

## **Introduction**

Today, I'm going to share with you one of the most significant principles that you will ever hear. I'm not saying that for dramatic effect. It truly is. For one thing, it's about what is perhaps the most pressing issue of our everyday lives. For another thing, it teaches us God's most basic strategy for addressing that issue. The passage I read, Romans 12:14-21, reveals what that principle is. Overcome evil with good and that's what I'm going to preach about today.

## **What Evil Is**

Let's start by understanding what evil is. Evil has three basic expressions that define it.

The first is falsehood. Falsehood refers to deceiving others. It's stating or promoting what we know isn't so. Some secularists say that since deception is helpful, it's also good. The Bible of course rejects such a view. It isn't good. It's evil.

Evil has a second basic expression, compulsion. Compulsion refers to overriding the will of others. It takes away their freedom to make decisions, their leadership over their lives, by either manipulating or forcing them. Slavery of course is an extreme form of compulsion. But there are countless other 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. To attack means to act against the well being and joy of others. That's what the words "persecute" and "curse" in verse 14 refer to. Another way is withdrawal. To withdraw means to disregard or be indifferent to the well being and joy of others. We simply don't care. Attack and withdrawal are often intertwined and are how lovelessness, in practice, works. They're evil.

A young woman told me about her mother-in-law. She thought this

young woman wasn't good enough for her son and let everyone know it. She constantly made snide remarks to her, talked badly about her to others, and chided her son for marrying her. The young woman summed it up by saying that her mother-in-law was making her life miserable.

That little anecdote illustrates evil. It also teaches us how much a part of ordinary human existence it is. It's a common tale. 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. That's what that daughter-in-law, a professing Christian, did. She got evil and gave it right back. She said bad things about her mother-in-law to others, gave her the cold shoulder, and did as many little things as she could to annoy her. That's the way of the world isn't it? People get evil and give it right back.

That may be the way of the world 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. That anyone includes mothers-in-law. Never give evil for evil to anyone.

Give good for evil instead. Paul writes these powerful words 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. That's what Jesus said in Matthew 5:44 and Luke 6:28. That's His way. Whenever anyone does evil to us, we should do good to them in return.

This good that we should do, like evil, has three basic expressions. The first is truth. Truth refers to being honest and forthright with

others. It states and promotes what is so. The second expression is freedom. Freedom values and pursues the liberty of others to make their own decisions, to exercise their leadership over their own lives. The third expression is love. Love cares about and actively seeks the well being and joy of others. Those expressions clarify our call. We should respond to evil with truth, freedom, and love.

The pastor and two elders of one of our Friends churches underhandedly removed its presiding clerk (the head elder). They deceived and attacked and truly wronged 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 deception, compulsion, and lovelessness. He gives truth, freedom, and love in return.

So there you have it: the most pressing issue of our everyday lives, how we should respond to evil; and God's most basic strategy for addressing it, give good not evil for evil.

### **Why We Should Give Good not Evil for Evil**

It's imperative that we do that and Paul explains 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 everyone 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 everyone 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 tells us 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 count on us giving evil for evil

in order to stay in control. They actually rely on us to deceive, compel, attack, or withdraw. For one thing, our evil feeds their evil and keeps them motivated. For another thing, it justifies further evil in their mind. It's okay to keep hurting us, they think, because our own evil shows that we deserve it. It's a profound insight. Evildoers actually need us to give evil for evil in order to stay in control.

But giving good instead takes that control from them. It does two things. First, our goodness starves their evil to death. Their evil, not having our evil to feed on, withers and dies. Second, our goodness throws them off balance. They're no longer able to justify their evil in the face of it. They think, "What kind of person am I anyway – doing things so bad to someone so good." Those two things eventually make evildoers realize that they aren't playing the game they thought they were, that they're no longer in control. Their behavior then usually changes as a result of that. Normal evildoers, who aren't depraved, 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 Christian named John moved next door to a cranky old woman named Erma. On three different occasions, Erma called the police on John and on none of those occasions had he done anything wrong. When spring came, John found out that Erma wasn't able to mow her yard anymore. So, he told her that he'd mow it for her if she wanted him to, which he's been doing ever since. He also gets her groceries every week and does minor repairs on her home when it needs them. John got evil. He gave good in return and heaped burning coals on Erma's head. They're now at peace, with Erma doing good things for him in return, like baking him his favorite pies.

