

OVERCOME EVIL WITH GOOD
Sermon for the 13th Sunday after Pentecost, 2020
Romans 12:16-21

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is Romans 12:16-21, the second part of our reading from before, ¹⁶ **Agree with one another! Do not be proud but accommodate yourselves to humble people! Do not think that you are wise!** ¹⁷ **Do not repay anyone evil for evil! Take into consideration what all people regard as good!** ¹⁸ **If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with all people!** ¹⁹ **Do not take revenge, dearly loved people, but leave room for God's wrath! For Scripture has said: "Vengeance belongs to Me. I shall repay," says the Lord.** ²⁰ **Rather, "If your enemy is hungry, feed him! If he is thirsty, give him a drink! If you do this, you will heap burning coals on his head."** ²¹ **Do not be overcome by evil but overcome evil with good!**

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your Truth, Your Word is Truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

If there was ever anything that would demonstrate beyond a doubt that Christianity was unnatural and contrary to common sense, it would be the words from our Second Lesson this morning. There is nothing normal about it. There is nothing reflexive to human nature about it. Being unnatural does not mean that it is not desirable, just not the way people reflexively tend to be. Listed before us today are a set of instructions where God instructs us to be the opposite of what our human nature naturally leads us toward. Speaking through the Apostle Paul, the Lord teaches us to **overcome evil with good**.

At the end of our reading, Paul writes, **"Do not be overcome by evil but overcome evil with good!"** How does one overcome evil with good? By following the exhortations he has laid down. For example, **"Do not think that you are wise!"** These words are similar in meaning to what Jesus spoke in the parable about being invited to a wedding feast in Luke, chapter 14. There, Jesus told a story about a person invited to a wedding banquet who chose a place of honour. The host was forced to ask this person to move to a place away from the head table to make room for a more distinguished guest. Humiliation comes to a proud person who is demoted. Jesus suggested the proper course of action was to start out sitting in the lowest place. All the guests will take note when the host asks such a person to take a better place. At the end of that parable, Jesus said, *"For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted"* (14:11). Jesus wanted His disciples to learn how to practice humility.

We generally like to think that we have a pretty realistic grasp of situations we encounter, or of life itself. Paul's exhortation is not that we should not work at understanding life and things, but that we should be humble. We must never think we have the best mind in the group, or always have the best answers. Maybe you do, but when you begin to believe that about yourself, it leads to pride - and often to idiotic and unthinking mistakes.

Another principle is, **"Do not repay anyone evil for evil!"** This seems to fly in the face of the Old Testament justice principle of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.¹ Of course, that Old Testament principle was defining civic justice - such as would be handed down by a court of some sort. However, Paul is describing something else. It is not "justice." It is godly and God-like conduct. It is patient and forbearing just as God has always been with us. By means of this approach to evil, we blunt the power of evil to spread through us and by means of us by refusing to play the game of evil. We don't feed the sense of justification for evil when it attacks us, and we don't give another just cause to strike at us.

We also come to understand the patience and graciousness of God. He forgives, bears with us, and works for our blessing and benefit in spite of our sin against Him. Our patience, and never paying back evil for evil will give us a taste - a dim and poor taste, but a taste - of the enormity, depth, and true nature of God's patience and forgiveness towards us.

That patience and forgiveness will not stop evil from attacking. It will merely show that evil to be all the more wicked because it strikes where there is no retaliation, and seeks to harm those who refuse to respond in kind. We shall, as a matter of fact, promised by Jesus, endure evil against ourselves from time to time. As Christians, we are to

¹ Exodus 21:24; Deuteronomy 19:21

patiently endure, trust God to strengthen us, defend us, and bring us safely through, and, like God, forgive those who sin against us. We overcome one of the goals of the evil one when we refuse to return evil for evil; we don't allow ourselves to become a source of further evil, and we are protected from corruption by the evil that befalls us by declining to live according to the rules of evil.

Paul urges us to take even the next step, **“If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with all people!”** Peace with everyone around us is impossible at times, but we are instructed to be at peace so far as it depends on us. If there must be hostilities, arguing, bickering, insults, let it be from them to us and not the other way around. I think you can see why this approach does not appeal to many people - and absolutely does not appeal to our natures. The only time our nature endures hostility and insult is when we are literally unable to do otherwise. Weakness, sickness, fear, or some other incapacity must hold our nature back, otherwise, we just don't put up with undeserved and unwarranted violence and humiliation. We have seen in the news how people will often even make unwise decisions, knowing that they are going to do more injury to themselves or their cause by doing so because they will not put up with insults and disrespect.

