

**Sermon Title: Evil for Evil**  
**Biblical Text: Romans 12:17**  
**Teaching Series: Justified by Love**  
**Preaching Date: January 22, 2023**  
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## **Romans 12:17**

*Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all.*

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Today Paul is revisiting a thought he introduced a bit early. A thought he'll unpack here in v.17 and in the following passage he'll develop even more. So, we're in a bit of a three-part mini series within the larger series. It's about how we respond to being wronged. It's about what we do when we're confronted and impacted by evil. You see, last week we focused on the general meaning of blessing rather than cursing those who wrong us. And next Sunday we'll look at how our response and God's response to evil reshapes our community. Today is about how we should and shouldn't respond to evil. That's what I'd like to talk about. Healthy and unhealthy ways to respond to evil.

You see, Paul has a two-fold instruction for us in v.17. *Don't repay evil with evil. Instead, give thought; think about it.* I want to mention that some of what we discuss may be disturbing or even triggering to those who have experienced abuse and intimate mistreatment. My desire in being clear about what the Bible teaches is

not to cause undo harm, but rather to clarify the darkness of evil and point to the light of the gospel.

Here's how we'll move through our passage today ...

- *Unhealthy* responses to evil.
- *Healthy* responses to evil.
- *God's* response to evil.

We'll spend much more time on the first two points than the third.

[Prayer]

**Movement 1: Unhealthy Responses to Evil (v.17a,  
Matthew 5:38-39;40-42;7:1-5, Exodus 21:23-25,  
Deuteronomy 13:5)**

Look at the first half of our verse with me. Paul simply says, *Read Romans 12:17a* ... "*Repay no one evil for evil.*" There is only one reason Paul has to give this instruction. Because we have an instinct to get even. Our impulse is to repay evil with evil.

In other words, in our brokenness we respond to evil in some pretty unhealthy ways. Jesus knew this too. In his Sermon on the Mount, he was sure to instruct his

listeners to resist this natural urge. Jesus said, *Read Matthew 5:38-39 ... "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 the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also."* Jesus highlights our inclination to get even. That's the first unhealthy response to evil we see in the Bible, *joining evil*. When we join evil, we repay evil for evil. We move with the flow of human sinfulness and use hurtful words, behaviors, or thoughts to get even with someone who has hurt us.

But if you listen closely, you hear that Jesus is actually quoting Scripture. It's a quotation from Exodus. Moses was transcribing the law for God's people. He was detailing the difference between the regulations of justice if a man hits a pregnant woman. There were different rules in place based upon whether or not the baby was harmed. If the baby was harmed, Moses says, *Read Exodus 21:23-25 ... "then you shall pay life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe."* At first blush, this might be perfectly reasonable to some of us. For others, this may seem like evil for evil. Famously, Gandhi criticized this Old Testament teaching saying, *"An eye for an eye will only make the whole world blind."* *But what's the passage actually mean? And what's Jesus getting at when he quotes it?*

Well, in Moses' day there seems to have been a tendency to not only repay evil with evil, but to repay evil when even greater evil. The offended party would retaliate in disproportionate ways. And so the law was instituted by God for the sake of justice. According to scholar John Hannah, it was meant *"to restrict the*

*exacting of punishment to what was equitable" (Hannah, 141). And so what Jesus is doing in Matthew 5 is elevating the expectation of his follower even higher than Moses. Our response to evil should not simply be just but loving. Jesus continues, **Read Matthew 5:40-42 ... "And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you."** In Romans 12:17, Paul continues this teaching.*

There's another way we respond to evil in an unhealthy ways, **we ignore evil all together.** In December of 1966 Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. spoke to congress about this very thing. He said, "**All too many of those who live in affluent America ignore those who exist in poor America. In doing so, the affluent Americans will eventually have to face themselves with the question that Eichmann chose to ignore: How responsible am I for the well-being of my fellows? To ignore evil is to become an accomplice to it**" (Eighty-Ninth Congress, Second Session, December 14 and 15, 1966, Part 14). Adolf Eichmann was a chief architect of the Holocaust.

Ignoring evil is contrary to the heart of God. Though it might feel safe to ignore evil, that feeling of security is just that, a feeling. When we overlook the evil—which directly or indirectly affects us—we become coconspirators in it's destructive agenda. In response to the numbness of God's people toward idolatry, Moses commanded them, **Read Deuteronomy 13:5 ... "you shall purge the evil**

***from your midst.***" We don't ignore evil, that just gives birth to a different type of evil.

Now, you might be think. *Sweet, I don't feel like I join or ignore evil. Free pass on this message.* Well, let's keep thinking. There's one more way I think we have to be mindful of how we repay evil for evil. ***We judge evil and evil doers.*** Now, that may seem noble. Knowing what is evil and calling it evil is a way to "judge" evil. But we must be very careful about the difference between being discerning and being judgmental. Discernment is a way of seeking righteousness. Judgmentalism is a way of acting righteous.

