

## **Vengeance is Mine!** (*Overcoming Evil with Good*)

Romans 12:17-21 on February 4, 2024

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*Please read Romans 12:17-21 before going further in this transcript.*

I don't know about you, but personally, I have to admit, that there've been at least a few times in my life when I've found myself enjoying a "good" revenge story. Let's be honest, don't we all find a particular kind of satisfaction when the bad guy gets what's coming to him? There's a certain aspect of vengeance that satisfies our need for wrongs to be made right! How many of us have cheered on Russell Crowe in the movie, *Gladiator*? As he avenges the murder of his king and his family. How many of us have been drawn into Herman Melville's classic story of *Moby Dick*? His epic tale about Captain Ahab's obsession with getting his revenge on that terrible white whale! Or, for those of us who love a good western, there's *True Grit*. The story of a teenage girl who goes on a quest to find justice for her murdered father.<sup>1</sup> And finally, for those of us who prefer something a bit more lighthearted, there's *"The Princess Bride"*: "Hello. My name is Inigo Montoya. You killed my father. Prepare to die!" Come on, admit it! Most of us are drawn to these kinds of stories because we love seeing the bad guy get what he deserves! We don't want to wait for justice, we want "sweet" revenge, and we want it now! However, God's Word says, "Do not repay anyone evil for evil..." So those of us who are "becoming deeply devoted followers of Jesus together," need to learn to respond to evil in a radically different way.

When we've been hurt or wounded by something evil, it's incredibly difficult for us to respond in a Christlike way. It goes against our human instinct. In no way is the Bible suggesting that it should be easy for us to forgive the wrongs and evils that've been committed against us. However, Jesus Christ does call and equip His followers, to respond to evil in a much different way than our natural human inclinations. Two weeks ago Pastor Eric went through a long list of distinguishing marks of a disciple. That list from verses 9-16, now continues into verses 17-21. The gospel of Jesus Christ is "A Gospel for Everyday Living." The Good News of Jesus Christ has immediate and direct ramifications on how we should live, including how we should respond to evil. We should respond, by "Overcoming Evil with Good."

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<sup>1</sup> Some of us are familiar with Shakespeare's classic, *Hamlet*. This story is about a father's ghost telling his son to avenge his murder by killing the new king, Hamlet's uncle.

## Overcoming evil with good...

### 1) Demonstrates the authenticity of our Christian witness.

Romans 12:17-18 begins, “Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. 18 If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.” Now that’s a high and holy calling! Commands like these are well beyond our own capability; we absolutely cannot do this on our own! It will take nothing less than a supernatural act of God to empower us and equip us for this kind of gospel living. Earlier in this passage, Romans 12:9 declared, “Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good.” If we enlist in evil, in order to fight back against evil, then we’re increasing the very evil that God tells us to hate. We end up living lives that are no different than the world around us. A key part of our Christian witness is living out the radically different Christian life for which God’s Spirit is empowering us. If we consider ourselves “Deeply Devoted Followers of Jesus,” then Jesus should be Lord of every single area of our lives.

In Matthew 5:38-39 Jesus instructs His followers, “You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ 39 But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. A few verses later, in Matthew 5:43-45 Jesus goes on, “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,<sup>2</sup> 45 that you may be children of your Father in heaven....” Jesus commands His followers to embrace a distinctively Christian attribute, an attribute that ought to characterize each one of God’s children. We are to be like our Heavenly Father. We’re called and equipped to emulate Him, and to live differently than the world around us. This evidence of our godly behavior, proves and demonstrates that we are authentically Christian people. In Matthew 5:46-47 Jesus goes on, “If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? 47 And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that?”

The proof is in the pudding; the authenticity of God’s children is revealed, when His godly attributes are displayed in the way we carry out our daily, Christian lives.<sup>3</sup> God’s Word urges us to be mindful of our Christian witness. Romans 12:17 states it plainly, “...Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. We’re urged to guard our reputation, and to consider what other people see in us. To be clear, this means we should care about our reputation, not just our reputation with our fellow believers, but also with

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<sup>2</sup> When I read Matthew 5:44 urging us to pray for our persecutors, Voice of the Martyrs comes to mind. It’s a wonderful ministry that I highly recommend you look into. <https://www.persecution.com/>

<sup>3</sup> By the way, this kind of distinctive living has always been God’s intention for His holy people, even going back to the Old Testament. See Leviticus 19:18 and Exodus 23:4-5.

nonbelievers.<sup>4</sup> A godly reputation can be an important means by which the Lord's purposes are accomplished, but an ungodly reputation will only serve to hinder those purposes. An ungodly reputation by God's people is often used by our enemy, the devil, to advance his evil plans.<sup>5</sup> So how we represent the Lord in the eyes of other people is a high and holy calling.

