

“Overcome”

Romans Wasn't Read in a Day – part #2

Romans 12:1-21

[title slide] *Welcome, Prayer*

There are several occasions we are celebrating this weekend. Today is Pentecost Sunday – the day we remember the birth of the Christian church. It is Memorial Day Weekend, the time we remember and honor those who have sacrificed their lives for our nation. It's Graduation Sunday, when we honor and bless our graduates. Each event is a celebration or remembrance that expresses a hope of humankind.

One of those hopes, which touches on our scripture today, is the hope for peace, forgiveness, and justice. Martin Luther King, Jr. once said, “Man must evolve for all human conflict a method which rejects revenge, aggression and retaliation. The foundation of such a method is love.”¹

I want to share the following story from an online article as we reflect more on this idea of overcoming conflict and evil.

When we are wronged in some way, our natural inclination is to fight back, to get even. Needless to say, this reaction, though thoroughly human, is almost always in error. "Forgiveness," said Epictetus, "is better than revenge, for forgiveness is the sign of a gentle nature, but revenge is the sign of a savage nature."

A dramatic example is the experience of a Hungarian refugee -- to protect his privacy we'll call him Joseph Kudar. Kudar was a successful young lawyer in Hungary before the uprisings in that country in 1956. A strong believer in freedom for his country, he fought Soviet tanks in the streets of Budapest with his friends. When the uprising failed, he was forced to flee the country.

When Kudar arrived in the U.S. he had no money, no job, no friends. He was, however, well educated; he spoke and wrote several languages, including English. For several months he tried to get a job in a law office,

¹ <http://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/r/retaliation.htm>

but because of his lack of familiarity with American law, he received only polite refusals.

Finally, it occurred to him that with his knowledge of language he might be able to get a job with an import-export company. He selected one such company and wrote a letter to the owner.

Two weeks later he received an answer, but was hardly prepared for the vindictiveness of the man's reply. Among other things, it said that even if they did need someone, they wouldn't hire him because he couldn't even write good English.

Crushed, Kudar's hurt quickly turned to anger. What right did this rude, arrogant man have to tell him he couldn't write the language! The man was obviously crude and uneducated -- his letter was chock-full of grammatical errors!

Kudar sat down and, in the white heat of anger, wrote a scathing reply, calculated to rip the man to shreds. When he'd finished, however, as he was reading it over, his anger began to drain away. Then he remembered the biblical admonition, "A soft answer turns away wrath." (Proverbs 15:1)

No, he wouldn't mail the letter. Maybe the man was right. English was not his native tongue. Maybe he did need further study in it. Possibly this man had done him a favor by making him realize he did need to work harder on perfecting his English.

Kudar tore up the letter and wrote another. This time he apologized for the previous letter, explained his situation, and thanked the man for pointing out his need for further study.

Two days later he received a phone call inviting him to New York for an interview. A week later he went to work for them as a correspondent. Later, Joseph Kudar became vice president and executive officer of the company, destined to succeed the man he had hated and sought revenge against for a fleeting moment -- and then resisted.²

² Bits & Pieces, March 31, 1994, pp. 12-15. <http://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/r/revenge.htm>

In Romans 12:21, the apostle Paul tell us not to overcome evil by evil, but to overcome evil with good. Chapter 12 sounds a lot like a commencement speech to me. The goal of the featured commencement speaker is to inspire the graduates who are about to apply their knowledge in the world and begin a new chapter of their lives. For many, this is a rite of passage that is powerful and memorable.

Let's test that fact. What do you remember from your commencement? *(Pause for answers.)* It's unlikely we all remember the speech given by the commencement speaker. But we will remember we were there and how we felt.

Paul might not have been a great commencement choice. One time he preached so long, someone fell asleep and fell out of a second story window. (Acts 20:7-12) Yet Paul's words are inspiring. He says, “offer yourselves as a living sacrifice to God, so you can know his will.”

Whether you are a graduate or not, we all could use a dose of inspiration and motivation. With over thirty imperative verbs, Paul describes how a Christian can overcome evil with good. Let's examine some of those ways.

First, Paul tells us to remember God's mercy, which brought us our salvation. God's great love motivates us to become living sacrifices. Everything Paul tells us to do is a direct result of offering ourselves fully to God. You cannot fully love others and resist evil if you have not loved God first.

Paul urges us not to conform to the world. Everyone – graduate, child and adult – is tempted to conform to the thoughts, patterns and actions of a world that chooses to live without God. It's easy and natural to go with the flow. There is no risk or sacrifice involved, but it all leads to emptiness. Following God's will, on the other hand, is a deliberate choice that leads to fullness of life.

Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 6:20, “You were bought at a price. Therefore glorify God with your body.” Nothing God asks us to do is without reason. Jesus died so we could live for him. Would you choose to be a living sacrifice? Are you willing to forgo your own desires so that God's will can be done? If you are going to overcome evil with good, the answer to that question must be yes.

