

“Overcome Evil With Good,” Romans 12:17-21 (June 5, 2016)

¹⁷ Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all.

¹⁸ If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. ¹⁹ 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.” ²⁰ 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.” ²¹ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

PRAY

We are finishing up a five week series on Romans 12, and in this chapter of the Bible we learn a great deal about how, practically, we can live the Christian life. The apostle Paul packed more helpful instruction on Christian living in this chapter than can be found in any other chapter in the Bible. The first two weeks we studied the first two verses of the chapters, and we looked at the interior life of the Christian – how as a Christian we are to be living sacrifices and transformed by the renewing of our minds.

These last three weeks we’ve looked at the Christian life in terms of how we as believers are to relate to other people. You could say we backed the camera out and instead of focusing so much on us as individuals we looked more at the church as a whole. So two weeks ago we looked at spiritual gifts, and how we are to use them to serve the church. Last week we talked about hospitality and how we can minister to one another through that gift.

Now, to finish the series, we will today study the last five verses in the chapter, and in these verses Paul answers this question: what does it look like for a Christian to respond to evil?

We live in a fallen world, with lots of sin, lots of pain, lots of sorrow, and much of it is the result of one person deliberately heaping it on another person. We’ve all been hurt by others, some of us in this room have suffered terribly at the hands of other people. What do we do with it? How does a Christian respond to evil?

Three things we must do: *first, we must not repay evil for evil. Second, we must heap burning coals. Third, we must leave room for God’s wrath.* That’s how you respond to evil as a Christian.

First, we must not repay evil for evil. When we are wronged, the most natural reaction (at least, it’s natural to me) is to hurt the person that wronged me right back. You do evil to me, I will do evil to you. You make a cutting remark about me, I make a cutting about me. You hit me, I hit you back. Our natural reaction is to repay evil for evil.

But we are expressly forbidden in the Scriptures from doing that. Verse 17: “Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all.” Verse 19: “Beloved, never avenge yourselves ...”

1 Peter 2:21-23: “For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. ²² He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. ²³ When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly.”

Never repay evil for evil. This teaching, by the way, makes Christianity unique among world religions. All the other religions say you love those who love and take revenge on your enemies. On the other hand, this teaching has been the focus of a lot of criticism of Christianity, with people saying that Christianity must be for the weak, the effeminate, the frightened, if you are supposed to love your enemies and not retaliate when you are wronged. Ted Turner once called Christianity a “religion for losers.”

But that’s not the picture we get from the Bible. King David in the Old Testament was a warrior, not at all afraid of a fight. But he went out of his way on numerous occasions so as to not repay evil for evil. Once, when King Saul and some of his men were trying to hunt down and kill David, Saul went into a cave to relieve himself. David and his men were hiding from Saul in the back, and when they saw Saul come in they urged David to get up and kill Saul, or at least let them do it for him. ⁶ He said to his men, “The LORD forbid that I should do this thing to my lord, the LORD’s anointed, to put out my hand against him, seeing he is the LORD’s anointed.” ⁷ So David persuaded his men with these words and did not permit them to attack Saul. 1 Samuel 24:6-7.

We cannot repay evil for evil, but does that mean that as Christians when we are wronged we must just take it? And there’s nothing we can do about it? Absolutely not. Look at Matthew 5:38-42 (these are perhaps some of the most misunderstood verses in the Bible, spoken by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount): “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ ³⁹ But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. ⁴⁰ And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. ⁴¹ And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. ⁴² Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you.”

It’s so easy in our culture to read those verses and think all Jesus is saying here is that when it comes to evil, Christians must be doormats. We must allow ourselves to get run over and slapped around ... literally. We think a bully on a playground pushing the other kids around.

But in the first century, a slap on the right cheek (almost certainly coming from the back of the right hand of the slapper) was an insult, not a physical attack. And when you were insulted, you had legal rights – you could go to the rabbis and sue that person for damages.

Jesus is saying here, “Do not avail yourselves of these rights – don’t take revenge when these things happen. Instead, turn the other cheek.” That not only means you’re not

taking revenge, but it also means you're not scared because you're not running away. You're not cowering in fear before the insult.

