

Overcome Evil With Good

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Date: 14 August 2016

Preacher: Jason Webb

[0:00] Please turn in your Bibles to Romans chapter 12 for our scripture reading.! Romans chapter 12 and we'll read verses 9-21.

! Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer.

Share with God's people who are in need. Practice hospitality. Bless those who persecute you.

Bless and do not curse. 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.

Do not pay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the sight, in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.

[1:17] 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.

On the contrary, if your enemy is hungry, feed him. If he's thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. Well, we've all been there, that moment of decision.

Maybe we didn't recognize it as a moment of decision, but it was there. God gives us insight sometimes, and we see two roads open up before us and in front of us.

Well, let me tell you about that moment that I'm talking about. It's that moment when you are in a fight with someone.

[2:18] You are in an argument, or they have said something very mean to you, something very cruel to you.

Or maybe there's been hurtful words and misunderstanding on both sides, but maybe it was mostly you, maybe it was mostly them. Either way, you're hurting.

Wives, you're saying, why won't my husband just listen to me? And the husbands maybe are saying, why won't she just understand what I'm saying?

Maybe it's between parents and teenagers. You've told your teenager for the 300th time to clean up their room, and you're upset, and it's fire the cannons, and you let them have it.

And meanwhile, the teenager is like, why are they being so unreasonable? Why are they being so inconsiderate and so rude? And parents can be that way, can't they?

[3:21] But even there, in all those situations, usually there's this moment, this moment when you realize that you can either keep going and go for the win, or you can say something totally unexpected, something kind, something gracious.

You can rescue the whole situation. You'll either be overcome by evil, or evil will overcome you. And it is the hardest thing to do. It is certainly one of the hardest things to do. My flesh cries out against it.

It's not natural. It's not what I want. My flesh wants to walk away the victor. My flesh wants my dignity and my rights and my point of view to be victorious.

I want instant vindication. I want revenge. I want that person to suffer enough to come to their senses and start treating me the way I deserve to be treated.

[4:37] But it doesn't work if we go that way, does it? We can either have our pride, or we can save your relationship with that person.

You can't do both. You can go down swinging, or you can stand up with grace and conquer with good. Or you can be conquered by evil.

Well, this morning I want to look at that verse in Romans chapter 12. It's the very last verse, 21. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

And I basically have three big points. And the first one is just how counterintuitive, how otherworldly, how heavenly this advice is.

It's part of that strand of advice that goes through the entire Bible that really is so counter to the world. Verse 20, the verse right before this is a quote from Proverbs chapter 25, where he says, If your enemy is hungry, you feed them.

[5:48] Or if he's thirsty, you give him something to drink. Jesus himself said in the Sermon on the Mount, You've heard that it was said, Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.

But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. Do you see how counterintuitive, how otherworldly that is? That we right here, we are on heavenly ground. This is the air of heaven. This is not the air of earth. This is not the air that we normally live in in our world. It's something that we look at and we can say, But that's foolish.

That won't work. If I do that, they'll take advantage of me. If I do that, they'll just run over me. If I do that, it'll just get worse.

And underneath that is the same sort of thinking that's behind a lot of, in Romans chapter 6, Paul uses these rhetorical statements, where he says, What shall we say?

[6:52] Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? Or, what then shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? What Paul is saying and what he's imagining his retractors saying is, if God, if it really works this way, if it's grace that overcomes evil, then won't people just take advantage of that?

That won't win their hearts. They'll just make them sin all the more. Won't people take advantage of that situation? That's the way the world thinks. That's how religious people think.

That's how irreligious people think. They can never understand. They can never appreciate the power of grace. It's foolishness to them.

They say it's madness. It won't work. It's not right. What they think we should do is we should tighten the screws harder. If we just tighten the screws harder, that person will shape up.

They'll treat me right. And so they do tighten the screws harder and harder, and it really turns out that everything gets worse. Let me give you an example.

[8:08] And as I'm explaining this situation, it's a true situation, register in your own heart, weigh in your own heart your response as we go along. What do you think of this?

Is it foolish? Is it madness? Do you say, but it's not right? Or do you begin to see that maybe this is the wisdom of God at work?

It's the grace of God. So here's the situation. It's 2012. And we are all the way in Denmark. And there's a city called Aarhus.

It's the second largest city in Denmark. It's about the size of South Bend and Mishawaka put together, about 280,000, 300,000 people or so. And Aarhus started to see something.

The city started to see something that made a lot of people afraid. A lot of their young people or some of their young people started going missing. And families started calling the police crying desperately, saying, our sons are gone.

