

Introduction

I recently read an article titled "The 25 Most Popular Conspiracy Theories." They include the following. The Bush administration conspired to blow up the twin towers and blame it on Muslims. The Beatles conspired to cover up the death of Paul McCartney in 1966. The CIA conspired to kill J.F.K. And NASA conspired to make the world think men actually walked on the moon. Those theories illustrate what a conspiracy is. It's an unknown or little known agreement between two or more persons to do or achieve something.

Today, I'm going to preach about just that – a conspiracy. But I'd note two things. First, it's real as opposed to not real as the ones I just mentioned are. And second, it good as opposed to bad as the ones I just mentioned are. What is that conspiracy? Paul tells us in our text.

What Evil Is

This conspiracy has to do with what verses 17 and 21 call "**evil**." Evil has three basic expressions that define it.

The first is deception, which refers to stating or promoting what we know isn't so. Take the practice of "**puffing**" for instance – vendors exaggerating the quality of a product or service in order to sell it. The law may not consider it a cause of action for fraud or breach of contract, but like all deception, it's evil nonetheless.

Evil has a second basic expression, compulsion, which refers to overriding the will of others. It's taking away their freedom to make decisions by either manipulating them or forcing them. Slavery of course is an extreme form of compulsion. But there are countless lesser forms. Nagging, for instance, to get someone to do what he or she doesn't want to do is on the same continuum as slavery. It's evil.

There's a third basic expression of evil, lovelessness. Lovelessness manifests itself in two practical ways. One is attack – acting against the good of others. That's to what the words "**persecute**" and "**curse**" in

verse 14 refer. So, a mother-in-law who dislikes her daughter-in-law talks badly about her to others. Or a wife gives her husband the cold shoulder for coming home late from work. Another way lovelessness manifests itself is apathy – being indifferent to and disregarding the good of others. So, a nurse calls in sick when she isn't, knowing another nurse will have to work a double shift because she does. Attack and apathy are how lovelessness, in practice, works. They're evil.

Those then are the three expressions of evil and we all know how much a part of ordinary human existence they are. Evil is one of the most pervasive realities in our lives. Hardly a day goes by that we aren't on the receiving end of deception, compulsion, or lovelessness.

Give Good Not Evil for Evil

So what should we do when we are? How should we respond to evil?

Verse 17 tells how most people do. They respond in kind. They give evil for evil. So the daughter-in-law whose mother-in-law talked badly about her got evil and gave it right back. She was unwelcoming, even rude, to her mother-in-law whenever she saw her. Or the nurse whose co-worker called in sick when she wasn't tongue lashed her. That's the way of the world isn't it? People get evil and give it right back.

But it isn't the way of Jesus. Paul tells us what His way is in verses 17 and 19. He declares in those verses **"Never pay back evil for evil to anyone"** and **"Never take your own revenge."** The words **"never"** and **"anyone"** show that he's giving us a hard and fast rule here. There are literally no exceptions to it. Never respond to deception, compulsion, or lovelessness with deception, compulsion, or lovelessness – with anyone for any reason. That anyone includes mothers-in-law or thoughtless co-workers. Never give evil for evil to anyone.

Always give good for evil instead. As Paul states it in verse 21, **"Overcome evil with good."** He says it differently in verse 14 but the meaning is the same. Bless not curse those who persecute us. Paul said that because Jesus did in Matthew 5:44. It's His way. When anyone does

evil to us, we do good to him or her in return.

This good we do, like evil, has three basic expressions. The first is truth. We're honest and forthright with others, stating and promoting what is so. The second is deference. We value and pursue the freedom of others to make their own decisions. The third is love. We care about and actively seek the good of others over our own. Those expressions clarify our call. Respond to evil with truth, deference, and love.

The pastor and two elders of one of our Friends churches underhandedly removed its presiding clerk (head elder) from his position, deceiving and slandering him in the process. But he stills comes in at 8:00 every Sunday morning to pray for Sunday school and worship, attends the Sunday and Wednesday evening services, faithfully gives of his time and money, prays constantly for the pastor and elders, and is kind to them. He got evil – deception, compulsion, and attack. He gave good in return – truth, deference, and love.

Why We Should Give Good not Evil for Evil

It's imperative that we do the same and Paul reveals why in verse 21. It's for two reasons. One is that when we give evil for evil, evil overcomes! It diminishes and sometimes even destroys the personalities and lives of the people involved. The other reason is that when we give good for evil, good overcomes! It enhances and sometimes even recreates the personalities and lives of the people involved.

Paul explains the dynamics of that in verses 18 and 20. Look at verse 20. Quoting Proverbs 25:21-22, he writes that giving good for evil heaps burning coals on the heads of evildoers. "**Burning coals**" refers to remorse. Giving good for evil causes remorse in evildoers. Now look at verse 18. Paul identifies what the usual result of that remorse is. It's peace. There's resolution in the relationship.

