

ROMANS

Part 25: “How We Overcome the Power of Evil”

Romans 12:14 –21

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Scripture Reading

“Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight. Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. 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.’ 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.’ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Rom 12:14–21).

Introduction

Last week, I invited us to consider the extraordinary reality of early Christianity’s dramatic and exponential growth.

After all, consider how unlikely it is that a small band of Jesus followers (that would have only numbered in the hundreds in the middle of the first century) would launch a history-shaping, global movement (that would soon number in the millions by the end of the third century and in the billions today).

For years, many people in the academic world put forward a simple but misguided explanation to the puzzle of Christianity’s unlikely but dramatic rise to prominence.

They said Christianity rose to power when Emperor Constantine—the first Christian emperor—rose to power. Once Christianity was persecuted by political power. But once Christians achieved political power, Christianity was free to flourish.

However, that thesis has not only been challenged. It has been debunked. In fact, some of Christianity’s most dramatic growth happened during some of the heights of the most fierce persecution. So how did Christianity essentially conquer Rome without political power, military force, or seeking to accommodate itself to the preferences of Roman society?

A now deceased sociologist named Rodney Stark explored this question in captivating detail [show [Stark Book Cover](#)]. In the late 1990s, he wrote a rather significant book

entitled *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries*. In this book, Stark sought to name and describe several of the key sociological reasons for Christianity's surprising success.

Stark calls attention to the fact that, in the first few centuries, being a follower of Jesus was costly. To follow Jesus meant facing social stigma and rejection. Nevertheless, many Christians were willing to follow Christ no matter the cost—even when that cost they had to pay was their own life. But counterintuitively, the great cost of following Jesus had the surprising ability to reveal the great value of following Jesus.

Stark writes: *“Martyrs are the most credible exponents of the value of a religion, and this is especially true if there is a voluntary aspect to their martyrdom. By voluntarily accepting torture and death rather than defecting, a person sets the highest imaginable value upon a religion and communicates that value to others. Indeed...Christian martyrs typically had the opportunity to display their steadfastness to large numbers of other Christians, and the value of Christianity they thereby communicated often deeply impressed pagan observers as well.”*

Simply said, the courageous faith of the martyrs often strengthened the conviction of other Christians and inspired conversions among pagans. For this reason, the early church father Tertullian once said, *“the blood of the saints is the seed of the church.”*

But even more, it wasn't just that Christians were willing to suffer for the sake of Christ. They suffered in a different way. They refused to return evil for evil. They rejected the temptation to hate their enemies. And again, their faithful witness captured the attention of the watching world that made Jesus unignorable.

All of this goes to underscore a critical idea that flows all throughout Romans 12. The gospel is not only a radical set of true ideas. The gospel is an invitation to a new way of life. That is why we say our mission here at Redeemer is to declare the gospel with our words and display the gospel with our lives to our neighbors and to the nations.

Last week, we discussed how the gospel of Jesus Christ is to be displayed in how we are called to love. This week, we will explore how the gospel of Jesus Christ is displayed in *“How We Overcome the Power of Evil.”*

Exposition

Let's begin with the first verse of our reading: *“Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them” (Rom 12:14)*. In many ways, this is a profoundly simple sentence. If you've grown up in the church or if you've read the Bible for many years, you might even be tempted to rush by such a sentence without a second thought. I call this temptation *“the peril of familiar truth.”*

The peril of a familiar truth is losing the ability to hear the truth because we believe we already know it. This is why I want to intentionally slow down as I read this passage.

We must rediscover the shocking command to "bless those who persecute you" because our cultural moment is actively discipling us toward another sub-Christian ethic.

We are disciplined by social media and cable news to believe if we are hit, we should hit back harder. We are disciplined to believe that humility and civility are weaknesses, unrestrained pride and harshness are strengths, and that our desired ends justify unrighteous means. We are disciplined into an anxiety-laden culture war mentality in which the fight for temporary political power demands our ultimate devotion.

Our culture thinks this way and lives this way. And tragically, rather than offering the culture a better way, many Christians model our speaking, thinking, and acting no differently than the world around us.

Christians are called not to be conformed this world but transformed by the renewal of our minds (cf. Rom 12:2). Our way of life and engaging the world around us must not be according to the war of our culture but by the words of our King. And these are words of our King: *"But I say to you who hear, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. To one who strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also, and from one who takes away your cloak do not withhold your tunic either. Give to everyone who begs from you, and from one who takes away your goods do not demand them back. And as you wish that others would do to you, do so to them"* (Luke 6:27–31).

When we suffer due to the powers of evil in our world, when we endure hatred, when we experience unjust persecution, Christ calls us to something entirely different than fighting back or passively enduring mistreatment. We are to bless those who curse us and persecute us. We are to love our enemies.