[9:11] We can't find them. Our daughters are gone. We don't know where they went. Well, the police looked into it. And they realized that these young sons, these teenage sons, or these 20-year-old sons, these 20-year-old daughters were leaving to join ISIS.

They were part of the thousands and thousands of people that were leaving Europe to go to Syria, to go to Iraq.

And then that gets us to the question, what do we do about that? What do we do about that? What do you do with all these people who are becoming radicalized in their own country, in Denmark, and then leaving to fight?

Or maybe staying to plan something, some sort of act of terror? Well, there was a variety of responses throughout Europe, and these variety of responses continue to this day.

France shut down mosques if they were suspected of having terrorists there, or possible terrorists. Great Britain declared citizens who left to fight for ISIS as enemies of the state.

[10:21] Several countries threatened to take away their passports. And they took other steps to tighten the screws, to say, you don't want to do this. You don't want to do this.

This is unacceptable. This is wrong. You can't do this. If you do this, you are going to suffer. If you do this, there's going to be a price to pay. So that's what most of the people did, and most of the countries did.

The police in Arus took a different path. They made it clear that people who traveled to Syria were free to come back home. They were free to come back home, and when they did get back home, they would be able to get help.

If they needed help finding an apartment, they would help them. If they needed help going to school or getting into school. If they needed help finding work.

If they needed connected to a mentor or to counseling. The police said, let's be able to help these people. Let's do that. And then what they started to do is, instead of merely reacting to what was going on, the police started to proactively begin calling these young people.

[11 : 35] A lot of times, these young people, something bad happens to them. And they find each other, and then they start talking to each other.

And the more they're sitting there stewing over the things that have happened to them, that's when they become radicalized. Well, the police started making contact with these people who were involved in these little groups in the city.

And they started calling them, and they said, is there anything I can do to help? Is there anything we can do to help you? Now, one time, they called a young man. His name was Jamal.

And Jamal's parents were from Somalia. And Jamal answered the phone. And when he heard it was the police, his natural reaction was he started yelling and started screaming at them.

And the reason is, throughout his young life, he had been pulled over countless numbers of times by the police. For no good reason. Just merely because he was black, and everyone else in Denmark is white.

[12 : 38] And he's pulled over. He's treated completely unfairly. And he begins to feel very marginalized. Like, his country hates him. And they were acting like they hated him.

And so he started to hate them back. So his reaction's natural. But the conversation took a turn. When the policemen on the other end heard Jamal out, and then he apologized.

And the apology turned everything around for Jamal. It was just a little seed. But what started to happen was, slowly, something started to unwind in Jamal's heart. A seed began to grow.

And when some of his friends left, he stayed. And he went back to school. And he found a job. And now, instead of hating his country, he loves his country.

He's glad he's there. You see, Jamal and that policeman were at that moment that I had talked about earlier, where it was, either be overcome by evil, or overcome evil with good.

[13 : 49] Now, what would have happened if Jamal answered the phone and yells and screams at the police officer, and then the police officer yells and screams back at him, and threatens him, and does all the rest?

Jamal would have been gone as soon as he could. A man without a home. A man where he doesn't belong anywhere. And he would go and be killed or kill.

Now, a lot of people made fun of the Arus police. They said it wouldn't work. They said it was stupid. They called it a hug a terrorist program. But this is the point.

While the people keep leaving Great Britain, keep leaving France, keep leaving these countries, kids don't leave Denmark anymore.

They've rejoined society. They've become productive, valuable citizens. Now, the world thinks one way. It has its reasonings.

[14 : 48] It has its ways. And as much as they don't want it to be, the end ends up being more evil. Jesus said, wisdom is proved right by her children.

That is, wisdom is proven, not by how it sounds at first blush, but then actually what it produces. It's actual children. And the folly of God is wiser than the wisdom of this world.

Now, doesn't the cross show us that the only way to overcome evil is with good? But the world says the cross is folly.

But for us who believe, it's the wisdom of God. It's the power of God. So, that's the first thing. We are on different territory when we're at this verse.

We got to say, I've got to throw off my world way of thinking and put on my earthly or on the heavenly way of thinking. Now, secondly, I want to think about what does it look like to be overcome by evil?

[15 : 52] What does it look like to be overcome by evil? So, evil has happened to you. You've been picked on, kids. You've been bullied.

You've been treated unfairly. Someone has done something evil against you. Perhaps, like, what this is talking about is persecution. Perhaps it wasn't.

It's just people being cruel. Perhaps it was just something, the events of life. This is an evil age. And evil happens to people.