The *ESV* translation of verse 17 is helpful here: "give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all." "Give thought to do" encourages a daily mindfulness. Rather than just an occasional afterthought of how our conduct might be coming across to other people, it's a consistent intentionality.<sup>6</sup> An authentic visible witness can bring opportunities for verbal witness. In the immediate context, the way that people see us respond to evil, can be a means by which we gain opportunities to share the gospel message. So a watching observer may feel prompted to ask us: When somebody slaps you in the face, why don't you just slap them back!? When someone does something awful to you, why do you respond by praying for them!? What's going on with you Christians!? "Well, I'm glad you asked. Let me tell you about the God I serve. He's a God of grace; He treats us sinners better than we deserve."

The transformative power of the gospel is so great, that it empowers us to treat our enemies better than they deserve. In the words of Romans 12:1-2, in view of God's mercy toward us, we offer our bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God. Our true and proper worship of God includes not conforming to worldly patterns of vengeance that return evil for evil. Instead, in stark contrast to this world, followers of Jesus are transformed by the renewing of their minds. This renewal makes us new, it makes us different, and as we live out our new life in Christ, we demonstrate God's good, pleasing, and perfect will.

We should also note that verse 18 gives us a helpful clarification, "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone." In other words, God and His Word are by no means being unrealistic. It's not always possible to live at peace with everyone. We aren't responsible for the other's person's half of the equation. Once we've sincerely done all that we can do, then we leave it at that. We should also consider that today's verses are only part of the answer to how we overcome evil in this world. Next week Pastor Eric will be preaching a message titled, "Thank God for Government." Romans 13:4 reminds us, "For the one in authority is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They are God's servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer." And so there's also a place within God's

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<sup>4</sup> Consider 2 Corinthians 8:21, "also in the eyes of man."

<sup>5</sup> Consider 1 Timothy 3:7, "...so that he will not fall into disgrace and into the devil's trap."

<sup>6</sup> Consider 2 Corinthians 8:21, taking pains to do what's right in the eyes of the Lord AND man.

system of righteousness for earthly authorities to step in, and to make things right. God has given us gifts like law enforcement and court systems, and armies and other forms of governance to help keep evil in check. And even though these earthly systems are imperfect, and sometimes they're subject to the corruption of sin, they're still one of the key means by which God sovereignly constrains the evil in our world.<sup>7</sup> To be clear, these earthly systems of justice are also there to protect the vulnerable and abused from their antagonists. Therefore, anyone who has been hurt or abused, should feel free to access these systems of justice to their full extent.

## **Overcoming evil with good also...**

### **2) Demonstrates our faith in God's trustworthiness.**

Romans 12:19 says, "Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord." There is indeed a place for vengeance, but that place is in the perfect wisdom of God. A God who knows all and sees all; a God who has all of the facts. A God who loves perfectly and judges perfectly from His throne in heaven. If our conception of God is that he is like some elderly, doting grandfather who's always letting His grandkids get away with doing whatever they want, then we'd better think again. He is elderly, and He is loving, but He is most certainly not soft, or naïve, when it comes to punishing sin. He's a fair and impartial judge who will punish all sinful behavior justly. We can have absolute assurance that God is completely trustworthy to rightly avenge every single drop of evil in this world. God will get it all sorted, either through the earthly authorities He's appointed in Romans 13:4, or through His final judgment when each one of us will give an account before Him.

Romans 14:10-12 reminds us, "...For we will all stand before God's judgment seat. It is written: " 'As surely as I live,' says the Lord, 'every knee will bow before me; every tongue will acknowledge God.' " So then, each of us will give an account of ourselves to God." There's an overarching power that rules over each one of us. Perhaps you know someone in this world who thinks that they have some kind of power or control over you, but there's a much greater power over every single one of us.<sup>8</sup> As followers of Jesus, we've put our faith in God's ultimate power and authority, which is above all other powers and authorities. Our faith is in God's trustworthiness; we are counting on Him to make all things right, because He is a righteous God who is worthy of our trust and devotion.

