

## **How to Overcome Evil**

### **Romans 12:14-21**

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[Much of this message is adapted from Jay Adams' good work on expositing Romans 12 in his book "How to Overcome Evil." I am grateful for his many works, but this one in particular.]

I'm sick and tired of this. All he ever does is condemn me. He's nasty all the time. I've just about had enough. I'm done with this. I'm going to set up boundaries, because I need to protect myself.

These are all things that many of us think when somebody wrongs us. We're not sure what to do. Most of us want to do the right thing and glorify God, but what does that look like?

Should I defend myself?

Should I just stand by and take it?

Is this what Jesus meant when he said turn the other cheek?

We are Christians living in a world full of hatred, fear, and trouble. While we have the great promise of heaven, God has not yet removed us from trouble. In fact, when one becomes a Christian he takes on a whole new set of problems. God has, by the Word and by his spirit, given believers all that is necessary to handle evil successfully.

Some of how we handle trouble is based on our perspective, and our understanding of God's providential care and plan for our lives. Look, for example, with me at Philippians chapter 1, starting in verse 12.

I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ. And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear.

Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from good will. The latter do it out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. The former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment. What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice.

Evil men have thrown Paul into prison in Rome. Soon he will face the Roman Emperor Nero. Paul is not sure whether he will survive that encounter. But he was prepared either way. What Paul wanted, above all else, was to give a successful witness for Christ... that Jesus would be exalted in his body whether he lived or died. Both Paul's present condition in the Roman prison and his future potential death under the hand of Nero placed him under incredible pressure; and demanded a biblical response from him.

And so, where does Paul's perspective come into play? Under these kind of circumstances most of us would grow resentful, and others would just wallow in self-pity. Still others of us would strike out in anger, and some of us would simply be devastated.

But Paul's response was different. As he responded to questions from the Philippian church, we see a perspective that is completely different than the one we would probably have. Look again at verse 12.

*I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel...*

And so, we see in Paul not someone who is simply languishing in prison, but someone who is working out ministry in the midst of evil. He has not given up but is still hard at work. Some might say that Paul was on top of his trouble.

With that perspective in mind, turn with me to Romans chapter 12. Read along with me verses 14-21.

We will work through passages based on the structure of the text rather than simply working through the verses in order.

The bottom line this evening we see in verse 21. God expects us to overcome evil.

One commentator writes,

The word overcome is a war word. It comes right off the battlefield with the smell of smoke and sweat still clinging to it. The term is used to describe a defeat. To be overcome is to be defeated in battle. To overcome, on the other hand, is to defeat the enemy. You are in the battle of your life. Your battle is with sin wherever it is found, within you or outside of you. Here, Paul is thinking of those sinful attempts that others make to hurt you. Through them Satan wants to defeat you and disgrace Christ.

Look a verse 21 again: don't be defeated in battle by evil; but in battle defeat evil with good. You are in a war, like it or not, and you will be attacked – one way or another, overtly or subtly. If you are not ready or ill-prepared you will not be able to withstand when the attack comes.

So, you have been given battle orders by your commander-in-chief: "Don't lose the battle with evil but defeat evil in battle with good." Recognize the fact that you are in a war and study these orders carefully – there is much in them to help you fight well.<sup>1</sup>

Christians are not only to be undefeated by evil (do not be overcome by evil), Christians are to defeat evil (overcome evil with good).

God expects these battles to be fought and won. But they are not to be won with revenge. They are not to be won with callous hearts. They are to be won by doing good.

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<sup>1</sup> Jay Adams, *How to Overcome Evil*, pages 29-31

I once heard a pastor say that evil is a popgun; good is an atomic weapon.

God expects us to use the strong weapon not the weak weapon. But, what does this look like? It begins in verse 14.

When we are persecuted, we are to bless not curse.

Blessing is simply asking God to do good to the one who is persecuting you and you saying good things to them as well.

On the other hand, cursing them is asking God to punish them and you saying evil things to them as well.

In James chapter 3, he points out the contradiction when believers curse another. James writes, “Out of the same mouth come words that bless God and words that curse men. This ought not to be! The same stream doesn’t send forth fresh water and saltwater.”

Christ on the cross prayed for those who killed him; later, Stephen did the same. These “blessings” were prayers for the greatest good of the evil persecutor.

So in all this, the emphasis is on the other person, not on you, your hurt, your pain, etc. This is the way of love. And that is how you bless rather than curse.

Do you see the unique perspective that Paul is bringing to our minds? It is a complete change in perspective from what we would normally desire to do.

God is asking us to have the same perspective that Paul showed while in prison in Rome. God is asking us to have the same perspective that Paul showed throughout his ministry and travels. It is the perspective that understands the truths that God is, indeed, working all these evil things together for our good. And by working these evil things together for our good, God is conforming us more and more to the image of Christ.

But many of us have a huge problem. The problem is simple, but profound and deep within our hearts. That problem is that many of us have no desire to be conformed more and more to the image of Jesus.