He's right and here's why. Evildoers rely on us giving evil for evil in order to stay in control. They actually count on us to deceive, compel, or attack. In their minds, our doing so justifies the evil they've done to

us and even further evil. It's okay that they harmed us and will do so again, they think, because our evil shows that we deserve it. It's a profound insight. Evildoers actually need us to give evil for evil in order to stay motivated and in control.

But giving good instead takes that control from them. It throws them off their stance. They're no longer able to justify their evil in the face of it, which makes them feel guilty. **"What kind of person am I"** they think, **"Doing bad things to someone so good."** They realize they aren't playing the game they thought they were. Their attitude and behavior then usually change as a result. Normal evildoers, whose hearts aren't hardened, cannot over time resist goodness. But even if they do, goodness let's loose the forces of God's power and love in the situation. That in turn redeems it as much as it can possibly be redeemed.

A drill instructor at Paris Island observed one of his Marines reading his Bible and praying every night and despised him for it. So he did every rotten thing he could to break him and send him home. He verbally and sometimes even physically attacked him, made him do extra push-ups and sit-ups, made him run extra miles, and gave him every dirty job in the book. But the Marine continued to read his Bible and pray, stayed positive, and did the best he could. Finally, the drill instructor got him up in the middle of a rainy night and made him **"hump"** or hike behind his jeep as he drove it for several hours in the mud. When they got back to the barracks, he ordered the exhausted Marine to spit shine his muddy boots clean before going to bed. He then went to sleep and woke up several hours later. He was stunned when he did to find that the Marine had spit shined not only his own boots but the drill instructor's as well. Overcome with respect for this Christian Marine, he changed his tune and began treating him as he did all the rest.

The moral is that giving good for evil eventually overcomes it.

The Cosmic Conspiracy

Now that we know the details of our text, we're able to grasp what it

is. It's God's plan for undermining the structures and expressions of evil that dominate our world. Please understand the significance of that. Human beings can live well only when the evil in their environments is overcome. God has a plan for that. Overcome it with good.

That's His plan and He calls us to be part of it, to partner with Him in carrying it out. Do you realize it creates when we do? It's a conspiracy. Remember what a conspiracy is – a little known agreement between two or more persons to do or achieve something. Here it's a little known agreement between God and disciples of His to undermine and overcome evil with good. Let me ask you a question in that regard? Are you part of that conspiracy? Are you a co-conspirator of God?

If you aren't, you can be by doing two things. First, make the decision to overcome evil with good. Have a vision for that. Make it a primary aim in your life. And second, carry out that decision as best as you can. Do whatever is necessary to achieve the aim, which raises an issue of course. What is necessary? It's two things.

First, we must trust God. Most of us (human beings) consider the idea of overcoming evil with good laughable, absurd. There's a reason we do. This world of ours is a dangerous place, we think, and so it frightens us. In that kind of world, giving good for evil is unsafe. We'll be harmed or suffer loss if we do. But trusting God dramatically alters our point of view. Our world is under the supervision of an utterly good and utterly great God. In light of that character and competence of His, it's always safe and best to do what He says. Well, He says give good for evil. It's always safe and best, therefore, to do that. So, we do it. Overcoming evil with good requires trusting God.

There's a second thing it requires. We must love God. Let me point out a basic characteristic of love. On the negative side, if we love someone, we can't hate or resent what that someone loves, unless it's immoral of course. On the positive side, if we love someone, we will also naturally love what that someone loves. The Bible teaches in that regard that God loves evildoers. So, if we love God, we won't resent or hate

evildoers. We'll love them instead because He does. And since we love them, we'll never do evil to them. On the contrary, we'll always do good to them, even when they do evil to us. Overcoming evil with good requires loving God.

Trusting and loving God though are indirect freedoms. We can trust and love Him only by doing something else first. That something else is knowing Him cognitively and experientially. So, we do that. We know Him cognitively by building a thorough vision of Him. We know Him experientially by routinely engaging Him and His kingdom at hand. I've explained before, in detail, how to do both of those things.

Anyway, the bottom line is this. Those who know God will trust and love Him and because they trust and love Him, they'll confidently and gladly join His conspiracy.

A disciple of Jesus I know is part of a condominium association that has two cranky, unreasonable members. This elderly couple is constantly stirring things up, complaining about and attacking other members. Everyone else in the association returns evil for evil. They give them the cold shoulder and talk quite badly about them. But this disciple of Jesus doesn't. He returns good for evil by being cordial and kind to them. In the winter, for instance, he voluntarily shovels the snow from their driveway so they won't have to. My point is this. He doesn't do that to get accolades from anyone or even to make disciples of the couple. He does it naturally because He knows, trusts, and loves God.

Conclusion

In 1998, Hillary Clinton famously mentioned a "**vast**" conspiracy. But the one I've preached about today is more than vast. It's "**cosmic**" as well. It's transcends the visible world of matter. That's because it's chief conspirator is God. He's the chief conspirator and He's looking for people He can empower and transform to be conspirators with Him. May each of us be one of those – a cosmic co-conspirator of God.