

“Do Not Return Evil for Evil”
(Romans 12:17-21)

I. Introduction.

A. Orientation.

1. This morning, Paul deals with another common problem we face: how to respond to the sinful things people do to us.
 - a. This is something we *all* have to deal with.
 - (i) There is a great deal of evil in the world, and the world is dishing it out constantly, especially to Christians.
 - (ii) John Trapp once wrote, “One son God hath without sin, but none without sorrow” (Treasury).
 - (iii) And Thomas Watson wrote, “Man is born to trouble”; he is heir apparent to it; he comes into the world with a cry, and goes out with a groan” (Ibid.).
 - (iv) Even our Lord Jesus, in His humiliation, underwent the miseries of this life: The author to the Hebrews writes, “Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance, and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you may not grow weary and lose heart” (12:1-3).
 - (v) Isaiah prophesied that this would happen: “For He grew up before Him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of parched ground; He has no *stately* form or majesty that we should look upon Him, nor appearance that we should be attracted to Him. He was despised and forsaken of men, a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and like one from whom men hide their face, He was despised, and we did not esteem Him” (Isaiah 53:2-3).
 - (vi) Misery, suffering, persecution were a part of our Savior’s life, and they will be of ours, as well.
 - b. Sadly, we are even prone to dish it out to each other as Christians.
 - (i) We often are motivated by an evil spirit – the flesh – even doing right things with the wrong reasons.
 - (ii) Again, Watson writes, “Let original sin make us walk with continual jealousy and watchfulness over our hearts. The sin of our nature is like a sleeping lion, the least thing that awakens it makes it rage. The sin of our nature, though it seems quiet, and lies as fire hid under the embers, yet if it be a little stirred and blown up by a temptation, how quickly may it flame

- forth into scandalous evils? Therefore we had need always to walk watchfully. . . . A wandering heart needs a watchful eye” (Treasury).
- (iii) We all have sin in our hearts; we’re all prone to give into it; the only difference is how we express it – according to our particular nature.
 - (iv) Therefore, we need to watch over our hearts.

- c. But we also need to realize because of this that others will do us wrong: and we need to respond righteously when we are wrong.
- d. The question is: What are we to do when someone wrongs us?
- e. This is what we’ll want to consider this morning.

2. Review.

- a. Last week, we were called to humiliation.
 - (i) Not to think so highly of ourselves and lowly of others.
 - (ii) Not to believe that we have all the answers.
 - (iii) Not to put ourselves forward and others behind.
 - (iv) But to lower ourselves to serve others, as our Lord did.
 - (v) It is the way our Lord took to be exalted; it is the only path we can take to achieve the same thing.
- b. We will not be able to do what the Lord calls us to this morning unless we first humble ourselves.
 - (i) If we are to glorify God, we must get self out of the way.
 - (ii) “Humility is the repentance of pride” (Nehemiah Rogers).
 - (iii) It doesn’t thrust itself into the light, but hides in the shadows.
 - (iv) It puts the Lord first; it puts others before self; it puts self last.
 - (v) If we can’t do this, we won’t be able to respond righteously to wrongs.

B. Preview.

- 1. So what do we do when others wrong us? We are not to hurt them back.
 - a. We are not to get mad; we are not to get even.
 - b. We are to return a blessing instead.
- 2. This morning, I want us to consider that the Lord commands us:
 - a. Not to return evil for evil.
 - b. But to do good to those who mistreat us.

II. Sermon.

A. First, we are not to return evil for evil.

- 1. We are not to take our own revenge.
 - a. “Never take your own *revenge*, beloved” (v. 19).
 - b. The word means to punish someone yourself for what they did to you.
 - c. Example of Samson:
 - (i) Samson’s wife told his riddle to the Philistines; Samson left in anger.
 - (ii) Her father gave her to another man.

- (iii) When Samson went to her and found out, he set the Philistine's fields on fire.
 - (iv) When they found out who did this and why, they burned Samson's wife and her father.
 - (v) Samson retaliated by slaughtering many of them.
 - (vi) So they came out to imprison him.
 - (vii) When the Philistines camped against Judah, they asked, "'Why have you come up against us?' And they said, 'We have come up to bind Samson in order to do to him as he did to us'" (Judges 15:10).
 - (viii) When the men of Judah came and asked Samson why he did what he did, he answered, "As they did to me, so I have done to them" (v. 11).
 - (ix) There was a constant struggle to even the score.
 - (x) The same thing happens when two people fight, either with words or fists. Neither wants to stop until they have evened things out.
 - (xi) How many times has someone hurt us, and we've responded by hurting them back:
 - (a) They say something nasty to you; you say something nasty back.
 - (b) They take advantage of you financially; you want to hurt them financially.
 - (c) Someone hits you, you want to hit back.
 - (d) Someone cuts you off on the freeway, you want to cut them off.
- d. This is what Jesus spoke against when He said, "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, do not resist him who is evil; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn to him the other also" (Matt. 5:38-39).
- (i) He didn't want to stop justice, only personal revenge.
 - (ii) What Samson did would have been wrong if he hadn't been a judge over Israel and God's messenger of His vengeance (Judges 14:4).
2. Our Lord tells us we are not to allow ourselves to be overcome by evil (v. 21).
- a. There's plenty of evil in our hearts that we must overcome.
 - (i) Being a Christian doesn't mean we're perfect.
 - (ii) David committed adultery and murder; Samson committed acts of immorality; Peter denied his Lord: of course, they repented.
 - (iii) But the fact is we have sin to contend with.
 - b. Because of this, we're prone to struggle in all areas of obedience, including this one.
 - (i) But we need to be careful: we mustn't allow bitterness, anger, the desire for revenge to stay in our hearts.
 - (ii) William Gurnall once wrote, "Our hearts are of that color which our most constant thoughts dye into it. Transient fleeting thoughts, whether of one kind or another, do not alter the temper of the soul. Neither poison kills nor food nourishes, unless they stay in the body; nor does good or evil benefit or harm the mind unless they abide in it" (Treasury).

