

“Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” Romans 12:21

A student emailed me recently asking for help on the topic of “evil”. One of the questions I had to answer was: “How can evil be overcome?” Good question, not easy to answer. But that’s just what this text calls you and I to do as Christians in our relationships with people!

It is easier to be overcome by evil than to overcome evil. Have you ever felt overwhelmed by all the bad stuff that people do to each other or what someone has done to you? Have you ever wanted to get revenge rather than justice? Have you ever lived with an unforgiving spirit and bitterness in your heart towards someone else? Have you ever remained a victim longer than you needed to? Have you ever withdrawn from people and life or become depressed over wrong that has been done against you? Have you ever felt like giving up on God because of all the evil in the world that he doesn’t seem to prevent? If you can answer “yes” to any of those things then at some point you have let someone else’s evil overcome you, and control your thinking and behaviour.

I heard only this week of some of my relatives who used to be in church and actively involved every week but not any more. They have been to a number of churches and in each place felt hurt or burnt and now have withdrawn and are going nowhere. I don’t know whose fault it was but the pattern suggests it might not have been all one way. Whatever happened I was sad that it had overcome them in some way to a point where they have withdrawn and retreated from other Christians. Those reactions to our experiences of sin and evil are normal for us, they are what naturally tends to happen inside us when other people sin against us.

In Romans 12 God calls us to be transformed, not conformed to the way people normally think and behave when they experience sin and evil from others. We are meant to have our thinking and behaviour transformed by God’s mercy to us in Jesus Christ. That’s where overcoming evil starts for us, and it’s where we get the motivation and power to work at it. We start at the cross of Christ where he dealt with my evil and yours by absorbing it and dying for it to take it away from us and out of God’s own sight. God dealt with all our evil not by ignoring it or just accepting it but by suffering in our place and dying in our place. That’s how seriously he took it. Our evil killed him and the evil others have done to us killed Jesus too. God allows us to see our own sin in light of the cross – evil and yet forgiven, and he asks us to look at others only through the cross too. We are called to live with a different mindset and way of handling the things that go wrong between us and other people.

In the second Bible reading today Romans 12:9-21 God has several things to say about the way we handle the sin and evil we see and experience in life.

Firstly he says **“Hate what is evil, cling to what is good”**. We are allowed to hate it when bad and hurtful things are said and done, sinful, evil things. God hates it too! God says it’s ok to hate what is evil, in fact we should, but he calls us to cling to what is good. We often hate what is evil and cling on to it, replay it in our minds over and over like a video or DVD. We tell others about it and remind ourselves of all the bad stuff and all it does is reinforce our anger and make us feel miserable. When we only focus on what’s gone wrong and on the hurt done to us we easily become bitter and depressed. We can’t see any good in a person at all and if the evil done to us is bad enough we can’t see any good in life itself. We can’t minimise or underestimate how hurtful some things are, but if we stay there and can only see ourselves as victim and keep replaying the sin it will destroy us. Then evil has overcome us literally.

By all means hate evil but cling to what’s good. Focus on what’s good rather than replaying the bad old things. Christians will upset each other but don’t let it ruin what’s good! Hold on to that! The word literally means adhere or stick to what’s good! When something bad is done to us we often think everything is bad! We lose perspective. God says remember all the good, find some good and stick to that

The Psalms can be helpful to us when we feel like evil has been done to us or we are angry and overwhelmed by the evil in the world. The psalm writers get angry, they hate what’s happened to them or other people and they let God know about it! But they don’t despair, and they end up clinging to what’s good, they cling to God himself even though they can’t understand what’s happened to them. You can use them as your own prayers when you are overwhelmed by evil something done to you or others.

Not only do we hate what is evil we usually we also hate the person who does it. We see them as evil and we want to punish them, get even or better, let off steam, or we deal with them by cutting them out of our lives. That's true even of minor things that happen in the average week, let alone the bigger things that hurt us. God calls us to do something totally unnatural to us, even offensive to our way of thinking! He raises the bar of Christian thinking and behaviour to a height most of us can rarely reach or even bother attempting!

“Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse.Do not repay anyone evil for evil.... 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 is 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.”

These things are the opposite of what usually happens when things go wrong between people. We usually curse those who hurt and offend us, and our pride leads us to cut ourselves off from them and want to get even or revenge. God says bless them, and do the opposite of what people would expect you to do. It will surprise and disarm the person you are angry with. Hopefully they will feel ashamed and repent and you can forgive them. On Thursday evening's news I saw a young shopkeeper interviewed after she had been robbed by the same gang for the nth time. Her business was now threatened for survival. She was rightly angry but she saw past the evil action and said she felt sorry for these teenagers. She looked beyond their behaviour to the person who was responsible but who she saw also had unmet needs. She hated the evil but wasn't overcome by it. She still had a heart of love for the person who did it. Justice will still need to be done but she isn't the one imprisoned by her anger and frustration and hurt. She wasn't out for revenge. I don't know if she was a Christian but she sure spoke like we are supposed to in the face of evil done against her! She hated the evil done but she didn't hate the evil-doer. She saw a bigger picture, and that is what Christians are meant to see. We are meant to be concerned most of all about people's standing with God even ahead of our own need to be right or to get even.

Whatever we do we need to make sure we don't make it harder for people to connect with God. By doing the opposite we will do something they and people around us watching don't expect and rarely see. We overcome evil not by exacting revenge but by doing good with God and for God.

“Live in harmony with one another. ...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.” God calls us to take responsibility for our half of every relationship, including the ones gone bad. You can't control what others do and how they respond but you can take responsibility for your own. The Christian calling in this passage is to be a witness to Christ when things go wrong between you and another person. **“In the eyes of everybody”** – you see others are watching to see how Christians react to hurt. If they see something unexpected and different and see how it changes for good they will be intrigued about your faith. The speaker from an organisation called Peacewise at our recent Synod reminded us of how powerful a witness we can be when things go wrong between people. You might like to get a copy of his talk. The first 2 principles of Peacewise are 1. See conflict as an opportunity, and 2. Glorify God in the way you handle it.

God isn't asking you to be a living doormat that enjoys and lets others walk all over you and rub their dirt in your face, but he is asking you to be a “living sacrifice” for Christ's sake, to be Christ to someone, to choose with Jesus and in his strength to forgive and forgo your right to get even for the sake of their ultimate good.

Do I hear you thinking “It's not fair?” No, it's not fair, it's faith! Faith that leaves the fairness ultimately to God, faith is more concerned with peoples' standing before God than about being right or getting even ourselves.

Why should we? Why would we want to think and behave like that?

The answer takes us back to the beginning of the chapter “The mercies of God”. The mercy we have experienced in the face of our own evil from God.

Overcoming evil with good was what Jesus was doing on the cross. It's what we do when we pick up ours and follow him.