You're standing your ground and saying, "I'm not going to let your anger, your emotion, your evil control this situation. I'm going to control it. I'm not going to hit back, nor am I going to press charges. I'm making a conscious decision not to get caught up in the emotions of the situation, but to remain calm, remain in control, and absorb the evil you've done to me, and I refuse to repay it." *Turning the other cheek is not an act of fear but an act of defiance in the face of evil.*

Now, like I said a moment ago, the way you do this changes across cultures. A slap on the cheek would not be an insult today – today, it's battery. It would require a different response. And today, when someone insults us, we don't respond by doing this [turn cheek]. That wouldn't make any sense! The person who insulted us would say, "What in the world are you doing?"

We wouldn't literally "turn the other cheek" in response to that kind of evil, but figuratively we must turn the other cheek and refuse to repay evil for evil. How? We wouldn't repay the insult, nor would we go behind that person's back and run them down to anyone who would listen. Instead, we'd say to the one who wronged us, "What you just said was hurtful and you should never let words like that come out of your mouth. You should never do that again." That's turning the other cheek. Not being a doormat, but not repaying evil for evil. Rather, on the inside, remaining calm, collected, in control, but on the outside acting – responding in a constructive way, a godly way, refusing to get sucked in to the cycle of evil and trying to limit the ability of the evil by making peace.

Paul, though, is very realistic – he realizes that you can't always make peace in the face of evil. "If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all." Romans 12:18. "If possible" – but sometimes it's not within your power to control the situation in such a way so as to live peaceably with everyone. With some people and with certain types of evil, you might have to call the police. In some desperate situations, you might have to intervene physically in order to try and restrain an evil person until the police arrive.

But the goal is to live peaceably, and along those lines I want to comment on one phenomenon in our modern world Paul couldn't possibly have thought about, but which is a real struggle for a lot of us: how to live peaceably when it comes to engaging with media. We are inundated with articles or comments on articles from various news websites, on Facebook, on Twitter. Some of us watch a lot of news channels on television. And you may have had the experience of reading one of those articles or watching one of those stories and finding yourself angry, then finding yourself arguing about that piece of news with someone in your head. An internal argument. Now, this person you're arguing with might be real or they might be imagined – you might actually know this person or it might be a composite of a lot of different people.

But you see a story on or you read an article about, oh, I don't know, people who insist they did not have to shoot the gorilla. They could have saved the child without killing

Harambe. And you find yourself angry and, in your head, you go into this argument. You may never actually argue with a real, live person on the other side of the issue from you, but internally this argument goes on. Or maybe you argue with the television while the story is being shown. Maybe you have no idea what I'm talking about, but for some of us this is a daily reality.

Here's my point: if you allow yourself to get worked up when you are confronted by opinions on political issues, on cultural issues, on religious issues, that differ from your views, that's not living "peaceably with all." You're not living the Christian life when you do that. You may in a small but real way be "repaying evil for evil."

Now, what's the point of all this? Why should we refrain from repaying evil for evil? Second, because we are to heap burning coals. ²⁰ 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." Romans 12:20. Paul quotes from the book of Proverbs, and we don't know where the phrase "heaping burning coals" on the head of your enemy originally comes from, and there is a lot of debate about what precisely it means.

But I think from the context here in Romans I think it's reasonably clear that to heap burning coals on the head of one who does evil to you is to love and serve your enemy in such a way so that they hopefully will feel shame for how they've treated you and, as a result, repent. Change their behavior. Stop mistreating you. Stopping sinning.

It's also a theme in the book of Proverbs. Proverbs 15:1: "A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger." When someone is angry with you, when someone speaks in an unreasonable way toward you, and you respond softly, it helps diffuse the situation. Again, it's not that you just sit there and silently "take it." It's not that you don't tell them what they are doing is wrong, but you do it gently and without anger.

But we still haven't answered "why"? Why, Christians, should we refrain from repaying evil for evil? Why is that so necessary to the Christian life?

Because that is what God has done for us in Christ. Friends, if you're here this morning and you're a Christian, what were you before you came to know the Lord? You were his enemy! That's Romans 5:10 – we were God's enemies. If you claim to be a Christian, it means you own – you absolutely own – the fact that you are a sinner. You have done evil things.

No, you may not have raped, murdered, stolen, committed adultery, but you've done evil – you've done evil in word, thought, and deed. You cannot be a Christian without owning the evil you've done.

And did God repay evil for evil? No. Romans 5:10: "For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled,

shall we be saved by his life.” God did not repay us evil for evil, but he reconciled us to him in Jesus Christ.

