

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

August 26, 2018, Pastor Jeff Harrison

Overcome or Overcoming

Part 4 of *The Scandal of Jesus' Beautiful Gospel*

Romans 12:17-21

Introduction:

A. Announcement; Doctor story shows temptation to evil even with minor offense

Here at Northwest our mission is to help you take next steps with Jesus, so that you can help others take next steps with Jesus. And as an elder board, we've been celebrating some encouraging stories we've heard about God working through you all to help people take next steps with Jesus.

And we want everyone to share in the encouragement and celebration of those stories. So the next two Sundays, we're taking 30 second videos of you sharing how you're helping people take next steps with Jesus. Then we'll compile them into a video we'll show at our Next Steps meeting on September 30th.

So be thinking about if you've got something to share about how you're helping people take next steps. We'll be shooting the videos the next two Sundays after first and after second service, thanks.

And now, as we turn to God's Word, let's ask for His help in applying it...

My six-year-old son Grant had two warts on his hand, so my wife Stephanie called the pediatrician's office. They said it'd be good for both parents to come for the appointment because they freeze the warts off, which requires the child to be still while experiencing pain from the extreme cold.

So the parents try to help keep their child calm and still, and if that's not happening, you get to do the dirty work of pinning down your child while the painful treatment is administered. So Stephanie makes the appointment on my day off and we make a family trip to the pediatrician's office.

The doctor examines the two warts and decides to try to freeze them off. And on that day, my son is not feeling the idea of sitting still a whole minute while the doctor painfully freezes his warts. Our efforts at encouraging cooperation are falling flat, so eventually we must pin Grant down, which he's real pleased about, while the doctor freezes off the first wart. It was a bit traumatic for all of us, and now we're gearing up to do it again.

But then, the doctor begins shaking his can of liquid nitrogen, which it turns out, has just emptied, and was their last can. The doctor apologizes, sheepishly explaining that it's hard to tell how much is left in the can and that we'll just have to come back in another day to freeze the other wart and that he won't charge us for that second appointment.

Now I'd like to tell you I was "totes profesh" about the whole situation, just a picture of inner calm. But in truth, my internal frustration level is rising. I was not satisfied with a mere apology. I want the doctor to profusely apologize. For his oversight is causing an otherwise unnecessary second traumatic appointment for my son. And another trip, on my day off, to the pediatrician. And I also want the doctor to say that from now on they'll order two cans of liquid nitrogen and always reorder when the first can runs out so this situation won't happen again. And I want him to say he'll refund our appointment cost for our trouble.

And when my many expectations were not met, I was tempted to express those things to that doctor in, shall we say, an unkind way.

B. We're tempted to be overcome by evil

And I bet I'm not the only one here who's been tempted to respond poorly when unhappy with someone else. Maybe that temptation comes for you when you're cut off in traffic, or when someone strongly expresses a differing political opinion on social media, or when you're on hold forever and then the customer service representative seems uninterested in helping you.

I was tempted to respond poorly even though it was an honest mistake, that was apologized for, by someone just trying to help my son. So clearly, I need God's Word this morning.

And while it's hard enough to respond well in these situations, the difficulty goes up enormously when dealing with an enemy. The person who keeps bullying you at school day after day, the coworker who just decides for no reason that they don't like you and keep making things difficult for you, the toxic family member.

When someone treats us as an enemy, we all, whatever our beliefs, are tempted to respond to their evil with our own. The Bible describes this as being "overcome by evil". When evil is done to us, our reflex is to hurt that other person back, creating a cycle that harms us all.

Now I know "evil" isn't the most popular term in our culture, but most still think some things, like genocide, are evil, and the Bible teaches evil exists, so we'll use the term today as we see what the Bible says about the danger of being overcome by evil.

C. Romans 12 speaks to the danger of being overcome by evil

So if you've got a Bible, turn to the New Testament book of Romans, chapter 12. Romans, chapter 12, verse 17. If you're new to reading the Bible, the big numbers you see are chapter numbers, and the little numbers are the verse numbers.

Now the book of Romans was written by Paul, a very key leader in the early church. Romans was written to the church in the capital city of Rome about 25 years after Jesus rose from the dead. The Roman emperor Nero had recently come to power. And Nero would eventually lead a huge persecution against Christians. So the topic of being overcome by evil was timely for the church in Rome, who would soon face brutal enemies. And in the meantime, these Romans faced the everyday temptations we all face when mistreated by others.

I. Avoid repaying evil and seek peace

A. Don't repay evil or take revenge, live peaceably (12:17-19a)

So let's start in verse 17 of Romans chapter 12. Here God's Word says:

¹⁷Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. ¹⁸If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. ¹⁹Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath...

These verses provide a first level to not being overcome by evil. That we avoid repaying evil and instead seek to do what is right and live peaceably. Now before we dig into this passage, I want to say that sometimes doing what is right includes removing yourself from an unsafe situation or calling someone to repent for their sins and apologize. Doing what is right sometimes includes seeking justice to protect yourself or others from further harm. These are all biblical ideas when done with godly motivations, they're just not the focus of this passage.

The focuses in this passage are to avoid repaying the evil and to seek peace. I like the Bible's realism about this in verse 18. We can't guarantee we'll live peaceably with everyone, but we can try to live at peace.

But this is not easy. When you discover the affair, or that your business partner has been stealing money for years, these verses call us to not retaliate nor seek revenge and try to live peaceably.

And if it that isn't hard enough, living peaceably can invite further trouble. For an enemy might try to take further advantage of you as they see your commitment to not retaliating.

B. God will justly take care of evil (12:19b)

I don't know about you, but I could really use some help here to live out this passage, and thankfully verse 19 brings assistance.

Verse 19 says: ¹⁹ 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.

This quote here of God saying, "It is mine to avenge, I will repay" comes from the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy, chapter 32. It describes what God will do in response to wicked enemies violently abusing and killing His people.

I know some are uncomfortable with God judging sin, but the Bible teaches that it flows from His perfect justice and love. And if you love someone, your anger is rightly aroused if they're unjustly mistreated. And because God has such an incredible love for people, His just anger is rightly aroused when His children are abused, when evil destroys what God holds so precious.

And because God possesses perfect love and justice and wisdom and power, He's the only one qualified to deal with all evil. And knowing that God will one day perfectly take care of it can help His followers to avoid retaliating.

C. Balkan war reflection illustrates how God's justice helps us avoid evil

This makes me recall back in college when my family visited my Uncle Jim in Croatia, where he was a missionary. As we walked through Zagreb, the capital city, some of the buildings had bullet holes, so I asked my uncle about it. My uncle, a history buff and good storyteller, told me some of the horrors of the Yugoslav Wars of the 1990s.

A series of horrific ethnic conflicts that included the sieging and destruction of cities, hundreds of thousands forced from their homes, a massacre of 8,000 in a designated safe area, thousands more tortured, starved, and killed in war camps, attempts at ethnic cleaning, and in the end, over 100,000 dead.

A few years after this, a pastor introduced me to Miroslav Volf, a Christian professor at Yale, who's from Croatia. Volf talks about how many here in the west think that a God who judges evil leads to His followers attacking others.

But Volf notes that when, like some in his homeland of Croatia, you did not participate in the fighting, yet enemies still came and plundered you and destroyed your home, and your daughter or sister or wife was violated, and your father or brother or son's throat was slit, a

platitude like “violence won’t solve anything, you just need to forgive” will never satisfy the rage over such injustice. No, if you’re in that situation and able, you’re picking up the sword.

So how can our passion for justice be honored while at the same time not being overcome by evil? Volf says that, despite its unpopularity with many here, the best resource to avoid the overwhelming desire for revenge is belief in God’s perfect vengeance.

That only if we’re sure that God will right every wrong with perfect love and justice do we have the power to put down our literal or figurative swords and seek peace. That not being overcome by evil requires trusting that God deeply cares about our injustices and in the end will take care of it.¹ And so verse 19 instructs,¹⁹ 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.

II. Minister to your enemy

A. Minister to your enemy’s needs (12:20a)

Now verse 20 is another challenging verse, it actually raises the standard for our response to our enemies way higher still. Please follow along as I read verse 20, which says:

²⁰ On the contrary: “If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink...

Now that’s a high standard, don’t just avoid evil, but also minister to your enemy’s needs. We see in verse 20 that we’re not called to be a doormat, just taking abuse and doing nothing about it. Rather, by God’s power, we’re to do something strong in response. But it’s not to strike back, rather it’s to have the internal strength to serve our enemies in love.

So, at the risk of getting personal here, I’d like us each to think about who we’re against. You might have too much “church” in you to feel comfortable calling them an “enemy”, but is there anyone you’re against?

Perhaps there’s someone who’s hurt you, or someone you love, and frankly, you don’t want them to do well. Maybe it’s an ex or a bad boss or a racist. Or it could even be someone in our church family. Or someone who used to attend here who hurt you and then left instead of seeking reconciliation. And now you can’t imagine helping a person you’re against in their time of need.

Or perhaps it’s a group, rather than an individual. Perhaps there’s a political group you see as the enemy. Or how about people of a certain nation, or race, or religion, or economic

¹ From Tim Keller’s discussion of Volf in sermons I’ve heard and in his book *The Reason for God*.

status? Or people whose only crime is rooting for the wrong sports team? Or maybe it's those with a different take on same sex relationships?

Whoever it is, verse 20 instructs us: ²⁰ On the contrary: "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink.

Called to serve the needs of those who treat us wrongly, of those we feel against, of those we're just frustrated at in the moment.

When Grant's doctor apologized, as my internal frustration was rising, do you know what my wife Stephanie said? "That's okay, we're a forgiving people."

That's not what was in my heart. I was actually frustrated at my wife for saying that so quickly, before her pastor husband could express, in front of our impressionable young kids, how the doctor had inconvenienced us and what he should do to make it up to us and make sure the situation didn't happen again.

That doctor wasn't our enemy, he just ran out of liquid nitrogen while trying to help our son. And he has plenty of food and drink, but if there was anything he needed in that moment, it was a gracious, forgiving response to his apology. And in the spirit of verse 20, Stephanie met that need.

B. Opportunity to influence should motivate ministry to enemies (12:20b)

Now the second half of verse 20 explains why we should serve others in this way, not just in the minor inconveniences, but even when we've attacked. God's Word says:

"In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head."

When we covered Romans in seminary, my professor noted that we have records of an ancient custom of a person carrying a smoking pan of burning charcoal above their head as a sign of sorrow over wrongdoing.² So it's possible that custom is why Paul uses this metaphor of "burning coals on his head" here in verse 20.

And Paul's point is not to be kind to your enemies in the hopes they feel horrible and grovel before you in shame, that would just be a different way to retaliate.

Rather, when you respond to their evil by serving them, you're hoping that your kindness melts their hard heart. That your service leads to a godly sorrow over their sin; and is a compelling invitation to learn more about the Jesus in whose way you follow.

C. Paul's story in Jesus motivates us to overcome evil with good (12:21)

² He referred to W. Klassen's article *Coals of Fire: Sign of Repentance or Revenge?*

As Paul so aptly says it in verse 21: ²¹ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

That's a strong summary of this passage, but it's incredibly difficult to do. And if you're familiar with Paul's story, you know he lived this out. Paul was no ivory tower theologian suggesting to Christians on the front lines facing real enemies, "Say, how about you guys just try overcoming evil with good."

No. Paul endured savage beatings, imprisonments, murder plots, spiritual attacks, shipwrecks, a stoning, and attacks on his message and character. Yet Paul kept traveling all over helping people start life changing relationships with Jesus and serving the poor and teaching and living this message of overcoming evil with good.

Yet when we first meet Paul in the New Testament book of Acts, he was not overcoming evil, he was overcome by it. First, Paul is part of a mob that stones a man named Stephen to death just for following Jesus. As Stephen is dying, on his knees being pelted by rocks, he cries out, as his last words, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." It's an echo of Jesus' words while being killed by His enemies on the cross, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they're doing."

Yet instead of Paul repenting of this horrible sin against this godly man Stephen, Paul makes it his full-time mission to travel around imprisoning as many Christians as he can while breathing murderous threats against them. Then one day, Jesus confronts Paul right in the midst of his evil quest to imprison more of Jesus' followers.

Picture the person you love most. What would you say is an appropriate punishment for a man who heartily approved of your innocent loved one being savagely pelted to death by stones and who then personally also made sure others you hold dear were unjustly thrown into prison while breathing murderous threats against them?

And now Paul is face to face with Jesus, who blinds Paul and then says, "Why are you persecuting me?" It looks like Paul is finally getting what's coming to him, I bet he's terrified. Remember verse 19, "It is mine to avenge, I will repay." But instead of holy judgment, Jesus extends His enemy Paul totally undeserved forgiveness and love and purpose.

Today is the last message of our *Scandal of Jesus' Beautiful Gospel* series. And the scandal of the gospel is that Jesus, God's Son, came into the world to suffer in the place of His

enemies. Jesus had every reason to take offense at Paul and us, but instead of taking offense at us, He gave His life for us.

On the cross Jesus took all the judgment we deserve, absorbing the penalty for all our evil, every time you've hurt someone, every good thing you've failed to do, every wicked thought you've ever had.

Jesus did it so that one day, when He ends evil in the world forever, He can end that evil without having to end us. Think about that.

I think Paul never lost sight of how Jesus overcame Paul's great evil with even greater good. Jesus dealing with Paul's evil so thoroughly that the evildoer himself was changed, as Paul then lived in the beautiful, upside down way of His master Jesus, overcoming evil with good.

D. An invitation to come to Jesus

And if you don't yet know Jesus, our heart for you here at Northwest is for you to join us in receiving the goodness of Jesus. I'd love to hear about it if you take that step of faith and come to Jesus, trusting that He died for your sins and rose from the dead, overcoming your evil with His good, so that one day, when Jesus ends evil once and for all, He won't have to end you.

And for anyone here struggles to believe in Jesus because His people have treated you like an enemy, rather than showing you love, I'm so sorry for that. I hope this morning what you see shining through is the beauty of Jesus' life and way, rather than the imperfect way His followers often embody it.

Conclusion:

A. Let's together overcome evil with good

And that's why we're talking about these things today, to encourage myself and other Christians to authentically follow in Jesus' way. Not overcome by evil done to us, rather, overcoming evil with good. Our divided culture desperately needs millions of people living in this way. And that's our application today Northwest, let's together overcome evil with good.

B. Overcoming evil with good is our story

For overcoming evil with good is our story too. It's not just Paul's story in Jesus, or Stephen's story in Jesus, from back then, it's still the story of Jesus followers today. In minor inconveniences, like when my wife Stephanie said, "That's okay, we're a forgiving people."

All the way to facing unspeakable evil. Like our Christian brother Miroslav Volf forgiving the horrors of the Yugoslav Wars. Like our Christian brothers and sisters from the AME church in Charleston forgiving Dylann Roof after he killed nine in a Bible study.

Like the incredible forgiveness shown to Joel Kime, who I recently heard interviewed. Back when Joel was 17, he was driving recklessly and hit Aaron and Sarah, a Christian couple married just that week. Sarah dies, and Aaron becomes a widower at age 21.

Joel's parents, who are also Christians, insist that they must go to Sarah's funeral to apologize face-to-face. Joel doesn't want to go, but realizes he has no right to dictate anything, so they go. There they meet Aaron, standing next to his 19-year-old bride Sarah in a coffin. Joel apologizes and Aaron wraps his arms around Joel and says, "I forgive you."

At the funeral they also meet Sarah's parents, Melvin and Barbara, who are also Christians. Amazingly, they also wrap Joel in their arms and say, "We forgive you and want to have you and your family over for dinner."

A few weeks later, Sarah's parents actually have Joel and his family and Aaron over for dinner. And then Joel's family have Sarah's parents and Aaron over for dinner. In the interview, Joel tells this incredible story of Aaron playing ping-pong with him, like friends would, at a dinner about a year after the accident. And how Sarah's parents wrote a letter to the judge in Joel's case asking for Joel to receive no punishment.

And unbelievably, Aaron and Sarah's parents even came to Joel's wedding, celebrating the union of the man who broke Aaron and Sarah's union through his reckless driving. Aaron could have easily been overcome by evil against Joel, but he instead chose the narrow path of Jesus, overcoming evil with good, and today Aaron is a pastor.

The accident happened over 25 years ago, but Joel's and Sarah's families still get together for dinner every year around the time of Sarah's death. And in more recent years Sarah's parents have opened up to Joel about the extreme difficulties of Sarah's death and of choosing to forgive Joel. It's incredibly hard to overcome evil with good, it's a death, but it's our way as Jesus followers.

In the interview Joel talked about how desperately he needed forgiveness as a 17-year-old. And when Aaron and Sarah's parents gave that forgiveness, a transformation took place

inside of him. That now Joel has the desire within to be forgiving of others, as he was forgiven. And today, Joel, like Aaron, is a pastor.³

C. Respond to message as we sing *Brother*

Friends, overcoming evil with good is close to the heart of God. And I believe God's Spirit is at work now, helping us to see who we are against, and how we can begin to love. So as we ask the Holy Spirit to move, I'd like to invite the Worship Team to come up now.

We're going to sing *Brother* one more time. As we sing, let's be thinking about those we are against, and ask God to help us to love them in the way of Jesus, Who had every reason to take offense at us, yet instead of taking offense at us, laid down His life for us, overcoming evil with good. Jesus, help us to follow in your way.

³ <https://www.missioalliance.org/podcasts/embracing-your-daughters-killer-the-freedom-of-radical-forgiveness-with-joel-kime/>. Accessed 8/23/18.