But our God is a God of peace, and we are to be a people of peace. Paul finishes his Letter to the Thessalonians with these words, *“May the Lord of peace Himself give you peace at all times in every way!”* (2 Thess. 3:16). This liturgical benediction and confident prayer are that the Lord is indeed with us and will continue to be so, and it is also an encouragement for us to be at peace with all people. But does that mean that we must patiently endure insults and humiliation and even attacks that we can do something about? In our personal lives, particularly when it arises out of our faith and out of confessing Christ, YES. If we can avoid or blunt the attack, that is fine - but we cannot “fire back,” neither can we make war because we have been unjustly offended. Besides, with the words, **“Take into consideration what all people regard as good!”** Paul is asking that we preoccupy ourselves with doing excellent things before all people that they may also glorify God. Jesus reminds us to *“Let (our) light so shine before other people, that they may see (our) good deeds and glorify (our) Father who is in heaven!”* (Matthew 5:16). Our good deeds are meant to lead others to glorify our heavenly Father, not to bring praise to the one who does them. Leading people to worship the true God is the whole purpose of doing good deeds.

But even when trouble and controversy are unavoidable, when situations occur in which we do suffer harm and loss, Paul says, **“Do not take revenge, dearly loved people, but leave room for God's wrath! “Vengeance belongs to Me. I shall repay,” says the Lord.”**

We must never take our own revenge. How very contrary to our nature! Paul doesn't say, “try not,” or “as a general rule don't”, but **“Do not.”** We are commanded not to take revenge - and the reason is, **“Vengeance belongs to Me. I shall repay,” says the Lord.”** Revenge belongs to God - and He will judge and avenge all our injuries and wrongs. Hell is waiting for those that do not repent. Luther says that God punishes the wicked also here, in this life, using one scoundrel to punish another by taxes and crime and the many horrors of life that befall people at the hands of other people. But that hardly seems sufficient to us, since we also endure the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune here and now. Perhaps for the unbeliever, it is punishment, since they have no grace, and there is no point to their sufferings but suffering, but even if it is not - God will take revenge for us in the judgment. We are not about revenge but rescue and forgiveness. We leave revenge in God's hands.

Actually, if you want real revenge, Paul tells us by the Word of God, **“If your enemy is hungry, feed him! If he is thirsty, give him a drink! If you do this, you will heap burning coals on his head.”**²¹ **Do not be overcome by evil but overcome evil with good!”**

You will get revenge by being good - in the sense of holy - toward even your enemies. It is a sort of revenge by virtue of not giving them what they seek, but the opposite instead. However, these words from Proverbs 25² which Paul quotes here mean to indicate that the wrath of God - on such as can be wicked in the face of such kindness and do evil in the face of good even in return - will be all the more unbearable. By doing good and being holy in the face of evil, we deepen their misery both now and in eternity.

The plan, to overcome evil with good, is original with God. He gave it the test run, if you will, in Jesus Christ. When He faced the problem of evil and the ruinous results of sin, He did not go in with destruction, to wipe it out, He went

² Proverbs 25:21-22

in with holiness. He came and lived a holy life of obedience, and kindness and goodness, unlike the world had ever seen. Then He died at the hands of evil men to redeem them from their sins. He answered hate with love. He answered sin with righteousness. He came face to face with pure evil and conquered it with good. He paid our debt and penalty and called us to freedom and everlasting life with Him through Baptism, and the Lord's Supper, and Absolution, and pure grace.

Now He summons us to live as those that belong to Him and such as are happy to identify with their Saviour. He wants us to confront the world as He did, with holiness, and compassion, and patience, and humility, and love. It isn't the easiest way to do things. It required Jesus to go to the cross - and it may well require us to take up our cross, and suffer, to follow Him.³ The Lord doesn't want us to be surprised by it, or have any illusions - and He doesn't want us to give up in the face of evil which will confront us, but to overcome that evil with good, just as He did.

He has given us gifts and blessings to help us endure and stand firm. There is the Lord's Supper. It regularly refreshes us, brings us forgiveness to our lips and hearts, and connects us with our Lord personally. He has given us Absolution to remind us that the war has already been won. We can stand faithfully behind Him and face whatever comes knowing that our endurance doesn't depend on us alone - but on Christ, and He will hold us up when the going gets tough.

And He has given us one another - the Church - to comfort and encourage and support us in the struggle. We have also been given the Holy Spirit to dwell in us, to lead and guide our thoughts and works. Plus, we have the Bible, the very Word of God. While all else changes around us, often at a dizzying pace, the Word of God stands firm and unchanged. The promises of God and of His grace are new every morning.⁴ We have a firm foundation!

So, we have the plan of God for our lives in brief before us. "**Do not be overcome by evil but overcome evil with good!**" It is one of those plans that make no sense to us, except in Christ and by His grace and blessing. It is contrary to our nature and to the human way of thinking - and, frankly, it is way beyond our ability, all by ourselves. The power for us to do this is His, so we cry, "*Come, Lord Jesus!*" Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

PRAYER FOR THE THIRTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

O Lord, we thank You for all Your goodness to us, but especially for the gift of Your Word and for the knowledge that we have of You through its message. We thank You for teaching us Your commandments, but, far more, we thank You for showing Yourself and Your limitless grace to us in Jesus Christ Your Son. Enable us to listen to Him in faith and to obey Him in love.

