

Overcome Evil with Good Romans 12:14-21

Revenge...

Giving someone what they deserve... Is there anything that so combines a sense of justice with our own self-righteousness more completely than revenge? Revenge is so connected with our innate sense of justice that we can even combine the adjective "sweet" with it: He was able to get "sweet revenge".

But while those in authority are often called upon to dispense justice, at least in some limited sense, personal revenge is never encouraged in Scripture. Vengeance is an action that God reserves for himself. He alone is qualified to exact revenge in a manner that perfectly accords with His absolute righteousness. God explicitly teaches us so.

Deuteronomy 32:35a ³⁵ Vengeance is mine, and recompense,

Psalm 11:5-7 ⁵ The LORD tests the righteous, but his soul hates the wicked and the one who loves violence. ⁶ Let him rain coals on the wicked; fire and sulfur and a scorching wind shall be the portion of their cup. ⁷ For the LORD is righteous; he loves righteous deeds; the upright shall behold his face.

Taking personal revenge is so very deceptive because in your heart you are dispensing a sort of justice, of which God approves. But because you have no right or authority to dispense such justice, but rather are motivated by your own sense of hatred towards the one who has hurt you or a loved one, you are acting in one of the most ungodly ways possible.

Theologian John Murray says it well:

"The essence of ungodliness is that we presume to take the place of God, to take everything into our own hands." Murray

Instead, godliness calls us to wait upon the Lord.

Proverbs 20:22 ²² Do not say, "I will repay evil"; wait for the LORD, and he will deliver you.

But knowing that revenge is wrong will not automatically remove the feelings of wrath that fill our heart when someone wrongs us. And what Paul commands here in Romans 12 is more than holding back justified anger. Paul takes Genuine Love to another level entirely.

Read Romans 12:14-21.

The verses before us today are the second half of Paul's teaching on Genuine Love which began in verse 9. And these verses continue the theme of being called to "transformation by the renewing of our mind" in v. 2.

Grammatically, we have left the list participles of vv. 8-13. Verse 14 begins with a clear imperative. A command.

14 Bless those who persecute you;
bless and do not curse them.

There may be no other command in Scripture that is so distinctly Christian, so full of Gospel truth, so manifestly impossible except by faith and by the working of the Holy Spirit, as this command. It so completely goes against our natural instincts, that after 35 years of being a Christian, I find that obeying this command, even partially, requires much prayer and pleading with God to grant grace that does not seem to reside in me. Even as believers, we regularly excuse ourselves and others for ignoring this command. We know that this command exists and should be followed, but who around us can be found to put this into practice?

What is it that God is calling us to? We must begin with what it means to persecute. Literally, it means to pursue someone with hostile intent. I think it is good to stick with this broad sense of the term.

Persecution occurs whenever someone pursues after you with the intent of harming you in one way or another. This harm could be physical, but it could also include harming your reputation, or your person generally (emotionally, spiritually, or even your material possessions). The key is that there is an ongoing pursuit with the intent to harm. The verb is in the present tense meaning that the persecution is ongoing. It has not stopped.

Into the teeth of this hostility, Paul gives the command to bless. What exactly does he mean by "bless"? We all have a general idea of what it means to bless, but it is helpful to hear it in explicit terms.

The Greek word is Eulogew. It means to speak of something in favorable terms. To speak well of. It is the word from which we get "eulogy". But if you follow the Greek word back to the OT it is connected with the Hebrew term Barak. And Barak means to "endue with power for success, and prosperity." To bless is to desire, to pray for, and to even encourage the welfare and prosperity of the individual.

And when you understand that salvation, eternal life, is the greatest blessing, you begin to see that Paul's command is not, "Be nice to them for a little while in hopes that they will be crushed."

His command is that we would truly desire for God to grant to them eternal life. And as a demonstration of this attitude, we are pursuing their welfare in this

present life. If we only had Paul's command here in Romans, it would be enough to bind us. But the truth is that Paul takes his cue from Christ.