What does that mean? Do you know what sin really is? One way to define it is that sin is trusting in your wisdom, your insight, your ability to get things done – sin is trusting your way instead of God’s way. That’s why, just to pick one sin at random, we are stingy with our money, instead of generously giving it away. God says to be generous with your money, help other people with it, serve other people with it, that’s God way. But when we trust our wisdom, when we go our way, we hold onto our money because, hey, we might need that money if the economy goes back into a deep recession. We might need that money for a rainy day. We trust our wisdom instead of God’s wisdom, so we are stingy with our money and we sin.

It’s also why we repay evil for evil. When we are wronged, we are so quick to think we must strike back and get it done ourselves, because if we don’t thing this evil done to us will go unpunished. We can’t let them get away with this, we must take care of this, so we trust our way of doing things instead of God’s way.

And when you do that over and over again in different areas of your life sin, guess what? You are breaking your relationship with God. God wants a relationship with you, he wants to love you, he wants you to know and trust and enjoy him. But a relationship with God is in many ways like a relationship with anyone else – you can’t have a relationship with someone who continually does the opposite of what you want them to do. You can’t have a friendship like that, you can’t have a marriage like that, and you can’t say you have a relationship with God like that either.

We’ve all done evil, but rather than repay us with evil for our evil, rather than taking revenge on us or just giving up on us, Romans 5:10 says God reconciled us to him in Jesus Christ. He’s made a relationship with him possible through Jesus Christ. Now, how did he do that?

Just think about it for a second: how do you have a relationship with someone that refuses to do anything you want to do, that refuses to listen to your counsel, that continually engages in self-destructive behavior? There’s only one way: you have go get them. You can’t just sit at home and fume. You can’t repay evil for evil. You must go after them if you want a relationship with them.

If you want a relationship with that person then you must change, you must adapt, and you must go where they are – even if where they are is a horrible place, surrounded by horrible people, doing horrible things, if you want a relationship with them there you must go.

And don’t you see? That is precisely what God has done for us in Jesus! If God had not wanted a relationship with us, he could have just stayed in heaven and allowed us to play out our sinful lives however we wanted here on earth. But he loved us. He loved us so much that he sent his One and Only Son, Jesus Christ, to earth to live among us, so that

we could know Him. *That's changing, that's adapting, that's going and getting people to have a relationship.* God didn't have to do that, but he did. And then at the end of his life Jesus Christ reconciled us to God by his death on the cross. Instead of repaying evil for evil, God absorbed the evil himself in Jesus Christ so that we wouldn't have to pay for it ourselves. God took the punishment and the justice we deserve for our evil on himself.

Friends, when you really see that – when you see your sin, and when you see the incredible lengths to which God went to reconcile you to himself – and when you really begin to feel it in your heart, to the extent that sometimes there are tears of joy when you think about the cross – when you see that and that happens to you, what's going on? **God has heaped burning coals on your head.** You were hungry and thirsty, and God gave you grace to satisfy you. You know that, and now you want, you truly want, to live in such a way so as to please, not frustrate, this God who loves you so very much.

And one way we can do that is by refusing to repay evil for evil, so that this same grace we've experienced, others can experience, even those who are our enemies. You can go after them, you adapt for them, you can even long to show God's love them, because God loved you when you were his enemy. That's why Paul can say, "Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God." 2 Corinthians 5:20.

When you feel the burning coals of God's mercy on your head, then I don't care what someone has done to you, *you long for them reconciled to God.*

Maybe you're thinking, "J.D., you don't know how badly I've been hurt. And I know I should forgive, I know I should love this person, I know I should want this person to be reconciled to God ... but I don't. I want them to pay for what they've done to me. I can't imagine ever feeling different." I don't know how badly you've been hurt; I've had a relatively easy life in that area. But there's one more thing we must know if we are to love our enemies.

Third, we must leave room for God's wrath. For those of you who have been really hurt by someone, or even for those of you who love someone who has been really hurt by someone, *I want you to know that it's okay to want justice.* There is nothing wrong with that. We do resist evil when we can, but when evil is unchecked, it is okay to long for, to pray for, to want justice to be done.

In the book of Revelation, we read about the souls of the Christians who have been martyred and are gathered around the Lord Jesus, and it says, "They cried out with a loud voice, "O Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?" Revelation 6:10. Ramadan begins tomorrow, it's a month-long period of fasting for Muslims to remember the first revelation of the Koran to Mohammed, and as we prayed a moment ago some secretly Christian people in Muslim countries will have to participate or they'll be found out and persecuted and perhaps killed. And you think about how horrible that would be – what if we were forced to worship a God we did not believe in? You want justice when you hear that.