I'll give you an example from my own life. Most people I knew in college only did two things on Sunday morning: sleep in or study. Not many went to church. Somehow, by God's grace, I made it to worship every Sunday morning

that I could, even if I woke up 10 minutes before service. Fortunately, the University Chapel was on the other side of the street from my dorm, and it also helped that I had a good friend in the choir.

It was a sacrifice to live as a Christian on campus. A lot of people didn't understand my choices. However I learned in the long term that my reward was good friendships, integrity and a clean conscience. That was truly worth more than the diploma.

Paul tells us: Don't think of yourself more highly than you should. There is a balance we need to strive for. Too little self-esteem is depression, which is not healthy. On the flip side, too much self-esteem is arrogance and narcissism.

Paul explains it this way: in Christ, we form one body, made up of different members. Each of us needs to realize our place. Don't try to be someone you aren't. We have two high school graduates here today, Meghan and Emily. Meghan wouldn't go and dance Emily's solo. And Emily wouldn't raise Meghan's rabbits. Each of them pursues their own gifts and talents. God gives each of us unique gifts “in measure of faith.” Our congregation has already been blessed by the gifts our students have used among us, like teaching Children's Church, helping in service projects and VBS, being worship hosts, singing in the band. These small things have not gone unnoticed.

Paul tells us to love sincerely, hate evil, and cling to the good. (v.9) It's been said, “Love makes the world go 'round.” Doing good is synonymous with being kind and loving. Paul tell us, never stop loving. We love others with our generosity, our hospitality, our kindness to strangers and the outcast. We are supposed to outdo one another in love. According to Paul, love is a competition you win by losing. (see v.10)

What is the result when we do all these things, when we are patient and kind, when we resist anger and retaliation? The answer is, by God's power, we overcome evil with good.

It is so easy to want to put others down to get ahead. It's so easy to criticize, condemn, complain. Paul says to do the opposite: “Bless those who persecute you.” (v.14) “Don't repay evil with more evil.” (v.17) “Don't take revenge.” (v.19)

Showing kindness to your enemies, Paul says, is like heaping burning coals on their heads. (v.21) This quote, taken from Proverbs 25, is a reference to an Egyptian practice of carrying hot coals in a container on your head as a sign of penance. Imagine the mental agony and confusion when someone receives kindness when they are expecting hatred. It’s powerful.

When you refuse to retaliate, when you choke back a harsh word, tear up the nasty letter you wrote, click delete instead of send, turn off social media instead of starting a flame war, you are being a living sacrifice. You are overcoming. And if no one has said, “Thank you! Good job! I’m proud of you!” I’m saying it now. All of heaven is saying it now.

All these ideas from Paul are not really his own. Jesus commanded them first. Take this small sample for instance. Matthew 5:9: “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.” Luke 6:28: “Bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. Matthew 5:44: “But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” Paul is just passing along what he already learned from the Lord.

Think of how God responded to evil and sin in the world. God didn’t retaliate. God didn’t wipe us out. God sent his only Son, Jesus, who overcame evil with good. Even though they crucified Christ, he said, “Forgive them.” (Luke 23:34)

People will know we are Christians by our love, and love overcomes. Love wins. If you want more love in your life, read and meditate on Romans. This is Paul’s letter to you. He is telling you how to succeed. We all have choices to make. For us, every day is a commencement – a day for a new beginning. We want our graduates to be successful, but we also want them to be compassionate, loving, kind, contributors, givers, and peacemakers. And not just the graduates. All of us.

I want to close with one final story of overcoming evil with good.

When he was an attorney, Abraham Lincoln was once approached by a man who passionately insisted on bringing a suit for \$2.50 against an impoverished debtor. Lincoln tried to discourage him, but the man was bent on revenge. When he saw that the man would not be put off, Lincoln agreed to take the case and asked for a legal fee of \$10, which the plaintiff

paid. Lincoln then gave half the money to the defendant, who willingly confessed to the debt and paid the \$2.50! But even more amazing than Lincoln's ingenuous settlement was the fact that the irate plaintiff was satisfied with it.³

Overcome evil with good, friends. Would you pray with me?

Memory Verse:

Romans 12:21 - "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

Reflection Questions:

1. Recall a time in your life when you reacted badly due to anger. Who offended you and how?
2. Why is it easier to respond to evil with evil? What does it take to practice patience and long-suffering? (Romans 12:23)
3. What is a "living sacrifice"? How does Jesus' sacrifice on the cross motivate us to live our lives in view of God's mercy? (Romans 12:1)
4. How can you remember to think of yourself in humble terms? (Romans 12:3)
5. Name one good thing you can "cling to" this week. (Romans 12:9)
6. How can you bless someone this week who is hard to love? (Romans 12:14)

³ Daily Walk, May 22, 1992. <http://www.sermonillustrations.com/a-z/r/revenge.htm>