Luke 6:26-36 ²⁶ "Woe to you, when all people speak well of you, for so their fathers did to the false prophets. ²⁷ "But I say to you who hear, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, ²⁸ bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. ²⁹ 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. ³⁰ Give to everyone who begs from you, and from one who takes away your goods do not demand them back. ³¹ And as you wish that others would do to you, do so to them. ³² "If you love those who love you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. ³³ And if you do good to those who do good to you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. ³⁴ And if you lend to those from whom you expect to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to get back the same amount. ³⁵ But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return, and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, for he is kind to the ungrateful and the evil. ³⁶ Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful.

Blessing the one who is harming you most reflects the character of God that is displayed every time he chooses to save.

Jesus died while we were yet sinners. That means, in order to save each one of us, he had to extend kindness to us while we were intending to do him harm, while we were seeking evil. I remind you, this is not the same thing as calling their evil good. To ignore evil or to deny that it is evil empties the glory of God's kindness to us. He loved us when we were most evil. That is the gospel. What Jesus, and Paul, are commanding of believers is to not extend wrath, but to extend kindness towards the very ones who are intending us harm. And Paul commands that our blessing be pure. We are not to have a mixture of desires within us. John Murray says it very well:

"When Paul adds, 'bless and curse not', he underlines the fact that our attitude is not to be a mixture of blessing and cursing but one of unadulterated blessing." Murray

Are you beginning to get a feel for why we need to have our minds renewed? This sort of thinking is the working out of God's mercy in our own heart. There is nothing natural about it. This sort of love can only flow from the heart of God. It just does not exist naturally in the fallen world.

The tendency within me is to want to lash out at those who lash out at me. When we are harmed, we naturally resort to fight or flight reflexes. Only as God's character fills us and renews us will we be transformed to bless our enemies.

It is best to see verses 15-16 in the context of persecution.

15 Rejoice with those who rejoice,

weep with those who weep.

I believe that Paul is encouraging Christian oneness and empathy towards other believers as they experience hostility from the world. It is possible for the unbelieving world to treat believers well. When this occurs, we should rejoice with those who rejoice. On the other hand, it is also possible for Christians to suffer at the hands of a hostile world. In these instances, fellow believers should suffer with those who are suffering. Don't be jealous when believers do well in this world. And don't distance yourself from those who are suffering. You remain united to your brothers and sisters in both circumstances.

It is easy to distance ourselves from other believers when they are persecuted by the world. If we associate with those who are persecuted, we too may be persecuted. When Joseph of Arimathea asks for the body of the Lord after his crucifixion, he was taking a huge risk of bringing persecution down on his own head. When our fellow Christians suffer persecution, we are to suffer with them... and living in harmony with them.

16 Live in harmony with one another.
Do not be haughty,
but associate with the lowly.
Never be conceited.

The word for harmony literally means to "be of the same mind toward one another."

Placed into the context of Romans 12, I would paraphrase it this way, "Don't change your attitude toward your fellow believer because they are being persecuted." Often, when someone is criticized and persecuted by the world, other Christians pile on. We look for the one inconsistency in the reasoning of our fellow believer and join in the criticism. As Christians, we do not get it all right, but that does not mean that we should refuse to align ourselves with other believers when they take a stand for what they think is right.

There are Christians in our day who are losing their jobs because they do not think it is right to get a vaccine. Now, whatever you personally think about vaccines, there are legitimate reasons why some people do not want to get them. Some of them are practical, such as fear of the long-term effects. Others are moral, such as not wanting any participation in research using aborted fetuses. Others simply do not think it is right for the government to issue mandates on health issues. Even if you are not convinced personally of these arguments, your brothers and sisters are sincerely trying to live out their convictions in this confusing world. Think twice before being critical of those who are your brothers and sisters. We are to have the same mind towards one another. That does not mean we will agree on every detail. But it does mean that we should have a common bond with one another in our union with Christ.

The temptation toward haughtiness is easy. We think, "Others are experiencing persecution because they are not as wise as us. They have not figured out how to navigate this world like we have. They are foolish and because of their foolishness they are suffering."

We must learn to fight against these attitudes. Persecution can cause us to turn on one another. May it not be so.

Now that Paul has instructed believers in how they should treat one another in the midst of persecution, he returns to his main theme of instructing believers in the proper response to the evil itself.