There's nothing wrong with wanting justice, and the promise of Romans 12 is that justice will be done. It's just that we won't be doing it. Romans 12:19: 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." Justice, vengeance, repayment – it will be done.

So many people say this notion of a wrathful God is a stumbling block to people becoming Christians. They say it's a primitive doctrine that we in the modern church need to jettison. Nothing could be further from the truth. If you really want power to forgive others and not take revenge when you've been wronged, then you need a wrathful God.

Friends, Romans 12:19 is simply saying that God is a God of justice, of fairness, of equity, and he's not going to allow anyone to get away with anything. Every sin will be perfectly paid for. Either the sin will be paid for by Jesus Christ in the place of the sinner, because the sinner has trusted Christ and taken shelter under the cross, or it will be paid for by the sinner himself forever in hell. It will happen – every sin accounted for, justice done for all of them.

If you didn't believe in the wrath of a just God on sin, how could you ever really forgive anyone from the heart and let go of your anger? You'd always be worried that they're getting away with it. *But no one's going to get away with it.* God's wrath will do its work, and we can't add anything to it.

But we must remember that it vengeance is the Lord's, and we are not qualified to at all to carry it out. That's God's job, not ours.

The last third of the book of Genesis is the life of Joseph, and if you know that story Joseph's father, Jacob, played favorites among his twelve sons, and Joseph was the favorite, and the other brothers hated Joseph for it. And so when Joseph was a teenager the brothers seized him and sold him off into slavery. For the next fourteen years, Joseph toiled in slavery or languished in prison. But he gets out, and finds himself through providential circumstances the prime minister of Egypt. And several years later, his brothers – the same men who sold him into slavery – appear before him as beggars. When the brothers realize who Joseph is, they are terrified that Joseph will avenge himself, because he certainly had the power to do it. I love, though, Genesis 50:19: But Joseph said to them, "Do not fear, for am I in the place of God?"

Do you realize what Joseph is saying? He's saying every person who holds a grudge, who holds onto their anger, who stays resentful toward someone who has wronged them, is sitting in God's chair. If you hold onto a grudge and refuse to forgive those who have hurt you, you are taking God's place. But in Romans 12:19 God is telling you, "Get out of my chair."

Friends, this is not God saying, "It didn't matter," but instead that *you are not competent to avenge the wrongs done to you.* You may be so angry and you're sitting there

thinking, “I know exactly what this person deserves.” No, you don’t! You don’t know what all the different factors that drove them to do what they did to you. You don’t know how they’ve suffered, you don’t know all the different influences on their life. You don’t know what all has made them into the person they’ve become. You have no idea what punishment would really get through to that person. So God says, “Get out of my chair.”

All of you have been wronged at one time or another. Most of you, probably, have been wronged seriously by someone who has never apologized or has seriously tried to do anything to make it right. And one of the roadblocks to your letting that hurt and bitterness go is the conviction that justice should be done. So we hold on to anger, we don’t let go of the grudge, and play the story over and over again with the feelings: it shouldn’t have happened; it shouldn’t have happened; it was wrong; it was wrong. How can he be so happy now when this has happened to me? It is so wrong!

But Romans 12:19 can lift that burden from you. God is saying, “My chair, for those who are unqualified, is actually a prison, where your bitterness puts you in bondage. Lay down the burden of anger, bitterness, and resentment. It does not mean you were not wronged, and it does not mean there is no justice. It does not mean they just got away with it.” No. God says, “When you lay down the burden of vengeance, I will pick it up.”

Then you can take a deep breath, perhaps for the first time in decades, and at last you may be free to love. John Piper talks about this in one of his sermons. When he was 28, his mother died in a car accident in Israel. Some drunken Israeli soldiers were in a car, and the swerved into oncoming traffic and hit the bus in which his mother was riding, and she was killed instantly.

But because of Romans 12, Piper said he was not only did he not hate those soldiers, he loved them and wanted them to know the gospel. He hopes one day to be in heaven with them. And at the very end of his sermon he said: “This, I commend to you, is a wonderful way to live. This is freedom. And in this freedom there are great open spaces for love.”

Friends, I want you to be able to love. It’s a wonderful way to live. So do not repay anyone evil for evil, but leave room for God’s wrath. Lay the burden of your anger and bitterness down, and let God pick it up. He’ll make sure that justice is done. **PRAY**