Sometimes it's not even personally. It just crashes into our lives. There's cruel words. There's unfair judgment. There's unsympathetic comments. Maybe it's something more.

Maybe for you, you just wish it was just mere words. But for you, it's been actual robbery, abuse, evil, theft, violence.

[16:50] And you can, maybe you can think of what I'm talking about. How this is connected to your life. Where evil has crashed into you. It's landed on your doorstep.

And so what does it look like, then, to be overcome by evil? What do we want to avoid? And again, personalize this and ask yourself, have I been overcome by evil?

Well, you are overcome in the first place if you see yourself as a punching bag. If you see yourself as passive, as a victim. See, a punching bag just takes the punches but never does anything in return.

It's a pure victim. It can't do anything to stop the boxer from hitting it. But that's what it looks like to be overcome by evil. That's one version of it. One variety of it.

You see yourself as this helpless person that's sailing in a ship and the hurricane is behind you. And you're just blown along by the evil. There's nothing you can do about it.

[17:55] That's to be overcome. When you've relegated yourself to nothing but a victim. Paul says, don't be overcome.

Don't be conquered. Don't let evil get the victory. Not to just say, here I am. I can't do anything about it. But to not let yourself be overcome.

So the question is, are you hopeless? Are you hopeless? I can't do anything about this. This person is just going to be doing this to me. And there's nothing I can do.

There's no reaction I can have that will help the situation. That's a sure sign that you've been overcome. So overcome by evil. It looks like hopelessness.

It looks like quitting. It looks like surrendering. This word overcome, it's a military word. It's an athletic word. It's a word for you're in the conflict and you're in the strife.

[18:55] So if you're quitting, if you're leaving it, then you've been overcome. And this goes right along with hopelessness.

First you lose your hope and then you quit fighting. And now you're starting to say, I can't win this person over anymore. They are my forever enemy. There's no point in trying to do good.

There's no point in trying to say something nice. There's no point in trying to do anymore. That's a sure sign of being overcome. But right here in Romans 12, you see other signs of being overcome. Are you taking revenge now? Are you repaying evil for evil? Are you cursing instead of blessing? Do not take revenge.

Is that the mode that you're in? Where they've done that to me, now I'm going to do it back. And now you're keeping a record. You're keeping a tally. And for every mark on their side, you're going to give them a mark on your side.

[19:56] And so I'm done talking to them. I'll give them the silent treatment. Or next time they want something from me, I'll drag my feet. I'll make them pay.

I'll needle them. That's overcome by evil. When now you're just into this mode of anger. You've lost your temper. You're always on a low boil. You're always on edge, ready to strike.

Maybe it's not even that. Maybe now you're obsessed with the evil that they've done against you. You can't let it go. You can't get away from it.

You play it over and over again. When the tape is done, you rewind it and you watch it over and over again. And everything that person does, everything that person says, you look at them through the lens of your own hurt.

And now they can't do anything right. You've been overcome by evil. It's overwhelmed you. And right along with that, you've lost your sense of grace.

[21:01] Maybe this is the deepest part. You've functionally forgotten that you're a sinner. That you do evil. That you have weaknesses.

And not only is all that true, but that God loved you when you were his enemy. And so even to this day, your relationship with God is a gracious one.

We don't ever outgrow our need for God's mercy and grace. We sing a song, could or would we bear from one another what he daily bears from us?

Again, our great sins against him. And then we measure what other people have done to us. So when you look at people, and now instead of seeing them as someone to love, you see them as a sinner, as someone to judge, as someone to condemn, as someone to punish.

They haven't lived up to my standards. They haven't lived up to my expectations. They haven't lived up to my hope. They haven't done what is right by me. They're not treating me the way I deserve to be treated.

[22 : 14] And now they'll pay. That's what I mean by losing your sense of grace. When you're harsh and demanding and exacting with others, it's because you have forgotten that God has not been harsh and demanding and exacting with you.

You've lost a sense of the wonder of grace. And so when you sing amazing grace, you just maybe say the words, but there's no feeling behind it. Now, let's be honest.

Ongoing, prevalent, prevailing, deep evil against us can get us to this point. And how hard this is. How hard it is to not be overcome by evil. We need Jesus to help us. We need Jesus to help us. Because these things are against our flesh.

They're against our first thoughts. Our first thoughts are for revenge. Our first thoughts are for justice. And so we easily slip into thinking, it's mine to avenge. I will repay. But if God loves us, if God's had mercy on us, if God has redeemed us out of our sin, if God demonstrates his own love for us, then this, while we are still sinners, Christ died for us.