1 Peter 2:21-23 reminds us of Christ's example, "To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should

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<sup>7</sup> So we could say that evil is overcome in this world by at least 3 things: God, good, and government.

<sup>8</sup> This may be the power of our enemy, or our abuser, or some criminal or corrupt official, or someone else.

follow in his steps. “He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.” 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.”<sup>9</sup> As deeply devoted followers of Jesus, Christ is the example that we ought to emulate: entrusting ourselves to Him who judges justly. When followers of Jesus demonstrate their trust in God, it conveys to the watching world that we bear the likeness of Christ.

Proverbs 20:22 says, “Do not say, “I’ll pay you back for this wrong!” Wait for the LORD, and he will avenge you.”<sup>10</sup> Romans 12:20 is quoting from Deuteronomy 32:35, “It is mine to avenge; I will repay. In due time their foot will slip; their day of disaster is near and their doom rushes upon them.” Leaving final justice in God’s hands is a clear demonstration of our faith and trust in God.<sup>11</sup> Even though our intrinsic need for justice may drive us to fiercely pursue righting every wrong that we see in this world, God’s timing is sometimes different than ours.<sup>12</sup> But rest assured, when it’s all done and said, and this present world comes to its final end, a complete and total, final and comprehensive justice will be rendered by God Himself.<sup>13 14</sup>

That being said, let’s also keep in mind Ezekiel 33:11, “As surely as I live,” declares the Sovereign LORD, “I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways!” A while back, I came across a helpful insight by a guy named Robert Plummer: “Because human governments [*sometimes*] fail to enact justice consistently and fairly, we must continually look to God as our ultimate vindicator. Life is not fair. We will die having never seen many injustices set right. Yet we can be sure of this: One day we will stand before our all-powerful and good King. On that day, every injustice ever committed will be either justly punished or [*justly*] declared forgiven through Christ. In our longing for justice, let us, like God, desire our enemy’s repentance more than [*their*] destruction.”<sup>15</sup> This leads us right into our 3<sup>rd</sup> and final point.

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<sup>9</sup> Consider 1 Peter 2:21-23 in light of Matthew 27:39-44.

<sup>10</sup> Proverbs 24:29 agrees, “Do not say, “I’ll do to them as they have done to me; I’ll pay them back for what they did.” Consider Joseph’s gracious example in Genesis 50:19.

<sup>11</sup> Also consider Romans 2:5-11 and Revelation 20:11-15.

<sup>12</sup> See footnote on Romans 12:19 on p. 2316 of the *NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015.

<sup>13</sup> However, consider another perspective on this in the warning from Proverbs 24:11-12.

<sup>14</sup> In the Old Testament, even though King David was a mighty warrior with a powerful army at his side, we see him sparing King Saul’s life in 1 Samuel 24, and then again in chapter 26. After passing up yet another opportunity to take revenge on his enemy, King Saul, in 1 Samuel 26:10, David says, “As surely as the LORD lives,” he said, “the LORD himself will strike him, or his time will come and he will die, or he will go into battle and perish.” And this comes true some time later when King Saul falls on his own sword in a battle against the Philistines in 1 Samuel 31:1-6.

<sup>15</sup> Robert L. Plummer, “Sweet Revenge,” *Daily Strength*, Sam Storms, Gen. Ed., Crossway, Wheaton, IL, 2022, p. 353.

## Overcoming evil with good...

### 3) Results in our enemy's potential repentance as well as our own personal reward.

Romans 12:20 says, "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." At first, this instruction to "heap burning coals on his head" sure sounds a lot like vengeance! However, this is a word picture that's likely intended to mean we should treat our enemies so well, that they may eventually come to repentance. Paul probably draws this idea from an ancient Egyptian ritual in which a guilty person would carry a container of burning coals on their head as a sign of repentance. So Paul is using this ritual as an illustration of how returning good for evil may cause our enemy to repent.<sup>16</sup> In other words, rather than our enemy being judged and destroyed, they would repent and find their way to God.<sup>17 18</sup>