17 Repay no one evil for evil,
 but
 give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all.

As Christians, we are not to fight evil with evil, even when it feels like justice to do so. And we are to creatively think of ways that we can do good to those who are seeking our harm. The world may not understand why we are doing what we are doing, but they surely take notice.

One of my all-time favorite books, outside the Bible, is *Les Miserables*. And one of the most beautiful scenes in that book is when the main character Jean Valjean is given mercy by a priest and his sisters. In repayment for the priest's kindness, Jean Valjean robs the priest of the valuable silver in his house. Jean Valjean has already spent time in prison and so when the authorities find him with the valuable silver items they immediately arrest him and take him back to the priest. But, instead of the priest pressing charges, he looks Jean Valjean in the eye and asks him, "Why did you not also take the silver candelabras? I wanted you to have them as well." Since the priest tells the officer that he had given the items to Jean Valjean, he had to be released.

No one would argue that the priest's act of kindness was an affirmation to Jean Valjean to go on living a life of thievery. The opposite occurs. This act of kindness moves Jean Valjean like none other. He strives the rest of his life to be a man of honor. Even as a hardened criminal he could recognize that he had been given honor. In the story of Jean Valjean, his heart is changed. But that is not the way it always turns out. We can return evil with kindness and receive more evil. That is just the way it is. Paul says as much in verse 18.

18 If possible, so far as it depends on you,
 live peaceably with all.

The Christian is never to go looking for trouble. The Christian should want to live peaceably with unbelievers. When there is conflict, it should be one-sided. But it

is not always possible to avoid all conflict. Christians should not have this expectation.

In verse 19, we have come to the heart of the philosophy supporting the command. I will state it in terms of a question: If I act with kindness in the face of evil, will evil then go unpunished? Another way of stating the issue: Will evil triumph over good?

19 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."

In answer to the question, "Will evil go unpunished?" Scripture is clear: God promises to pour out his wrath on evil.

If you choose to not take justice in your own hands, God gives you his solemn promise that he will indeed punish the evil done to you. We come here to an apparent contradiction. Paul has just told us that as a Christian we are to sincerely desire the blessing of the person who is harming us. But now we are to be comforted with the thought that God will not allow that same person to escape God's wrath. There is peace in knowing that they will get what they have coming. How can we possibly hold these two truths together?

Verse 20 is given by Paul to help explain how they can be held together, but his words baffled commentators throughout history.

20 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."

Paul is quoting the book of Proverbs.

Proverbs 25:21-22 ²¹ If your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat, and if he is thirsty, give him water to drink, ²² for you will heap burning coals on his head, and the LORD will reward you.

What are we to make of this, particularly the part about "heaping burning coals on his head"?

If you are inclined to care more about God exacting justice over evil, you will hear these words this way: When you act kindly in the face of evil, you are increasing the judgment that will be poured out on those who are evil.

Heaping burning coals on someone is a symbol of judgment. Sodom and Gomorrah come to mind. The problem with this thinking is that it seems to allow us to inwardly desire for God to “not bless” the one who is persecuting us. And yet, we were just told that we should desire their blessing.

So then, if you are inclined to focus on the importance of truly desiring blessing for the one who has mistreated you, you must find another interpretation for “heaping burning coals on his head.” It is not an easy task to turn these words into something positive. But, in general the most reasonable way is to connect actual wrath of God with the feeling of that wrath that we experience when we are brought to repentance and faith. The burning coals are symbolic of the guilt and remorse that we feel when we are confronted with our own sinfulness. This happened in the story of Jean Valjean. He was truly broken by God’s just wrath over him and was brought to repentance and faith. In this understanding, the burning coals are not final. In fact, the person who experiences them is then brought to salvation – true blessing.

Origen in Commentary on this passage: “Perhaps here also these coals of fire which are heaped on the head of an enemy are heaped for his benefit. For it may be that a savage and barbarous mind, if it feels our good will, our kindness, our love and our godliness, may be struck by it and repent, and he will swear that as his conscience torments him for the wrong which he has done, it is as if a fire were enveloping him.”

I believe that at the heart of our acts of kindness ought to be a sincere desire that God would use our kindness to bring the one who has hurt us to repentance and faith. This lies at the heart of our hope that God would save others like he has saved us.

And when God does bring a person to repentance and faith, our sense of justice is not lost. Every sin that they have ever committed has been laid upon Christ. The anger that we feel over the harm that they have caused us must be placed upon Christ. The sense of wrath that we feel against our persecutor, now that they are in Christ, must be transferred to the cross.

At the same time, God does not save everyone. And sometimes we question the sincerity of our persecutor’s conversion. We doubt whether they have truly repented. We wonder if they are simply jumping through hoops to avoid the consequences of their sin. We fear that justice will not actually be served.

Into these fears and doubts, we have the assurance of God’s Word. God will exact perfect justice. No one will ever fool God. If a person has not been brought to true repentance and faith, God will expose their hypocrisy and they will indeed receive the full and complete wrath of God.

So, I think option 1 is also relevant. In fact, it may even be more to the point. We are to rest assured that perfect justice will be executed, either on Jesus Christ for all who are truly in Him, or on the individuals themselves.

It may seem contrary to justice to want blessing on those who are guilty of evil. But in our day where the conversion of those who are evil to Christ remains a possibility, it ought to be the desire of all who have received such grace. But we must never think that this desire removes the final judgment. All who are apart from Christ will experience God's just wrath. And it is not wrong for the Christian who has been wronged to be comforted by this fact.

In essence, the Christian is leaving wrath to God and purposely choosing to seek salvation and blessing for those who are enslaved to the evil of their own hearts.

We have come to the final verse in this section.

21 Do not be overcome by evil,
but overcome evil with good.

How exactly does good overcome evil?

In order to answer that question, you must ask yourself, "Whose evil, mine or theirs?"

You see, they are intertwined.

The evil in their heart is overcome either by their being transformed by the grace of God or their being judged in the end by the wrath of God. But there is another evil that threatens our own heart. It is the evil of revenge. This is the evil that threatens the heart of the Christian. And it too must be overcome by good.

I know of no other story so relevant than that of Corrie Ten Boom. For some of you it is a story that you know well. I trust that your heart will be blessed to hear it again. But for some of you it will be the first time you have ever heard her story. I hope that you will not only be moved by it, but that you will make sure that her testimony is never lost to future generations.

I am reading from Guideposts. But her fuller story is written in her book "The Hiding Place." Corrie suffered terribly at the hands of the Nazi's in WWII as you will see. Corrie is the one speaking.

Guideposts

It was in a church in Munich that I saw him, a balding heavyset man in a gray overcoat, a brown felt hat clutched between his hands. People were filing out of the basement room where I had just spoken, moving along the rows of wooden chairs to the door at the rear.

It was 1947 and I had come from Holland to defeated Germany with the message that God forgives.

It was the truth they needed most to hear in that bitter, bombed-out land, and I gave them my favorite mental picture. Maybe because the sea is never far from a Hollander's mind, I liked to think that that's where forgiven sins were thrown.

"When we confess our sins," I said, "God casts them into the deepest ocean, gone forever."

The solemn faces stared back at me, not quite daring to believe. There were never questions after a talk in Germany in 1947. People stood up in silence, in silence collected their wraps, in silence left the room. And that's when I saw him, working his way forward against the others. One moment I saw the overcoat and the brown hat; the next, a blue uniform and a visored cap with its skull and crossbones.

It came back with a rush: the huge room with its harsh overhead lights, the pathetic pile of dresses and shoes in the center of the floor, the shame of walking naked past this man. I could see my sister's frail form ahead of me, ribs sharp beneath the parchment skin. Betsie, how thin you were!

Betsie and I had been arrested for concealing Jews in our home during the Nazi occupation of Holland; this man had been a guard at Ravensbrück concentration camp where we were sent.

Now he was in front of me, hand thrust out: "A fine message, *fräulein!* How good it is to know that, as you say, all our sins are at the bottom of the sea!"

And I, who had spoken so glibly of forgiveness, fumbled in my pocketbook rather than take that hand. He would not remember me, of course—how could he remember one prisoner among those thousands of women?

But I remembered him and the leather crop swinging from his belt. It was the first time since my release that I had been face to face with one of my captors and my blood seemed to freeze.