Last week, we discussed the true nature of love. To love is to will and seek the highest good of another. But what does it mean to love our *enemy*? A more fundamental question is, "who is the enemy Scripture calls us to love?"

In studying this passage, I came across a convicting sentence written by the theologian Karl Barth that I still can't quite shake. He said, *"[My] enemy is the man who incites me to render evil for evil."*¹

So who is your enemy? It is the person in your life that makes you want to fight fire with fire. It is the person who makes you want to unleash words of venom or even acts of violence. It is the person you might feel justified when and if you sin against them.

Yet, Christians are called to a different way of thinking and living. We are called to bless those who persecute us. This means that we are to intentionally pray for those who would wish us harm; to seek divine favor on their behalf; to will their highest good.

¹ Barth, *Romans*, 472.

This does not mean that we pray that God would give our enemies whatever their heart's desire, for that would not be love. But we must still pray for them.

I struggled for many years to understand how to do this, but there is a prayer I found several years ago in the *Book of Common Prayer (1928)* that I have found profoundly helpful. It's from the Evening Family Prayer. It says, "Reward all who have done us good, and pardon all those who wish us evil, and give them repentance and better minds."²

So, if you have nothing good you can say or pray of someone who has done you wrong or wished you harm, pray that the Lord would grant them repentance from sin and a better mind. This is a prayer for blessing our persecutors, and prayers like this one tend to open our eyes to see our enemies as God sees them.

And flowing from this command to bless our persecutors, Paul says, "Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep" (Rom 12:15).

Typically, when that verse is read in isolation, our immediate thought is to apply this to our relationships with fellow Christians. And indeed, Paul states elsewhere, "If one member [of the body of Christ] suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together" (1 Cor 12:26). But while verse Romans 12:15 does not require anything less than this type of love for our fellow Christians, I think it is saying something more.

In fact, I believe Paul is still talking about those who persecute us. Said a different way, Christians are called not just to pray for our enemies but to seek a level of human sympathy with them in their joys and sorrows.

To train our hearts to sympathize with our enemies is not a natural act—it is *supernatural*. It requires that we resist the temptation to reduce our fellow image-bearers to their worst actions and their worst ideas and instead embrace the divine and transforming power of grace.

A few years ago, the Dallas police officer who mistakenly shot and killed a man named Botham Jean (Bõtham John) in his own apartment was found guilty of murder and sentenced to prison. At the conclusion of the officer's trial, Botham Jean's younger brother, Brandt, took the stand and did something that astonished the world (show image of **Botham Jean hugging his brother's killer**). He publicly forgave his brother's murderer and asked for permission to hug her. When he did this, he made an explicit connection between the love and sympathy he showed her and the gospel of Jesus.

And, for a brief moment, an outraged, polarized, and vengeance-driven world stood in awe-struck silence before the power of amazing grace. What Christians believe was directly and visibly connected to how this one Christian lived.

² BCP (1928), 590–591.

Paul continues, charging Christians, *“Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight”* (Rom 12:16).

In a culture that favors people who impress the powerful, the wealthy, and the successful, Christians are to purposefully associate with the lowly. We are to show God’s love and care for those the world would deem unimpressive.

As the world seeks the praise of the praise-worthy, Christians are to give preference to the cause of the poor, the weak, and the alienated. We are to seek the face of Christ in the eyes of the hungry, the imprisoned, and those who are strangers in a strange land.

We are to never be wise in our own sight, which according to the book of Proverbs, is even worse than foolishness (Prov 26:12). Our posture is to be one of humility, not of pride. Our mindset is to be like those who are eager to listen instead of assuming that we are no longer in need of learning.

Paul goes on in verses 17 through 18, *“Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all”* (Rom 12:17–18).

Here Paul reminds us that how we live, how we suffer, and how we choose to respond to evil does not happen in a void. We are to be mindful that our lives are bearing witness to Christ before an unbelieving world.

When we refuse to return evil for evil, we honor the name of Christ before a watching world. Conversely, when we choose to respond to evil with evil, we dishonor the name of Christ before a watching world. Christ is not honored by Christians who curse or humiliate or “own” their enemies in his name.

Likewise, we are to understand it may not be possible to live at peace with some in our world. Peace requires a mutual commitment from two or more parties. We can't control the actions of others. But, instead of actively provoking cultural conflict, we can resolve to be those who prefer peace, seek peace, and make peace. For *“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God”* (Matt 5:9).

Paul follows this charge with another command: *“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’”* (Rom 12:19).

I find this verse fascinating. The Greek word translated here as “avenge” (ἐκδικοῦντες) comes from the same root as the word that Paul has used all throughout this letter for words like “justification” and “justice.”