Our kindness can hurt an enemy in such a way that it sometimes wins them over.<sup>19</sup> Responding to an enemy's evil behavior with grace, rather than with vengeance, may cause them to feel a certain amount of shame, or embarrassment, at the way they've treated us.<sup>20</sup> And that, in turn, may lead them to repentance.<sup>21</sup> Instead of repaying evil with evil, we repay evil with good. Rather than repaying their evil with a hellish response, we repay it with a heavenly response.<sup>22</sup> This kind of a godly response nudges our enemies toward the same God of grace who once rescued us, from our evil behavior. As we mentioned last week, a grace community church remembers what it's like, to be spiritually lost.<sup>23 24 25</sup>

Now even if our kindness doesn't end up winning them over, it still brings God glory. And... it also does something else... it brings us reward. You see, Romans 12:20 is quoting Proverbs 25:21-22, but it leaves off the last

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<sup>16</sup> See *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1069 footnote on Proverbs 25:22.

<sup>17</sup> See Andrew David Naselli's helpful summary of the two leading interpretations of this phrase on pp. 164-165 of his book, *Romans*, Crossway, Wheaton IL, 2022.

<sup>18</sup> Proverbs 22:15 says, "...a gentle tongue can break a bone."

<sup>19</sup> *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1069 footnote on Proverbs 25:22.

<sup>20</sup> Consider Titus 2:6-8, "...so that those who oppose you may be ashamed because they have nothing bad to say about us."

<sup>21</sup> You see, God has designed the human conscience to be sensitive to acts of kindness. More often than not, people notice when genuine grace and kindness is being extended to them. However, note Ephesians 4:19 and 1 Timothy 4:2

<sup>22</sup> Instead of givin' 'em hell, we give 'em heaven!

<sup>23</sup> Check out 2 Kings 6:8-23 for an intriguing story, and notice how verses 21-23 give an historical account of this very principle of feeding ones enemies.

<sup>24</sup> This is how we overcome evil: we share in the Gospel's victory over this world by setting up clear "signs which point to the reality of God's love for sinners." Alan F. Johnson (Cranfield quote), *Romans, Vol. 2, The Freedom Letter, Rev. Ed.*, Moody Press, Chicago, IL, 1985, pp. 105-106.

<sup>25</sup> Responding "to persecution and hatred with love and blessing was unprecedented in both Greek and Jewish worlds." Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans (NICNT)*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 1996, p. 781.

few words after “heap burning coals on his head.” Paul’s original readers would have likely known what Paul left out here. The full proverb says this: “In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head, and the LORD will reward you.” There’s a reward when we trust and obey God’s Word.<sup>26</sup> In Luke 6:35 Jesus tells His followers, “But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked.” 1 Peter 3:9 agrees, “Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult. On the contrary, repay evil with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing.” So overcoming evil with good not only results in our enemy’s potential repentance but it also results in our own personal reward from God.

Romans 12:21 concludes with a nice, succinct summary, “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” This is such a simple instruction: Don’t be overcome, but be an overcomer! And just how do we overcome evil? With good! So it’s not just that we refrain from returning evil, but we also take action by doing good to our enemies. At this point, you may be thinking: “All right Pastor Jerry, is that really the summary of your entire sermon, ‘do good.’ I mean, I suppose that’d be fine for a kids’ SS class, but we’re adults! I was really expecting something more, something a bit deeper, and something considerably more profound!” Here’s the thing though, the goodness of God is incredibly profound, and it’s an incredibly powerful force for change in our world.<sup>27</sup> The solution to evil doesn’t have to be complicated, or flashy, in order to be powerful and life-changing.<sup>28</sup>

We don’t overcome evil in a way that we might expect or predict with our own human reasoning; but we do overcome evil in a way that matches up with the gracious character of God.<sup>29</sup> We overcome evil in the Gospel way, with the goodness of God. Our simple obedience in doing good in God’s Name, has incredible power to make an eternal impact on this world. So friends, this week, let’s overcome evil with good!

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<sup>26</sup> Consider the end of Luke 6:35 and check out <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/jesus-gives-us-reasons-to-obey>

<sup>27</sup> Consider Micah 6:8. One of my favorite new worship songs is “The Goodness of God.” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-f4MUUMWMV4>

<sup>28</sup> Side note: this is actually why some people are so drawn to conspiracy theories. They are SO overwhelmed by the tragedy and complexity of the evil going on in our world, that they are drawn to complicated and fantastical explanations. Rather than trusting in the goodness of God to overcome evil, we sometimes look to wild and outlandish explanations instead.

<sup>29</sup> Consider Romans 2:4.