

Overcoming Evil
Romans 12:17-21
May 24, 2020



Please read Romans 12:17-21 before going further in the transcript.

Today is the 3rd Sunday in our series on “Living for God.” We’ll finish up Romans 12 today and our original plan was to end this series and then move on to a new summer series next week, on the book of Proverbs. However, as we wrap up Romans 12, it leaves us right on the doorstep of Romans 13, which talks about submitting to the governing authorities. In light of our current circumstances, it seems like it’s probably a good idea for us to take a look at those verses next Sunday. So, I hope that you can be here when we dig into Romans 13:1-7.

For today, we are going to focus on Romans 12:17-21 and the topic of “Overcoming Evil.” Depending on your personality, “Overcoming Evil” may either sound REALLY exciting and interesting or really intimidating and scary! This is quite an interesting passage, and it is a little intimidating, but most of all this passage is one that we really need to understand and apply. We live in a world where both good and evil things happen. And when we encounter evil, and we WILL certainly encounter evil, we need to have a strategy for how to live for God. The end of Romans 12 gives some great direction for how to overcome evil when we encounter it. One of the first things we should know about today’s passage, is that the focus isn’t on the Evil One, meaning Satan. Rather, the focus in this passage is on evil people. Actually, that’s wrong too. What we should really say is that the focus is on people who sometimes do evil things to us. Their evil behavior, isn’t so much because they themselves are evil, but because they are spiritually lost and don’t know any better. Until they find redemption and new life through Christ, some non-Christians will be our enemies in this world. The second thing that we should know about today’s passage, is that it doesn’t just urge us to RESIST evil or to ENDURE the evil things that are being done to us. This passage actually calls us to OVERCOME evil. And the way that we are taught to overcome evil, might surprise us! Please turn your Bible back to Romans 12:9. This is before the verses in today’s Scripture reading. Let’s begin by looking at a verse that we skipped over last Sunday. You see, verses 17-21 is not the first time that Romans 12 talks about evil. **Overcoming evil calls us to...**

1) ...hate evil. Romans 12:9 says, “Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good.” WHY does Paul even feel the need to say this? Since he is writing this letter to Christ-followers, wouldn’t it be fair for us to ASSUME that they would already “hate what is evil?” And yet, Paul feels the need to teach and clarify this; I wonder WHY? Maybe it’s because Paul knows that sometimes Christ-followers DON’T hate evil. Now, that’s not necessarily because we love evil, but rather because sometimes we “enjoy” a little bit of evil. What I mean is that sometimes someone ticks us off, or hurts us, or offends us in some way, and our response to it, reveals a little bit of evil. This is because we’re still sinners. Our sinful response might stem from some bitter root from the past, or from our own wounded pride, or from something else. But wherever it’s coming from, rather than hating evil, we sometimes cling to a “little bit of evil.”¹ Brother or Sister in Christ, if God’s Spirit begins to convict you about evil thoughts and attitudes, be honest about it. As we consider this idea of “Overcoming Evil,” let’s make sure that

¹ Which, of course, is a lie, because there’s really no such thing as a “little bit” of evil. We are warned about lying to ourselves Jeremiah 17:9, “The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?” Consider also Genesis 6:5; Ecclesiastes 9:3; and Mark 7:21-22.

we begin by “hating what is evil” within ourselves and “clinging to what is good.”² Overcoming evil calls us to hate evil. Overcoming evil also calls us to...

2) ...attempt peace with everyone. Jumping to Romans 12:17-18, it says, “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.” So, even though we need to hate evil, this DOESN'T mean we are supposed to hate the people who are doing evil things. This is a tough one though, because our natural human response is to want payback. In fact, most of us would agree that we feel like we DESERVE to get payback. Christianity drives us to our knees and drives us closer to Jesus when we recognize just how challenging it is to live for God. This is not the first time that Romans 12 calls us to bless those who treat us poorly. Romans 12:14 says, “Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse.”³ God calls us as His people to respond to evil treatment and persecution in radical ways, ways that might surprise us at first.

When we read books or watch movies about overcoming evil, it usually involves somebody strong and powerful using force to make the bad guy pay. And, frankly, Romans 13:4 talks about the governing authorities bearing the sword to bring punishment on wrongdoers. But the issue that Paul is addressing here is not about secular law enforcement. He is talking about our desire to get revenge! Romans 12:19 says, “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.” But wouldn’t you rather take justice into your own hands!? I know I would. At least, that’s my knee jerk reaction before the Holy Spirit gets a hold of me and renews my mind with the truth of God’s Word. Leaving final justice in God’s hands is a clear demonstration of our faith and trust in God.⁴

1 Peter 3:9-11 says it this way, “Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult. On the contrary, repay evil with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing. For, ‘Whoever would love life and see good days must keep their tongue from evil and their lips from deceitful speech. They must turn from evil and do good; they must seek peace and pursue it.’” We need to “attempt peace with everyone.” When we choose NOT to return evil for evil, we find victory in BOTH refusing to promote more evil AND in refusing to become like that evil. In Matthew 5:9 Jesus teaches, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.” God’s children reflect the character of their Heavenly Father.⁵ God’s children should have a reputation as peacemakers. And our next point is about that reputation. Overcoming evil calls us to...

3) ...guard our reputation.⁶ There’s a loaded sentence at the end of verse 17, “...Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone.” How in the world are we supposed to do that! Do what’s right in the eyes of everyone? You’ve got to be kidding me! Once again, Christianity drives us to our knees and drives us closer to Jesus when we recognize just how challenging it is to live for God. The *English Standard Version* is helpful here: “**give thought** to do what is honorable in the sight of all.” “Give thought” speaks to a daily mindfulness and a formulated strategy, not just an occasional afterthought of how our conduct might be coming across to other people. Our reputation before other Christians may matter a LOT to us, but just how concerned are we about our reputation before non-Christians? We might even think to ourselves: “Why should I care what some ungodly, non-Christian thinks of me?” Here’s why we should care about our reputation with non-Christians: God’s Word tells us to. That’s what it’s telling us in

² Consider 1 Thessalonians 5:14-15.

³ See footnote on Romans 12:9-21 on p. 2315 of *NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015.

⁴ Proverbs 24:29, “Do not say, ‘I’ll do to them as they have done to me; I’ll pay them back for what they did.’” Also consider Romans 2:5-8 and Revelation 20:11-15.

⁵ See *NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1599 footnote on Matthew 5:9.

⁶ See Proverbs 3:3-4, 22:21, and Luke 2:52.

Rom. 12:17 and that's what it tells us in other places. Places like 1 Timothy 3:7 where Paul gives Timothy the qualifications for a Church Elder: "He must also have a good reputation with outsiders, so that he will not fall into disgrace and into the devil's trap."⁷ Our reputation will either advance the Lord's purposes, or it will be used by our enemy to advance evil. How we represent the Lord in the eyes of other people is a high and holy calling. This is why overcoming evil calls us to guard our reputation.

Now we should note, that there are situations, when it's simply impossible for us to avoid the slander and false accusations that will come against us in this world. And that's why Scripture speaks about safeguards like keeping good accountability and having 2-3 credible witnesses rather than immediately condemning someone.⁸ 1 Peter 2:12 urges Christians to "Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us."⁹ Apparently, Peter knew a few things about being falsely accused and slandered by the world. However, he urges Christ-followers to press on and keep living such good lives in this world, that eventually those good deeds will lead lost people to glorify God. Living for God by simply keeping a good reputation is one of the greatest tools that God has given us in our war against evil.

Let's not, however, confuse reputation with "people pleasing." People pleasing is a fast way to burn ourselves out and actually fail to honor God. Obviously, there will be times in our life when we will live for God in such a way that certain people are NOT pleased with us. We could even say, it may not be "right" in their eyes. The gist of verse 17 implicitly echoes the qualifier in verse 18 "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you..."¹⁰ In other words, we do our very best but there will be situations where it is NOT possible to do what is considered "Right" in everyone's eyes. So we must be discerning. "Doing right in the eyes of everybody" doesn't mean that we will allow the world's standards of right and wrong to determine our moral compass.¹¹

Bearing the title "Christian" means that we represent the name Christ. A good way to measure appropriate Christian behavior is to ask the question: Can you put Christ's name to it? "Guarding our reputation" is not just about our individual reputation. It's a call to recognize our corporate identity, our shared reputation, as fellow believers. "Guarding our reputation" means that we will consider how our attitudes and actions are being perceived by the watching world. Matthew 5:16 urges us, "...let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven." And 1 Corinthians 10:31-33 encourages us, "So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God. Do not cause anyone to stumble, whether Jews, Greeks or the church of God—even as I try to please everyone in every way. For I am not seeking my own good but the good of many, so that they may be saved." This leads us into our final point. Overcoming evil calls us to...

4) ...witness with kindness. Romans 12:20 says, "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.'" This is a reference from the Old Testament book of Proverbs 25:21-22. But it's a very strange thing to quote right after telling us to attempt peace with everyone & to guard our reputation. Now we're told to heap burning coals on the top of some poor guys head! I mean, even if he is a really bad guy, that seems pretty extreme! This is a good time for us to remember that the Bible is NOT always

⁷ Consider also 2 Corinthians 8:21 when Paul was collecting the benevolence gift for the believers in Jerusalem, "For we are taking pains to do what is right, not only in the eyes of the Lord but also in the eyes of man."

⁸ See Proverbs 18:17.

⁹ 1 Peter 3:16 talks about, "keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander." 1 Peter 2:15 says, "For it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish people."

¹⁰ See footnote on Romans 12:17 on p. 2316 of the *NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015.

¹¹ See discussion by Alan F. Johnson, *Romans, Vol. 2, The Freedom Letter, Rev. Ed.*, Moody Press, Chicago, IL, 1985, pp. 103-104.

literal. Although it doesn't translate very well into our modern, western culture, what we have here is a word picture for a sign of repentance in the unbeliever. It's a play on words. Offering food and water to an enemy, is such a contrast to getting revenge. Today we might say, "Kill 'em with kindness!"¹² Retaliate! Fight back! By heaping on the kindness.¹³ In other words, responding to an enemy's evil behavior with kindness, rather than with vengeance, may cause them to feel some shame or embarrassment at the way they have treated you. And that may, in turn, lead them to repentance.¹⁴ You see, God has designed the human conscience to be sensitive to acts of kindness and to notice when grace is being extended.¹⁵ Rather than their evil behavior resulting in judgment and wrath, evil is overcome "when the hearts of evildoers are changed" and they come to repentance and faith in the Lord.¹⁶ Rather than giving them the wrath of hell, why not give them heaven!?

Of course, their repentance is certainly NOT a guaranteed outcome. Your enemy may just continue to treat you poorly. But, either way, God rewards us for obeying His instructions; that's actually how the full Proverb ends. Proverbs 25:22 says, "In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head, and the LORD will reward you." There is a reward when we trust and obey God's Word.¹⁷ This is how we overcome evil: we share in the Gospel's victory over this world by setting up clear "signs which point to the reality of God's love for sinners."¹⁸

Brother or Sister in Christ, are you ready to overcome evil this week? We are given a short/sweet summary of "Overcoming Evil" in Romans 12:21, "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." Don't be OVERCOME, BE an overcomer! Just how do we do that? Simple: we overcome evil with good. We don't just withhold from returning evil, but we take the initiative to return good.

At this point, you may be thinking: "Pastor Jerry, is that really the summary of your entire sermon, 'be good.' I was really expecting something MORE, something a little DEEPER, and considerably more PROFOUND!" Here's the thing, the goodness of God is actually VERY profound. Something doesn't have to be complicated or flashy or deep, to be powerful and life-changing. We don't overcome evil in a way that we might expect or predict with our own human reasoning; but we do overcome evil in a way that matches up with the gracious character of God. Our God has an incredible track record of kindness toward sinners.¹⁹ We overcome evil in the Gospel way, with the goodness of God. There is great power and eternal impact from the simple obedience of doing good in God's Name. So, Brother or Sister in Christ, this week, let's overcome evil with good!

This sermon was preached via livestream at the Evangelical Free Church of Bemidji on May 24, 2020 by Pastor Jerry R. A. Johnson

¹² "To harm, inconvenience, or bother one by treating them with excessive favor or kindness. The phrase originated as the expression "kill with kindness as fond apes do their young," referring to the notion that such animals sometimes crushed their offspring by hugging them too hard." <https://idioms.thefreedictionary.com/Kill+Them+With+Kindness>

¹³ Proverbs 22:15 says, "...a gentle tongue can break a bone."

¹⁴ See footnote on Psalm 25:22 on p. 1245 of the *NIV Zondervan Study Bible*, Grand Rapids, MI, 2015. Consider also Romans 2:15, "They show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts sometimes accusing them and at other times even defending them.")

¹⁵ However, note Ephesians 4:19 and 1 Timothy 4:2

¹⁶ Alan F. Johnson, *Romans, Vol. 2, The Freedom Letter, Rev. Ed.*, Moody Press, Chicago, IL, 1985, p. 105.

¹⁷ Consider the end of Luke 6:35 and check out <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/jesus-gives-us-reasons-to-obey>

¹⁸ Alan F. Johnson (Cranfield quote), *Romans, Vol. 2, The Freedom Letter, Rev. Ed.*, Moody Press, Chicago, IL, 1985, pp. 105-106.

¹⁹ See Romans 2:4.