I do not believe this word choice is accidental. Paul is saying if you are one who has been justified by Christ, if you are one for whom it is now said there is therefore now no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus (Rom 8:1), you no longer need to take matters of

justice into your own hands. Allow Christ, who is your justification, to be your justice. Allow Christ, your advocate, to be your vindication.

It may seem counterintuitive at first, but trusting in the judgment of God liberates us to truly forgive our enemies. When we forgive our enemies, we are not passively ignoring the ways we have been sinned against. We are not minimizing injustice or evil. In forgiving our enemies, we are simply releasing ourselves of the burden of needing to create our own justice. Rather, we rest knowing that our God is the judge of the living and the dead. We can trust that he will right all wrongs.

Instead, *Paul says, "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'" (Rom 12:20).*

When we are in a position of power and our enemies are in a position of weakness, when we are in a place of abundance and our enemies are in a place of need, we are commanded to love our enemies not only with our words but with our deeds also.

By doing this, Paul says we will "heap burning coals" on the head of our enemy. Here Paul is quoting from the book of Proverbs (Prov 22:25). But even in Proverbs, the meaning is unclear. But the context of this passage of Romans should incline us toward a view wherein the Bible is still calling us toward an expression of love—not animosity—for our enemies.

I believe that to "heap burning coals" on our enemies' heads likely means that we are to express love and grace in such unexpected ways that it creates a sense of burning conviction for the ways our enemies have sinned against us and wronged us.

We are to love our enemies in a way that does not perpetuate the cycle of evil but ends it. Instead of returning evil for evil, we are to expose the power of evil.

As Paul concludes this passage, he summarizes all that has been said with the simple verse: *"Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Rom 12:21).*

J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* is one of the great mythologies of our modern day. Written in the age of the World Wars, it recounts the epic story of good prevailing over a seemingly invincible force of evil.

The conflict centers around the great ring of power. It's an ancient relic filled with immeasurable power that once belonged to an evil dark lord. The dark lord is searching for the ring of power, knowing that if he is reunited with this ring, no force could possibly withstand his might. All that stands between this villain's conquest over the known world is a fellowship of heroes who vow to take the ring into the very heart of darkness that it might be destroyed once and for all.

But one of the heroes who commits to this mission is a warrior named Boromir. He is a tragic figure who is tempted by the ring of power. He wants to use the dark power of the

ring to destroy the enemy. But what he does not know is that the ring is a power that will not be instrumentalized by its wearer. Instead, the ring intends to use the wearer to achieve its will to power.

So too, amid fearful times and in a culture of rage, I think we may be tempted like Boromir. We may feel tempted to use evil to overcome evil. But we can never truly use the power of evil. Instead, we must recognize the power of evil only wants to use us.

Christians are called to a different way. As Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. once wrote, we must remember, *“Darkness cannot drive out darkness, only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate, only love can do that.”*

We are called to overcome evil with good—for this is the way of the Christian is the way of the cross.

Conclusion

Christ came into the world to an oppressed and fearful people who had been used and abused by the power of evil and the empires of men. Over centuries of injustice, they yearned for and hoped for a messiah—an anointed liberator king—who would set them free and bring forth the kingdom of God.

Yet, the empires of men had conditioned many to expect a messiah in purely political terms. They wanted a warrior. They wanted a revolutionary. They wanted a nation that would rule the nations that once ruled them. They wanted a political messiah to save them.

But instead of a military leader who displayed his greatness through the power of his sword, the messiah they needed came in the form of a humble rabbi who washed the feet of his own disciples. Instead of a conquering king, they were sent a Suffering Servant.

Jesus Christ came as one who prayed the blessing of forgiveness upon those who crucified him. He sympathized with us in our weaknesses yet without sin. He came as one who is gentle and lowly, and a friend of tax collectors and sinners. He humbled himself the point of death, even death on a cross, where he experienced God's judgment upon sin. And by the victory of his resurrection, he has overcome the power of evil with ultimate goodness; he has overcome the power of death by eternal life.

We are called to believe and trust in what Christ has accomplished. But we have also been invited to participate in the new life that Christ has given us. And the power of this resurrection life is more powerful than all the empires of men, for it is the power of the kingdom of God!

So, Redeemer Christian Church, may we be those who bear witness to the victory of Christ in the way we love and the way we suffer. May our lives point beyond ourselves to an everlasting kingdom that will not be shaken. May we overcome the power of evil with the power of our God, who is infinitely good. AMEN.

Discussion Starters for Gospel Communities

1. *Read Romans 12:14–21. How would these verses have challenged Christians in ancient Rome? How might these verses directly challenge the “culture war” mentality within American society today?*
2. *What are some tangible, practical ways that we can seek to love our enemies and bless those who persecute us?*
3. *Why is it so tempting to return evil for evil? How might we overcome this temptation?*
4. *How is this passage connected to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus?*