- (iii) Thomas Adams wrote, “We cannot keep thieves from looking in at our windows, but we need not give them entertainment with open doors. ‘Wash thy heart from iniquity, that thou mayest be saved: how long shall thy vain thoughts lodge within thee?’ They may be passengers, but they must not be sojourners” (Treasury).

- c. What can we do about this?
 - (i) We must repent, look to Christ and receive His strength.
 - (ii) And we must channel the thoughts of our hearts into the ways of Christ.
 - (iii) John Owen writes, “The mighty streams of the evil thoughts of men will admit of no bounds or dams to put a stop unto them. There are but two ways of relief from them, the one respecting their moral evil, the other their natural abundance. The first is by throwing salt into the spring, as Elisha cured the waters of Jericho—that is, to get the heart and mind seasoned with grace. . . . The other is, to turn their streams into new channels, putting new aims and ends upon them, fixing them on new objects: so shall we abound in spiritual thoughts; for abound in thoughts we shall, whether we will or not” (Treasury).

B. We come now to the second point: having looked to Christ and received His strength, we must overcome our thoughts, intents and actions and do the right thing.

1. First, we are to labor to do what is right in the sight of all men (v. 17).
 - a. All men don’t have a common morality; Paul doesn’t mean that.
 - b. But we are to do what is right, where men can see us, no matter who is looking.
 - c. We are to let our light shine before men that they may see our good works and glorify God who is in heaven (Matt. 5:16).
 - d. Very often, when men see a higher morality in other men – one that costs those men dearly – the Lord uses it to turn them to Christ.
 - e. This is what we are to do – not seek revenge, but do what is right.
2. Second, we are to endeavor to live at peace with all men.
 - a. Paul writes, “If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men” (Rom. 12:18).
 - b. We know it isn’t always possible; sometimes others want to continue to fight.
 - c. But we are not to be the antagonists.
 - d. Consider Jesus: “He was oppressed and He was afflicted, yet He did not open His mouth; like a lamb that is led to slaughter, and like a sheep that is silent before its shearers, so He did not open His mouth” (Isaiah 53:7).
 - e. Jesus told Peter, He had twelve legions of angels at His disposal (6000 per legion). One angel destroyed the Assyrian army.
 - f. But He didn’t use them; He submitted/humbled Himself; brought peace through the blood of His cross.
3. Third, we are to labor to do good to all men, even our enemies.

- a. ““But if your enemy is hungry, feed him, and if he is thirsty, give him a drink” (v. 20).
 - b. We are not only not to return evil for evil, but we are to minister to their needs.
 - c. Sometimes the Lord uses it to turn them; or sometimes to harden.
 - d. We mustn’t concern ourselves with the outcome, only the duty.
- 4. Paul sums it up, “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (v. 21).
 - a. Far from retaliating and prolonging the fight, we are to bless them.
 - b. Sometimes, especially for the Christian, doing good to our brother through rebuke or calling them to account may appear to them to be evil.
 - c. But if we do it with love in our hearts, it is good, even if it hurts them.
 - d. Solomon writes, “Faithful are the wounds of a friend” (Prov. 27:6).
- C. Now we know if we do this, something still doesn’t feel right. There’s still seems to be an imbalance. However, there really isn’t, because God says He will even the score.
 - 1. The Lord says that vengeance is His: He will repay.
 - a. If there is to be revenge, the Lord will take it, either in this life or the next.
 - b. Example:
 - (i) Adoni-bezek cut off the thumbs and toes of seventy kings.
 - (ii) When Israel caught him, they cut off his thumbs and big toes (Judges 1:6-7) – an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth – thumb for thumb and toe for toe.
 - (iii) He said, ““Seventy kings with their thumbs and their big toes cut off used to gather up *scraps* under my table; as I have done, so God has repaid me.” When they brought him to Jerusalem, he died there (v. 7).
 - 2. We are to leave room for God’s wrath.
 - a. If it’s a matter of justice, we are to leave it to the state – they have the power of the sword (as he will show us in Romans 13).
 - b. If it appears as though they’re getting away with it in this life, don’t believe it. God will repay.
 - c. Daniel Cawdray wrote, “As water is deepest where it is the stillest, so where God is most silent in threatening and patient in sparing, there He is most inflamed with anger and purpose of revenge; and, therefore, the fewer the judgments be that are poured forth upon the wicked in this life, the more are reserved in store for them in the life to come” (Treasury).
 - d. God will even the score; we must not.
 - e. When someone does something wrong to us, we are to do good in return.
 - f. We are even to pray for their repentance, realizing that God will do what is good in His eyes: He will bring justice to them through the blood of the cross, or through their own blood.
 - g. We must be content to leave it with Him. Amen.