[23 : 29] That, that's, that, this is the place where the fight is. To keep that gracious spirit in the face of evil. To keep close hold of Jesus Christ.

And to keep a close hold of the gospel. And we remember who I am and who he is. And what he has done for me. So only Jesus can help us to stay hoping.

To stay fighting. To stay sweet. To stay gracious. Instead of turning harsh and bitter. Which is so easy for us to do. So I ask, have you been overcome by evil?

Then thirdly, Paul doesn't only say, don't be overcome by evil. He gives us a positive. Overcome evil with good. Overcome evil with good.

So only good can overcome evil. So often, our world thinks that if I, give enough evil back, then that person will stop being evil and not win.

[24 : 29] But evil can never overcome evil. In the Sunday school, we saw the beginning of World War I. Just a picture of it. Now, most historians, forgive me, the historical lesson here for a second.

Most historians believe that the beginnings of World War II, most people say, you know what, when that really started was the day they signed the peace treaty for World War I.

because what happened was, at that peace treaty, the allies, the people fighting against the Germans, they made the Germans take all the blame.

They made the Germans say, it's all your fault, and you're going to pay for every last bit of it. And so, instead of everyone else taking their fair share of blame, and there was enough blame to go around, everyone said, it's all your fault.

And so, it wasn't justice. It was revenge. And so, the allies made the Germans suffer for years and years afterwards for their part in it.

[25 : 32] And what began to happen was, in the hearts of the German people, there was just humiliation, this marginalization, this bitterness that started to grow up because they'd been treated so unfairly.

And then along came someone with a funny mustache. And he said, I will make Germany great again. I will give Germany its dignity again. They won't humiliate us anymore.

And the people went along with it. Evil didn't bring peace. Evil just brought greater evil. So, only good can overcome evil. Only mercy.

And that's why Paul quotes Proverbs 25. If your enemy is hungry, feed him. If he's thirsty, give him something to drink. And in this way, in doing this, you'll keep burning coals on his head.

It's like you'll shame him to the point that he turns his heart towards you. So, how do you overcome evil with good? Let me just give you three steps. Let me give you three steps.

[26 : 36] And step number one is study your enemy. Now, we don't like to think that we have enemies. We don't like to think that we have enemies, but one of the pictures or one of the faces that other people wear is the face of an enemy.

Now, sometimes they're not our enemy and then they become our enemy. Sometimes someone in our family can be a family member and then they begin to treat us like an enemy. So, step number one is admit that, you know what, this person is an enemy and then study your enemy.

Study the person who has wronged you. If your enemy is hungry, and so you aren't studying to get them back, you're studying them, you're looking, you're thinking, what do they need?

What do they need? What is their greatest need? And this is going to take thinking and insight. It's not going to be easy to see necessarily. They might be covering it up.

And you, the hardest part is, you aren't going to want to look at them this way. You're going to want to look at them as just deserving of nothing good from you. So, it takes grace to look at them this way.

[27:52] But that's the first step. Study your enemy. Think about what he really needs. Then step number two is give him what he needs. Give him what he needs, not what he doesn't.

Give him what he needs, not what he doesn't. Overcoming evil with good takes finesse. It takes thought. And so often, we want to give people what they don't need.

We often want to give people what we want to give them. And then we're not happy when they don't return it. Or they don't, it doesn't do anything for us. And if that's the case, if we're just giving to someone, then perhaps we haven't studied them long enough.

We haven't thought long enough. We need insight. We need wisdom. We need to say, okay, what does this person really need? And it might be that they don't need anything at the moment. But then we wait until they need something.

But we give them what they need, not what they don't need. It doesn't say if your enemy is hungry, give them something to drink. It doesn't say if your enemy is thirsty, give them something to eat.

[29:01] Give them what they need. This is one of the reasons why Paul says, I pray that the Lord would help your knowledge or your love to grow in knowledge and depth of insight.

It's easy to love haphazardly. It's easy to just try a shotgun approach to relationships. But we need knowledge and depth of insight.

We need love that goes deep, that understands people deeply, that studies and thinks and then tries to meet them where they are, not where we wish they would be, not where we think they should be, but where they are.

And then step number three is repeat. Repeat, repeat, repeat. repeat. We can't give up after one time. We can't do it just one time on one occasion. Evil is going to crash into us repeatedly and every time we need to train ourselves to respond with good.

So let me give you another story. And I hope this story stirs up your thinking. Because in this story you're going to see these people putting these principles into practice.

[30:13] And they did it in a very difficult situation. But they studied their enemy, they looked for the need, they met the need, they repeatedly met that need again and again. And for this story we go to Washington, D.C.

And eight friends are celebrating in the backyard of someone's house around a big table. It's a true story. They're drinking wine, they're eating cheese, one of them had just opened this restaurant and so they'd all gotten together and they were having a good time.

And around 10 p.m. one of the men looks over and he sees a man coming through the bushes holding a pistol with a long, with a rather long barrel.

And at first he points it at a lady named Christina. And then he quickly moves away from her and he puts it to the head of one of the men's wives. And he yells, give me your money or I'll shoot.

And of course everyone is feeling absolutely stunned. They're not sure what to do and he's getting more aggressive, more violent. Give me your money or I'll shoot. Give me your money or I'll shoot. And the problem is, you can tell this is like a millennial generation, no one has any cash.

[31:29] They don't have any money on them. So how do you feel? You feel nervous. You feel scared. You feel angry. You feel like panicking. And that's how they felt.

That's how they felt. And more. They didn't know what to do. This person is treating them terribly. They don't know what to do. And so they started talking.

And they began with sort of the world's way of thinking. They started out with guilt and shame what would your mother think of you if she saw you now?

And he said, I don't have a mother. And they tried some more. Some more guilt. Some more shame. But the situation only got more and more tense.

Nothing was working. And out of nowhere, Christina pipes up and says, why don't you have a glass of wine?

[32:36] Sit down. Have a glass of wine with us. We're just having a good time. You can join us if you want. And all of a sudden that aggressive mean look on his face totally changed and it drained away.

and he took a glass and he tasted it and he said, hmm, that's good wine. And they said, here, have some more. And they poured him some more and he put his gun away.

And he sat down and he ate some cheese and he drank some wine and then he said almost to himself, I've come to the wrong place.

And they said, these things happen. And they all just sat there together. The stars overhead and the crickets chirping. And then he said something really strange.

He said, can I have a hug? And Christina pops up and gives him a hug. And then one by one they took turns hugging him. and then he said, can I have a group hug?

[33:44] And so all eight of them gathered around him and they hugged him. And after that he said, I'm sorry. And he walked away. He left his wine glass on the mailbox and he was gone.

And then when the coast was clear everyone burst into tears. And they said, it's a miracle. It's a miracle. And in some ways it was.

It really was. It was certainly a beautiful reflection of God's love and God's mercy to sinners.

Because when we were still enemies, when we had the gun in our hands, and when we were dead in our transgressions, when we were far away from where we should be, God came and he made us alive in Christ.

He sent his son to die for us. And when we were without hope, without God, in this world, with nothing but a fearful future of judgment, that's when God came looking for us.

[34:51] When we had the gun. Now maybe you're still that man with a gun. Still enemy of God. But in the gospel, Jesus Christ comes and he holds out his hands to people who are his enemy.

And he holds out his hand and he says, have a glass of wine, sit down, have some cheese, have a hug. And right now, God is holding out good to you.

That's the gospel. That there's mercy for sinners. There's not some sort of long trial period. It's mercy. He offers it just with two hands, bold face, repent, turn around, believe, fall into my arms, and there's mercy, full forgiveness.

And so that's what he's doing. He's holding out his hands saying, come home. And in the gospel, God doesn't give us what we don't need. He studies us. And he knows what we desperately most need.

We need forgiveness. forgiveness. We need a new heart. We need a new start, a new hope, a new life, a life with him. We need reconciliation. And so he's holding out his hand to you.

[36:12] He's overcoming evil with good. And so we need to go and do likewise. Well, let's pray. Our Heavenly Father, how deep is the love you have for us.

How great it is. How merciful and kind you are. When Saul of Tarsus was breathing out threats, you stopped him with great mercy.

And when we were stubbornly going in our own way, rebels against your will, you came down to us, no less, and you had mercy upon us, and you treated us like we don't deserve.

You gave us surprising grace, surprising, all of a sudden love that we didn't expect, we didn't deserve.

so we thank you for that. And we pray that your saving grace would reach sinners here this evening or this morning. That today would be the day that you stop them in their tracks and you win their heart.

[37:33] That you overcome their evil with good. And I pray that we would do the same. That we would walk in a way that's worthy of you. That we would walk in a way that you deserve and that you've earned from us in a way that imitates you and loves you and seeks to do what you do.

Please give us the presence of mind. Keep us from being caught up in the emotions of those moments of when we are, when someone is doing evil with us.

Give us presence of mind. Give us sober thinking. help us to remember this verse and to put it into practice. We ask these things in Jesus' name.

Amen.