Send forth Your Word into our world today. Open doors of opportunity for us, and equip us to be active witnesses to Your Gospel, so that more and more may come to know Jesus Christ. Sow Your Word in the hearts and minds of people everywhere. Change their blindness to sight. Change their enslavement to sin, Satan, and death into the freedom that Christ alone gives.

Heavenly Father, let Your Word, as a living power, judge the thoughts and desires of our hearts. Increase our knowledge of what is good, and strengthen us to examine ourselves, amend our lives, and give up our pet sins. Grant that, through feeding on Jesus, the Son of Man, we may remain in Him, and He in us, and that, remaining in Him, we may be guided by His Word, and bring forth abundant fruit.

Let Your Word shine in our homes, that parents and children may live together in love, serve one another in kindness, and experience true joy, both in this life and the one to come.

Give the Spirit of Christ to all who are facing sickness, sorrow, hardship or need. Grant that they may find You quick to strengthen and bless them, and lead them to praise You for doing everything well. Continue to sustain Your Church during this time of pandemic, and support all our front-line workers. Bring healing to those who are suffering from the disease, and comfort and grace to those who have lost loved ones.

Continue to keep us by the power of Your Holy Spirit; comfort us by Your Gospel, and sustain us by Your love.

³ Matthew 16:24

⁴ Lamentations 3:23

This we pray in the name of Jesus, who gave Himself for us, that we might live through Him, and praise You for ever and ever. Amen.

13 Pentecost (Proper 17)

Jeremiah 15:15-21

¹⁵ LORD, You understand. Remember me and take care of me! Take revenge on my behalf against those who are persecuting me! Because You are slow to become angry, do not take me away! Realise that I am suffering insults because of You! ¹⁶ Your Words were found, and I devoured them. Your Words have become my joy and the delight of my heart. For Your name has been called over me, O LORD, God of hosts. ¹⁷ I have not been sitting in the company of revellers. I have not been expressing delight. I have been sitting alone, because Your hand has been on me. For You have filled me with indignation. ¹⁸ Why has my pain been endless and my wound been incurable, refusing to be healed? Will You really be like an intermittent stream to me, like water that is unreliable?

¹⁹ Therefore, this is what the LORD has said: "If you return, I shall take you back, and you will stand before Me. If you separate what is precious from what is worthless, you will be My spokesman. Those people should come back to you, but you yourself shall not go back to them!" ²⁰ I shall make you a fortified wall of bronze to this people. They will fight against you but will not defeat you. For I am with you to save you and rescue you," declares the LORD. ²¹ "I shall rescue you from the hands of wicked people and redeem you from the grasp of ruthless people."

Romans 12:9-21

⁹ Love must be sincere! Hate what is evil! Cling to what is good! ¹⁰ Be devoted to one another with brotherly love! Honour one another above yourselves! ¹¹ Do not be timid in your zeal! Be fervent in spirit and serve the Lord! ¹² Be joyful in your hope! Be patient in trouble and persevere in prayer! ¹³ Share with God's holy people who are in need! Eagerly welcome strangers as guests! ¹⁴ Bless those who persecute you! Bless and do not curse them! ¹⁵ Rejoice with those who rejoice! Weep with those who weep! ¹⁶ Agree with one another! Do not be proud but accommodate yourselves to humble people! Do not think that you are wise! ¹⁷ Do not repay anyone evil for evil! Take into consideration what all people regard as good! ¹⁸ If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with all people! ¹⁹ Do not take revenge, dearly loved people, but leave room for God's wrath! For Scripture has said: "Vengeance belongs to Me. I shall repay," says the Lord. ²⁰ Rather, "If your enemy is hungry, feed

him! If he is thirsty, give him a drink! If you do this, you will heap burning coals on his head." ²¹ Do not be overcome by evil but overcome evil with good!

Matthew 16:21-28

²¹ From that time on, Jesus began to show His disciples that He had to go to Jerusalem, suffer greatly at the hands of the elders, Chief Priests and scribes, be killed and be raised on the third day.

²² However, Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him, "May God in His mercy spare You this, Lord! This will certainly not happen to You."

²³ However, Jesus turned and told Peter, "Get behind Me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to Me, because you do not have in mind the things of God but the things of human beings."

²⁴ Then Jesus told His disciples, "If anyone wants to come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me! ²⁵ For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. ²⁶ For what good will it do a person if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what will a person give in exchange for his soul? ²⁷ For the Son of Man is going to come in His Father's glory with His angels and then He will repay each person according to what he has done. ²⁸ Truly, I tell you that there are some of those who are standing here who will certainly not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom."