

How To Win The War Against Evil!



Text: Romans 12:17-21

Introduction

Bob is on vacation and will continue the series on I Corinthians next week. But we are going to stay close to the topic that he has been addressing—which is the nature of genuine or *Christ-like* love. So first of all, let's do a quick review. Do you remember which description of love in I Corinthians 13 Bob discussed last week? Let me give you a hint. It's in verse 4: "Love is *kind*." And do you remember what God's kindness is? It's not merely being civil toward others. It's not something you *pretend to give* in order to get something else that you really wanted all along.. That's the *world's* view of kindness. That kind of thinking reduces kindness to a mere transaction and turns relationships into ATM machines. I make a deposit in your life so I can have something to withdraw from you later when *I* need it. Then what happens? Inevitably someone starts feeling *overdrawn*—and before you know it, the account gets closed out. God's kind of kindness is *so much richer* than that and it runs *so much deeper* than that. It invests in a relationship even when there is no prospect of a certain return.

So how have *you* been doing lately? Are you making some strides in pursuing God's kind of kindness? I trust that you are. And to that end, I want us to pick up from where Bob left off last Sunday and continue to look at kindness—but from the perspective of a very difficult *relational context*. For the next half hour, I want you to try and look at kindness when it is put to the *maximum test*—when you find yourself in the middle of a *hostile* situation. Like when your reputation is being unfairly attacked. Or when you are being taken advantage of. Or you when you are treated unjustly. Here is the question you need to consider this morning: ***What is a follower of Jesus Christ supposed to do in the face of evil treatment?***

Paul deals with this issue at length in his letter to the Romans chapter 12, verses 17-21.

¹⁷ Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. ¹⁸ If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. ¹⁹ Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. ²⁰ 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." ²¹ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Prayer

Story of John Perkins

John Perkins was a sharecropper's son who grew up in Mississippi amidst dire poverty. When he was 17 he fled to California and vowed never to return after his older brother's murder at the hands of a town marshal. However, in 1960, after coming to faith in Jesus Christ, he returned to his boyhood home in Mississippi because he believed that God was calling him to preach the Gospel to the poor black people with whom he had been raised and to help them by training and mentoring black leadership. Little did he realize just how much it would cost him.

On February 7, 1970, a Saturday night, a van of black college students who had been taking part in a civil rights march was pulled over by highway patrolmen from nearby Brandon, Mississippi, and the students were arrested. Perkins and two of his associates went to the local jail to post bail, but when they arrived they were surrounded by five deputy sheriffs and several highway patrolmen who arrested them and began to beat them. Now mind you, Perkins had not been speeding, taking drugs, or resisting arrest. In fact, he didn't even have a police record. All he had done was to go to jail and post bail for the students. But he was a black leader—and he was hated for that.

John Perkins was beaten most of that night, along with some of the others. The officers stomped on him and kicked him in the head, ribs, and groin. One officer brought a fork over to him and said, "Do you see this?" Then he jammed it up his nose. After that, he shoved the same fork down his throat. The beating was so severe that it rendered him unconscious. Meanwhile the students whom he had come to release on bond watched from a nearby cell, convinced that John had died or was at least near death. The evil that John Perkins endured that night was unspeakably violent, vicious, and racist.

Yet in the end, it resulted in even greater good. For up to that point, the focus of Perkins' Gospel ministry had been entirely to rural African-Americans in his home state of Mississippi. Of course, in those days, it was all that he was *permitted* to do. For the most part, ministry to the white population was off limits to a black man. But the beating changed all that. It did so by changing his focus and vision. Listen to Perkins' testimony in his own words from his biography: [With Justice for All](#):

"I remembered their faces—so twisted with hate. It was like looking at white-faced demons. For the first time I saw what hate had done to these people. These policemen were poor. They saw themselves as failures. The only way they knew how to find a sense of worth was by beating us. Their racism made them feel like "somebody." When I saw that, I just couldn't hate back. I said to God that night, "God, if you will get me out of this jail alive"—and I really didn't think I would, maybe I was trying to bargain with him—"I really want to preach a gospel that will heal these people, too."

Through this terrible experience, John Perkins learned a lesson you and I need to grasp. He learned ***how to win the war against evil***. As he laid in a hospital bed recuperating, rather than dwelling on the sinful things that were done to him, John Perkins *meditated on the truth of the Gospel*. And as he considered the injustice of racism, he concluded that the problem was not a *skin* problem but a *sin* problem. He also concluded that if real justice was to ever come about, it would come ***"only as people's hearts were made right with God and God's love motivated them to be reconciled to each other."***

Most of us will never experience anything even remotely close to what John Perkins experienced that awful wintry Saturday night back in 1970. But *all* of us experience evil. Whether it is a high intensity evil like Perkins experienced—or a low intensity evil like a difficult boss or neighbor or family member—we all are engaged in the same war. And there are only two possible outcomes. Either we learn how to *conquer* evil—or we are *conquered* by it.

Transition: *So how can you win the war against evil?* Paul makes several key statements in this brief paragraph. But you can organize them around two key strategies: *defensive* and *offensive*. The first thing you need to do is to...

I. Pay attention to God's *defensive* strategy against evil.

When I speak of a defensive strategy, I am simply reminding you of what God says here and other places like Ephesians 6—that we are in spiritual warfare. Paul is trying to help you understand that spiritually speaking, one of the surest ways to defeat is to fail to understand that you are already in a war.

Do you remember that shortly after 911, the Department of Homeland Security was organized and one of the first things they did was to establish an *advisory system with a color code*? That is what Paul is doing in this passage. He is putting the advisory on *orange*. That means there is a *high risk* of attack. And to help you prepare for such an attack, he gives three warnings.

A. Don't "*buy into*" the world's currency for "paying back" evil (17a)

Do not repay anyone evil for evil

Our natural, fallen tendency when we think we have been sinned against is to respond in kind. Somebody bumps you—without even thinking you want to bump them back. If somebody cuts you off on the 696, they deserve a little tailgating. If someone speaks to you in a tone of frustration or obvious impatience—throw it back in their face. It's the law of the jungle—right?

What makes this even harder is that not only is this a natural tendency because of our innate sinfulness, but we live in a world that says: "*Don't get mad—get even!*" And it promotes this ideology in a number of ways:

- a. Movies and TV programs model this all the time. And I think parents need to really think this through. There are parents that would highly object to their children watching movies with sexually explicit themes and scenes—and well they should. Yet those same parents often miss the equally harmful influence of "*getting even.*"
- b. Now with the internet, there are innumerable ideas on how to get even. Here is an one I came across a few years ago:

FIGHT BACK!

Far too long parents have driven themselves to despair trying to get along with their teens. It's time to fight back. Here are some suggestions:

1. Insist on putting a picture of yourself on his wall.
2. Get a mother-daughter outfit and follow her wherever she goes.
3. Iron her jeans (and be sure to iron in a crease).
4. Invite his English teacher to dinner.

You know why some of you are laughing? Because you wish you would have come up with that idea!

God is warning you *not to go there*. It may feel good (at least at first) to pay somebody back for their evil to you—but the problem is that once you allow yourself to pay back someone in the currency of evil, you will end up on a spending spree that is hard to stop. You will lose control and say and do things beyond what you ever intended. And then you set in motion a mutually destructive pendulum that is extremely difficult to stop. Paul says: Don't allow yourself to go there.

Transition: The inclination to repay people *with evil for evil* comes from a deeper problem. The false belief that you have the right to seek revenge. And so Paul warns you to...

B. Renounce the world's "*right*" to revenge (19a)

Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath

Paul is not saying that we should be indifferent to injustice. And people who like to misrepresent Christianity by quoting Christ's words from the Sermon on the Mount where Christ says: "Turn the other cheek" miss His real point. What Jesus and Paul are both saying is that God has not given you and me the right to carry out personal retaliation against those who wrong us. In Romans 13, Paul will go on to talk about the role that God has given to government to enforce justice. And in this verse, Paul makes it very clear that the exercise of wrath is ultimately **God's** business.

So let's pause here and think very carefully for a moment. This verse represents the core concern of Paul's defensive strategy. He is saying that as bad as it may be to experience evil at the hands of another person—there is *something even worse*—something that is far more dangerous and destructive. Taking matters into *your own hands*—which is another way of saying that you are trying to take matters out of God's hands.

Illustration: If I am riding with you and I start criticizing the way you drive—and all of a sudden I wrestle with you for the control of your steering wheel, what am I saying? My action is a declaration of your incompetence. And that is exactly what we are doing when we take revenge on another person. We are accusing God of incompetence.

We are impeaching his role as the Sovereign Judge of the Universe. In short, we are saying to God—“You’re fired! Vacate your place on the Bench of Justice because *I’m* taking over!”

Question: Where have you heard that line before? Wasn’t it Lucifer who was cast out of heaven because *he* wanted God’s position? Wasn’t it the *Serpent* in Genesis 3 who persuaded Adam and Eve to disobey God with nearly the same words when he told them that if they would just eat the fruit, they would become *like God*?

Vengeance is at once an expression of rebellion *and* an act of unbelief. It is serious stuff. And so Paul warns you to be on your guard against it.

Transition: Guard your heart against it...

C. Or else you will be *conquered by evil* (21a)

You will become a casualty in the war against evil. Not by what *others* do to you—but by what *you inflict on yourself*. How does evil conquer us? Contrary to what we hear from the world, we are not conquered by evil simply because people wrong us. Romans 8:35-39 is very clear about that. In that passage, Paul says that *nothing* can separate us from Christ’s love—not people doing bad things to us like persecution or causing us harm, or doing us injustice. So what enables evil to conquer us? When we allow it to move from *outside of us to inside us*.

Evil conquers you by convincing you to *take matters into your own hands*. Evil conquers you when you become its willing slave by seeking vengeance for what has been done to you—whether real or perceived.

You are overcome by evil when you *quit* seeking God’s way, when you forget God’s unfailing love for you and you start to follow the world’s way of dealing with it.

Illustration: My kids got into an argument while playing a board game on vacation. My “godly” response? “You want to fight? I’ll give you someone to fight! You think your brother is a *pain*? I’ll be your *worst nightmare*!” In that moment, I lost the battle. I forgot that my struggle with sin had less to do with my kid’s behavior and more to do with what I was wanting in my own heart and not getting. And so I capitulated to evil by doing the very thing that I was accusing my kids of doing. And until I faced my sin, I was in no position to help them with their sin.

Transition: Pay attention to God’s defensive strategy. Don’t let the enemy take you down by getting you to return evil for evil. But there’s more to fighting evil than defense. You must also ...

II. Pursue God's *offensive* strategy for overcoming evil.

How do you do that? You start by learning to...

A. Aim for the *benefit* of others rather than *your own relief* (17b-18)

Think of all the thought and energy people put into seeking revenge. Jay Adams tells the story of a man who paid his alimony each month in nickels. He'd wheel it over to his former wife's house with a wheelbarrow and dump it out on her front lawn. Talk about premeditated!

If you are a follower of Jesus Christ, not only must you *not* seek revenge, God wants you to put the same kind of effort into doing your enemy good that unbelievers put into doing their enemies harm. How do you do that? Look at verse 17b-18b:

Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.

"Be careful" is lit. translated: "*think beforehand.*" It carries with it the idea of planning ahead. Instead of dwelling on how that person has sinned against you and nursing resentment, God calls you and me to put our energy into carrying out "right" actions. The word "right" doesn't so much emphasize just doing the "right" thing. It literally means what is *fine* or *beautiful*. So Paul is saying: Plan what is "beautiful" or "attractive" in the eyes of all men. He means plan in such a way that when others observe your actions and their results—even unbelievers will have to acknowledge that it was a job well done!

Illustration: Ken Sande, who was our speaker at our last year's Builder's Conference tells the story about a Christian worker with a very belligerent boss who was constantly trying to make life difficult for him. So he thought about what he could do to minister to her. Since his office was across the hall from her and they both had to go down a hallway to make copies or get coffee, anytime he needed to go down the hall, he always made it a point to stop and ask her if she needed any copies made or wanted a cup of coffee. And he kept doing this over several weeks. He was doing exactly what this text is talking about. What happened? I'll tell you in a moment.

Instead of seeking revenge, God calls on you to...

B. Defer the right of revenge to the *Judge of the Universe* (19b)

Trust Him that He will eventually right all wrongs. Just make sure that you are not part of the wrong that He will have to right! Instead of seeking to fight evil with still more evil...

C. Make use of God's superior weapons (20)

Revenge can seem *so* powerful and persuasive. And this is where Hollywood can seduce us with all the fireworks and fury of special effects. And more and more it seems like people are emulating that model. But you know something? It's not as powerful as it seems.

Have you ever seen a temper tantrum result in long-term, positive, deep down change?

Illustration: What happens when you honk impatiently or scream at a careless driver? When you threaten that annoying neighbor; When you rage on your inconsiderate spouse or your disobedient kids? What happens? They thank you for pointing that out. And they say: "I think I now see what you were trying to get at." No way. They merely react the way you do (Matthew 7:1-2). That's what has been going on in Iraq between the Sunnis and the Shiites for the past two years. A cycle of endless vengeance.

Vengeance can seem impressive. But at the end of the day, it's only a *pop gun* compared to the nuclear power of *kindness*. Just listen to this:

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."

So what are these burning coals? It may well be a metaphor of burning shame in which God uses your kindness to bring about conviction which may even lead to repentance.

Illustration: Remember the guy I mentioned with difficult boss? He just kept on showing kindness over several weeks until one day she came into his office and in tears asked him how he could be so kind in spite of her open belligerence. His planning to do what was right in the eyes of everybody resulted in an opportunity to share the Gospel with his boss.

Remember John Perkins? His response to evil led him not only to have a forgiving spirit toward his attackers—but led to the founding of the Voice of Calvary ministries which is having a significant role in the cause of racial reconciliation in our country. His reason? "I wanted to overcome evil with good!"

D. In short, don't be overcome by evil, but *overcome evil with good* (21b)

Conclusion: **The Great Reversal!**

If all of this seems a bit backward to you—you're hardly alone. After all, we live in a world that craves super-heroes who are strong—not weak. Who are successful—not losers. This message is so opposite of the way things work in our world.

And you're right. Because what I have been explaining this morning is part of a larger message that we call the Good News or the Gospel. And this Gospel tells us that God created the world for man to enjoy Him and to rule on His behalf. But when man chose to be his own god, and establish his own kingdom, he broke off fellowship with God and has suffered consequences like we have spoken about this morning ever since.

God could have left man in that predicament. It certainly would have been just. But He didn't. He sent His Son, Jesus to solve the problem that sin had caused. And when Jesus came, He came to pull off the Great Reversal. To make things the way they were meant to be. How did he do that?

John Stott, in his book, The Cross of Christ, puts it this way:

“The essence of sin is man substituting himself for God, while the essence of salvation is God substituting himself for man. Man asserts himself against God and puts himself where only God deserves to be; God sacrifices himself for man and puts himself where only man deserves to be. Man claims prerogatives which belong to God alone; God accepts penalties which belong to man alone.”

You ask: ***How can I return good for evil?*** You *can't* until you know the God who has returned good for your evil and who calls you to receive that good in the Person and work of His Son. And when you do, you can experience His *great reversal* in your life—and begin to win the war against evil.