

## Peacemakers Overcome Evil with Good

### Romans 12:14-21 (NIV)

<sup>14</sup> Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. <sup>15</sup> Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. <sup>16</sup> Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited. <sup>17</sup> Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. <sup>18</sup> If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. <sup>19</sup> 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. <sup>20</sup> 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." <sup>21</sup> Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

People will do evil to you. Some will be from inside the church, claiming to be Christians; others will be from outside of it, never claiming to hold to the same ideals or beliefs as you. So, what do you do when evil is done to you?

Maybe our first thought is: "Hurt them as they hurt you." If someone punches you in the gut, you punch them in their gut. If someone insults you, you insult them back. If someone humiliates you, you find a way to humiliate as well. We naturally operate on a law of retaliation because we desire justice. When someone hurts us, does evil against us, sins against us, they are creating a debt against us. We want that debt to be repaid and expediently. That's why often our first thought is to repay evil with evil.

But what does repaying evil with evil get us? Think back to the kids' message. Someone throws mud on our shirt and gets us dirty. Does the dirt come out if we fling mud at them? No, if anything, not only with they get dirty, but you too will get dirtier from picking up and slinging the mud. So it is with repaying evil with evil. When we respond to someone's sin against us by committing a sin against them, we're only adding to the debt, adding to the hurt, adding evil into this world. We are perpetuating the dirtiness, and no one comes out clean. Instead, we are overcome by evil.

People do see evil done against us and they also take note of how we respond. When we act in kind, repaying evil for evil, they see nothing different than the world around them. They can even encourage you to take matters into your own hands, to stand up for yourself, to hit that person back, to get even, repaying their evil. No one else is going to look out for you. No one else will get you justice. You have to fight back for it, or people will walk all over you.

If we act like the rest of the world and take justice into our own hands, this affects our reputation and the reputation of our God. If we repay evil with evil, what makes us any different than the rest of the people of the world? Doesn't this say that our God can't bring justice, that he is powerless to stop the wrongs of this world? Would anyone want to believe in a God like that?

So, God calls us to act differently. The Apostle Paul tells us in his letter to the Roman Christians: "Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse... Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone... If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink." (verses 14, 17-18, 20) Be peacemakers by overcoming evil with good.

This direction seems like a recipe for people to walk all over us, to be overcome by evil, but God has proven otherwise. All people, including us, have seemingly walked all over God with our evil. Every hateful thought, every hurtful word, every abusive act – these are all sins, our sins, and sins not just against the person, but also against God. Every sin we commit – knowingly or not – creates a debt with God. How did God respond to our huge debt of evil against him? Did he immediately smite us out of existence? Did he stand over us, shaking his head before verbally berating us? Did he just shrug his shoulders and say, "That's just the way they are"?

We don't have to wonder how God responded when we did evil to him. Peter in his first letter in the Bible recounted it: "When they hurled their insults at him, [Jesus] did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. 'He himself bore our sins' in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; 'by his wounds you have been healed.'" (1 Peter 2:23-24) Jesus took all the evil hurled at him. He took it on his shoulders and had all that evil, from the people of his day as well as our evil that we have done, and nailed it all to the cross as he was nailed to the cross. As men sinned against him and pounded in those nails, Jesus prayed for them. He asked his Father in heaven to forgive them. He did not smite or destroy. He did not berate or insult. He paid for all our evil with his life. In this way, he blessed those who persecuted him. Jesus was not walked all over by evil; he overcome evil with his good.

Because God has overcome our evil with his good, he calls us to do the same. When we take justice into our own hands and repay evil for evil, God tells us that this multiplies sin. It hurts the person we intended to hurt, and it hurts us as well as God. We get dirtier and dirtier, and no one gets cleaner. But knowing that we already have had our evil overcome by God's good, we change how we act with others. We don't take justice into our own hands. Instead, as Paul wrote, "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." (verse 19)

How do you live that out? Like Joseph in our reading from Genesis. His brothers had hated him enough to try to murder him, settling instead for selling him into slavery. Joseph languished for almost 2 decades because of the evil they did to him. And now when he is in a position to make his brothers suffer, to hurt them back just as much, if not more, than how they hurt him, he praises God for working good out of their evil. God had overcome their evil with good in his life, and Joseph was going to treat his brothers with that same action, to love them and be good to them and care for them, to be a peacemaker as he overcame their evil with good.

Knowing that God has overcome our evil and everyone's evil with his good, he wants us to be the peacemakers in other people's lives. In recent years, morality seems to have morphed into an impersonal action. People view you as good or evil based on the stances you take on issues. While it is good to carefully think through the multitude of issues all around us, we can't leave it as an impersonal social, political, or situational stance. It has to be more than a statement of belief; it's needs to be an action lived out with people and for people.

This is why Paul also directs us to "Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited." (verses 15-16) He's telling us to meet people where they are at, but to also actually meet people. It's one thing to talk about this agenda or that issue, but it's another to actually live out the human interaction part. Show up to actually love the person affected, not merely signing a name on a petition or copying and pasting a moral statement on Facebook.

Jesus directed us to be peacemakers with real people, not just issues, when he said in our Gospel reading, "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. If someone slaps you on one cheek, turn to them the other also. If someone takes your coat, do not withhold your shirt from them. Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back." (Luke 6:27-30) Don't just do good and live at peace with those who get along with you, who agree with you, who have the same morality as you. Pray with the face of your enemy in your mind. If the opportunity is there, let them hear your prayer that God would forgive them, that they would be saved. When they continue to do evil to you, let go of it and leave room for God's wrath. Have God take care of it because he is a God of justice.

In the meantime, we're also praying that God help us be the peacemakers who overcome evil with good so that we can turn people to him and his mercy. That's why Paul instructed us, recalling an old Proverb: "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." (verse 20) Paul did not tell us to do this because he wanted to give us a way to get revenge using kindness. No, he's telling us that when we respond to evil with good, this can lead people to recognize their evil, to feel ashamed and guilty for what they've done. When we respond with good, they want to know why we respond differently and not with evil. Then we get to share with them a merciful God who overcame their evil with his good, that he has done that for them to forgive them, to wipe out their total debt of sin, and save them. That's why we respond to evil with good.

This is how we live out God's calling to us to be peacemakers. We do not repay evil for evil because God has already overcome our evil and their evil with his good. On Judgment Day, he will avenge and repay; he will make sure that total justice happens for everyone. Until then, we get to show people that evil is overcome with good, God's good, when we do what is right and do good to everyone, especially our enemies. Amen.