assessments disappear when we look at this figure of speech in its larger context, and properly grasp its meaning in its ancient Middle Eastern setting.

The whole context argues against the possibility of interpreting this figure in a negative sense. We've been told to bless, not curse, those who persecute us. We aren't to repay evil with evil. We need to search for peace. Where the world's value system would call for retribution and vengeance in return for evil, we are to respond in love and kindness, going so far as to give food and drink to enemies who are hungry and thirsty. The next verse, **Romans 12:21**, implies that applying burning coals refers to an overcoming of evil by good.

This is confirmed when we look at the context of **Proverbs 25:21,22** which is quoted here. It closes with the words, **and the LORD will reward you**. God's rewards in the Old Testament are always given in response to human acts of kindness.

So an analysis of the context shows that the image of **pouring burning coals** on someone's head must have a positive meaning. It must be seen as an act of kindness goodness, done for the benefit of the recipient.

We get a clue by turning to the narrative of the prophet Isaiah's call to service in **Isaiah 6**. There, after his confession of sin, a burning coal is taken from the altar and applied to his

mouth, with the assurance that **Isaiah 6:7** *your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for*.

It is talking about purification and cleansing that follows repentance.

So it seems to be that the purpose of **heaping burning coals** seems to be that by our responding to evil with good, the evildoer may be brought to repentance.

When our adversary is treated with kindness, when good is returned for evil, then evil is overcome and our antagonist may be transformed by a renewal of his mind, and reoriented from darkness to light.

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

Three times in the verses we have been looking at Paul has said that we are not to return evil for evil. He is not just repeating himself (as old men tend to do), but rather building a progression.

In **verse 14** he tells us we are not to *spea*k badly of another person, but instead to speak good.

In **verses 17- 19** he tells us we aren't to *retaliate* when evil is done for us.

In **verses 20** and **21** he goes a step further and tells us that not only aren't we to retaliate, we are actually to *do good* and, amazingly, *overcome* the evil in other people by our good conduct.

Doing this – exhibiting real love for and doing good to those who seek to do us harm seems beyond our human capabilities, and it is. Genuine love is only possible when we allow the one who loves us most, and who gave his life for us, to transform us into new creations made in his image.

Have you ever considered the rip off that Jesus Christ got? Nobody in this world has ever been wronged like Jesus has been wronged. Nobody in this world has ever gotten a raw deal like the one Jesus received at the hands of his contemporaries. Nobody has ever been more undeserving of all the abuse and rejection and false accusations than he, or been more innocent than he.

⁶ Another e.g. is *to bell the cat* – which means to do something this is extremely dangerous, to undertake a hazardous task with the object of rendering a common enemy harmless (from the fable of the Mice and the Cat).

Jesus experienced all the hatred and injustice and violence that all the leaders in Jerusalem could pour out on him. He was also a victim of the mindless hate and the violence of the crowd and the Roman soldiers who had nothing against him personally, but who used him as an excuse to vent the hatred in their hearts.

But Jesus didn't take on and return their hate, and he didn't let it veer him off course of revealing the Father's love even for his enemies. **I Peter 2:23** *When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.*

I Peter 2:24 *He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed.*

Before you can give love, you have to receive love. If you find that despite all your good intentions and best efforts you habitually find yourselves being hateful, spiteful, mean – the sort of person you wouldn't like to be around yourself – it is probably because you haven't opened your heart to receive the flood of God's love and mercy.

Squeeze a sponge, and what comes out is what it is full of. If you are filled with hate and evil when the pressure is on ugly things come out. But if you are filled with the love of Christ, no matter how much pressure is put on you, love will come bubbling out.

Conclusion/response

We live in one of the wealthiest and most immoral valleys of the world. Appalled at the extent and depth of evil in our day. It's hard to put into words the wickedness of our day and specifically in our area.⁷

⁷ In **I Corinthians 6** Paul gave a descriptive list of the populace of Corinth. I wonder if these are terms we can accurately apply to our population?

- “sexually immoral,”
- “idolaters,”
- “adulterers,”
- “male prostitutes,”
- “homosexual offenders,”

How do we react to wicked people? Possible reactions:

- Go to war?
- Editorials?
- Organize a protest?
- Picket?
- Shun?
- Consign them all to hell?

Easy enough to “hate” people different than we are, especially when they obviously are flaunting their immorality and shaking their fists at God.

But Jesus said to *love your enemies* and *pray for those who despitefully use you.*

What if, instead of despising and hating them, we took the gospel to them? *Love is stronger than hate because hate enslaves, but the decision to love brings freedom – both to you and to the one who would be your enemy.*

Our vision statement (printed on back of your bulletin each week at top just under logo): *Attracting people to Christ with love, grace and excellence.* Let's do more than have it as a slogan, let's put it into practice, for the honor and glory of God and the expansion of his kingdom rule in this place.

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- “thieves,”
 - “greedy,”
 - “drunkards,”
 - “slanderers” and
 - “swindlers” ?

Those are the exact words used by Paul when he wrote to the. After listing them, Paul states: *“And that is what some of you were.”*