There's no doubt about it. Giving good for evil overcomes it.

### **Train to Give Good for Evil**

The problem is that's easier said than done. The fact is it's against

the grain of human nature to give good for evil. It isn't "in" most of us to do that. But it can be if we're disciples of Jesus. We can train to give good for evil. The Holy Spirit then transforms us when we do, changes our nature, so that we're able to. So, let's train by doing two things.

First, learn and dwell on the facts about evildoers and their implications to us. Take two facts, for instance, that William Law discusses in his celebrated book *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*.

Fact #1 – evildoers are loved by God. Because of His nature, God can't hate evildoers; He can only love them. Implication – if we love Him, then we'll love them. I have a question for you. If we love someone, can we hate or resent what they love? No, we can't. It's psychologically impossible. So, if we love God, we can't hate what He loves including evildoers. We can only love them.

Fact #2 – evildoers are sick people. Cancer victims are physically sick and their cancer makes them miserable. Evildoers are spiritually sick and their evil makes them miserable. Implication – we should have sympathy and love for evildoers just as we do cancer victims. Suppose that I despise and reject a cancer victim because he's a cancer victim. What kind of person would I be? It's the same kind of person that I'd be if I reject and despise an evildoer because he's an evildoer.

Now, we can train by using facts and implications like those. What we do is this. Someone does evil to us and we feel the first stirrings of resentment and anger. Instead of cultivating those stirrings, we dwell on those facts about evildoers and their implications to us. We purposely rehearse them in our minds and apply them to the evildoer and us.

There's a second thing we do to train. Pray for evildoers. Jesus Himself gives us that very strategy in Matthew 5:44, "**Pray for those who persecute you.**" So, we do that. That doesn't mean that we pray for evildoers a quick and generalized one-time prayer just to pretend we're being obedient. It does mean we pray for them thoughtfully and persistently, just like we would for ourselves. We may not feel like doing that but we do it anyway. We aren't being hypocritical if we do. We're

training, practicing prayer as a spiritual discipline, instead.

Do that because, if we're disciples of Jesus, it works. Persistent and thoughtful prayer for evildoers, as a spiritual discipline, changes us. Two forces are at work here. One is the transforming nature of prayer itself. The other, since we're training, is the Holy Spirit working in and through it. The result of those two forces together is this. We cannot long resent or despise evildoers for whom we pray. On the contrary, praying always leads to loving. William Law says it this way, **"There is nothing that makes us love a man so much as praying for him."**

Someone once greatly wronged me – said horrible things about me that weren't true. So I trained by doing two things. First, I dwelled on the facts about evildoers and their implications. #1 - this evildoer is loved by God. Do I have the nerve to resent or despise what God loves? #2 - this evildoer is spiritually sick. To resent or despise her for her evil would be like resenting or despising someone with cancer for her cancer. I trained by doing a second thing. I prayed for her thoughtfully and persistently. In my private prayers, I recommended her in detail to the love and favor of God. That's what I did and it worked. The resentment that I first felt dissolved away. I also came to genuinely love her and want the very best for her.

## **Conclusion**

So that's the message of Romans 12:14-21. Overcome evil with good. I told you that this is one of the most significant truths that you will ever hear. It's also probably the most disregarded. If you and I are like most people, we won't do it. And the reason we won't is because we don't believe it. Yes, it's clear that God says it. But we believe that He doesn't mean it. For one thing, none of us can do it. For another thing, it doesn't work even if we could. There's a better way, we think, overcome evil with evil. But we're wrong on both counts. The truth is that we can give good for evil and it works. So do it! Conspire with Jesus and always give good for evil to everyone in everything.