And if you don’t have any desire to be more and more conformed to the image of Jesus, then you will simply suffer, become resentful, wallow in self-pity, and plead for sympathy from others.

Let me make it clear, we should have sympathy for one another. Peter writes, “Finally, all of you, have unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart, and a humble mind.” (1 Peter 3:8). The context of this verse is encouragement from Peter to live righteously while being persecuted by others. The believers that Peter was addressing are suffering increasing persecution, and the purpose of this letter was to teach them to live in a righteous way in the midst of this evil hostility.

But, because sympathy and compassion emanate from the heart of God, the one suffering evil is required to look with compassion even on her oppressor. The one suffering evil is also compelled by Christ’s love to rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep.

Injustice is a difficult pill to swallow. Suffering evil at the hands of others is a hard place and a testing place. As we walk beside our friends who are suffering evil we must understand that these are opportunities for our friends to obey the Word from their heart. Often our desire for sympathy is purely emotional. And these emotions provide glimpses into the heart of those with whom we come alongside.

How else can we bless and not curse? Verse 20 tells us to do specific good toward an enemy.

By giving him something to eat or something to drink we begin to meet his physical needs. It may be more than food or drink, though Paul is using this as an example. And we do this out of love for God, whether we feel like it or not.

This is true of most of the commands in Scripture. That is, that we do them whether we feel like it or not. We do it because God is honored and glorified when we obey. Jesus made it clear that one of the ways that we show our love for him is in obedience to his commands.

Sometimes obedience hurts. For Christ, love and obedience meant going to the cross through the garden of Gethsemane. Jesus did not feel like dying for your sins, but he did it anyway. The Bible teaches that he *endured* the cross while focusing on the ensuing joy that it would bring.

Sometimes when we express love or are obedient to God's commands, we focus on the pragmatic here and now rather than the ultimate goals of obedience to Christ.

What does it mean to heap burning coals on another's head?

It is a way to subdue our enemies by our expression of love. Picture shoveling hot coals over a hillside on top of an enemy's head. It is rough warfare that successfully subdues the evil enemy. This seems to be contradictory.

You're telling us that shoveling hot coals over the head of our enemies is done by doing good to them? Yes. I once heard the phrase, "killing them with kindness." I think that's what God is talking about here. Heaping coals on your enemy's head is intimately connected with meeting his needs. The coals are your good deeds heaped on him.

This is God's own method for subduing his enemies.

- Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? (Romans 2:4)
- But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (Romans 5:8)
- 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. (Romans 5:10)

Jay Adams writes,

If your unsaved wife or husband is winning and you are the defeated partner, that is your fault. If you are constantly upset and miserable, don't blame your partner for that. Even though he gives occasion for your failure, it is your failure nonetheless. You allow him to

win by failing to heed your battle orders. 1 Peter 3 orders the Christian wife to win her husband by her submissive behavior even if he disobeys the Word. The same is true of the Christian husband. He too must win his wife by his exercise of Christlike sacrificial loving leadership. There is no defeatism in 1 Peter 3. The Christian is to take the initiative and overcome evil by doing good.<sup>2</sup>

Christians must never pay back evil for evil, verse 17.

Love does not retaliate. The one who retaliates and repays evil for evil becomes like the evil one who sinned against you to begin with.

Instead, give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. Give thought, plan, strategize. Think through how you will respond, don't simply react. You do this with hard work, much thought, and periods of intense prayer.

And you do it in an honorable way. With discretion and tact.

And then we see in verse 18 that believers must seek peace with everyone. Remember, this text this evening is in the context of believers who are facing persecution and evil from unbelievers. While these verses certainly pertain to relationships between believers, the context is clearly unbelievers.

And so, if possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all, believers and unbelievers, understanding that it is not always possible to achieve. You can only do your part. Nevertheless, you must act responsibly so that the offending party can see that you are trying to make peace. Any failure must be on their side of the relationship.

That means that you must:

- not provoke trouble
- not widen or extend the trouble that is already taking place
- and you must not do anything that would prolong the trouble

While we do our best to live peaceably with all, we leave the results up to God. Verse 19 reminds us that we never avenge ourselves but leave it to the wrath of God. It is his responsibility and done under his authority.

God promises to repay. It is not up to us to get our "pound of flesh." We must trust God at his word.

## **REFLECT AND RESPOND**

- Take time and think about those who are doing evil things to you. Ask yourself, "How have I responded?"
- Ask God's forgiveness for any wrongs that you have done in retaliation. Plan to seek forgiveness from those you have wronged.

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<sup>2</sup> Jay Adams, *How to Overcome Evil*, pages 37-38

- Begin thinking about how you will respond in the future. Prepare your minds for action. What will you do in the light of your enemy's needs?
- Heap good on your enemy. Do what you plan to do with finesse. Do what you plan to do out of love and for the glory of God.