"You mentioned Ravensbrück in your talk," he was saying. "I was a guard in there." No, he did not remember me.

"But since that time," he went on, "I have become a Christian. I know that God has forgiven me for the cruel things I did there, but I would like to hear it from your lips as well. *Fräulein!*"—again the hand came out—"will you forgive me?"

And I stood there—I whose sins had every day to be forgiven—and could not. Betsie had died in that place—could he erase her slow terrible death simply for the asking?

It could not have been many seconds that he stood there, hand held out, but to me it seemed hours as I wrestled with the most difficult thing I had ever had to do.

For I had to do it—I knew that. The message that God forgives has a prior condition: that we forgive those who have injured us. “If you do not forgive men their trespasses,” Jesus says, “neither will your Father in heaven forgive your trespasses.”

I knew it not only as a commandment of God, but as a daily experience. Since the end of the war I had had a home in Holland for victims of Nazi brutality.

Those who were able to forgive their former enemies were able also to return to the outside world and rebuild their lives, no matter what the physical scars. Those who nursed their bitterness remained invalids. It was as simple and as horrible as that.

And still I stood there with the coldness clutching my heart. But forgiveness is not an emotion—I knew that too. Forgiveness is an act of the will, and the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart.

“Jesus, help me!” I prayed silently. “I can lift my hand. I can do that much. You supply the feeling.”

And so woodenly, mechanically, I thrust my hand into the one stretched out to me. And as I did, an incredible thing took place. The current started in my shoulder, raced down my arm, sprang into our joined hands. And then this healing warmth seemed to flood my whole being, bringing tears to my eyes.

“I forgive you, brother!” I cried. “With all my heart!”

For a long moment we grasped each other’s hands, the former guard and the former prisoner. I had never known God’s love so intensely as I did then.

And having thus learned to forgive in this hardest of situations, I never again had difficulty in forgiving: I wish I could say it! I wish I could say that merciful and charitable thoughts just naturally flowed from me from then on. But they didn’t.

If there’s one thing I’ve learned at 80 years of age, it’s that I can’t store up good feelings and behavior—but only draw them fresh from God each day.

Maybe I’m glad it’s that way. For every time I go to Him, He teaches me something else. I recall the time, some 15 years ago, when some Christian friends whom I loved and trusted did something which hurt me.

You would have thought that, having forgiven the Nazi guard, this would have been child’s play. It wasn’t. For weeks I seethed inside. But at last I asked God

again to work His miracle in me. And again it happened: first the cold-blooded decision, then the flood of joy and peace.

I had forgiven my friends; I was restored to my Father.

Then, why was I suddenly awake in the middle of the night, hashing over the whole affair again? My *friends!* I thought. *People I loved!* If it had been strangers, I wouldn't have minded so.

I sat up and switched on the light. "Father, I thought it was all forgiven! Please help me do it!"

But the next night I woke up again. They'd talked so sweetly too! Never a hint of what they were planning. "Father!" I cried in alarm. "Help me!"

His help came in the form of a kindly Lutheran pastor to whom I confessed my failure after two sleepless weeks.

"Up in that church tower," he said, nodding out the window, "is a bell which is rung by pulling on a rope. But you know what? After the sexton lets go of the rope, the bell keeps on swinging. First *ding* then *dong*. Slower and slower until there's a final *dong* and it stops.

"I believe the same thing is true of forgiveness. When we forgive someone, we take our hand off the rope. But if we've been tugging at our grievances for a long time, we mustn't be surprised if the old angry thoughts keep coming for a while. They're just the ding-dongs of the old bell slowing down."

And so it proved to be. There were a few more midnight reverberations, a couple of dings when the subject came up in my conversation. But the force—which was my willingness in the matter—had gone out of them. They came less and less often and at last stopped altogether.

And so I discovered another secret of forgiveness: that we can trust God not only above our emotions, but also above our thoughts.

Do you want to conquer evil? I hope you do. By God's grace the evil of some will be conquered through salvation. God's just and good wrath will conquer the evil of the unrepentant. But as it relates to you here today, it is by blessing those who persecute you that evil is overcome in your own heart.