This distinction is perhaps most clear near the end of Jesus' sermon. At the beginning of his final movement he warns us, ***Read Matthew 7:1-5 ... "Judge not, that you be not judged. For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you. Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye? Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when there is the log in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye."*** The error Jesus is exposing is not about what we see (the speck),

it's about what we don't see (the plank). Seeing the speck is discernment. Not seeing the plank is judgment. *With me?* Jesus is not critiquing the fact that we might see evil in the life of someone else. Jesus is critiquing the fact that we don't see evil in our own lives. And so he says, first deal with the evil in your heart and

then, *what's he say?* **You will see clearly.** Then, and only then, you can help your brother with the speck.

So, *how do you repay evil for evil?*

If we're honest ... often in some pretty unhealthy ways. We either join evil, ignore evil, or judge evil. In any case, we have failed to, what Paul says, *give thought* to what is good. So, *how do we do that? How do we respond to evil in a healthy way?*

## **Movement 2: Healthy Responses to Evil (v.17b, Romans 12:21, Matthew 18:15-16,17, Galatians 6:1-5, Acts 15:39-41, Deuteronomy 22:25)**

Keep reading with me, the second half of v.17. **Read Romans 12:17 ... "Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all."**

That phrase, *give thought to do what is honorable* ... it really means to consider deeply what it looks like to do good. Paul draws out this meaning in v.21, **Read Romans 12:21 ... "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."** But we're getting ahead of ourselves. That's next week.

Marva Dawn explains that the verb tense Paul uses in v.17, "**emphasizes thinking prior to something so that one can respond appropriately,**" she continues ... "**think with the utmost care beforehand how our behavior will affect those who observe us**" (*Truly the Community*, 257,258). When we join, ignore, or judge

evil ... we respond with emotions only. We respond without thought. Resisting this urge requires thinking with the mind of Christ which we've been given by grace (see Philippians 2:5).

When we give thought to what is good, we'll respond to evil in a few ways. Now, we may not respond in all these ways to any and every circumstance. In fact, we shouldn't. And so I'd like to lay them out as responses to increasingly severe situations. That's why we have to think, pray, consider God's Spirit and Word and connect with his people. Every evil does not demand the same response. That's healthy. (And as I mentioned earlier, some of what I discuss here may be disturbing or triggering to those who have experienced abuse and intimate mistreatment.)

- Responding to evil with confrontation is good. Jesus gave immensely practical counsel to his disciples about how to address sin and evil with someone. He says in Matthew 18, *Read Matthew 18:15-16 ... "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses.* We go to the person alone, and tell them what is evil, sinful, or how they've hurt us. Then we bring a couple others if that doesn't work. If the evil persists, we escalate the confrontation by bringing in the church, or as I think Jesus is getting at, the elders of the church.

- Responding to evil with accountability is good. Accountability is not ridicule. It's not gossip or means of tearing someone else down. Accountability is about righteousness, holiness, and upholding the integrity of another person, of a community. Paul encourages the Church in Galatia this way, *Read Galatians 6:1-5 ... "Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ. For if anyone thinks he is something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself. But let each one test his own work, and then his reason to boast will be in himself alone and not in his neighbor. For each will have to bear his own load."* Notice there's an element of sharing in this passage, but also of independence and self-care and hopefulness. Accountability is a blend of truth and grace that empowers someone to walk in righteousness, toward restoration.
- Responding to evil with boundaries. In some cases the evil act may be unsafe for the offender party to address directly or completely or just to live differently together. Simply addressing the evil or setting up better accountability is not always enough. Jesus actually goes on to say in Matthew 18, *Read Matthew 18:17 ... "If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector."* In other words, boundaries are set on this person and they are treated differently than before as a result of their unrepentant and persistent sin. They were treated like unbelievers, now their



not. They were received without stipulations by the Church, now they're not. Boundaries are not weapons. Boundaries are an expression of love. Boundaries are markers of health used to protect, communicate, and, by God's grace, transform.

- Responding to evil with separation. While confrontation and accountability and boundaries are healthy and loving responses to most of the evil we face interpersonally, sometimes another option—which is still rooted in love and health—is necessary. In some cases we need separation. Paul did. He and another missionary named Barnabas faced an irreconcilable discord at the start of Paul's second missionary journey (see Acts 16-18). **Read Acts 15:39-41 ...** *"And there arose a sharp disagreement, so that they separated from each other. Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus, but Paul chose Silas and departed, having been commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord. And he went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches."* Notice. They disagreed. They likely tried to work through it, but they couldn't. They had to separate. Now, there is no explicit evil in this story. It was a disagreement. However, *how much more is the need for separation when sin and evil is involved?* When articulating laws around rape in the Old Testament, Moses explains that, **Read Deuteronomy 22:25 ...** *"But if in the open country a man meets a young woman who is betrothed, and the man seizes her and lies with her, then only the man who lay with her shall die."* The women does not need to confront, seek accountability, set boundaries ... she can separate.

Completely. He's put to death. Too often separation is not given as an option within religious communities. Of course, it should not be chosen unadvisedly. But it may very well be the healthiest response to evil in many cases.

It's important to mention ... **Reconciliation** is always our desires. And we should always be working toward **forgiveness**. We hope evil doers **repent**. But these all move with that aim, in love. You see, these are not our responses to evil when love doesn't work. These are what love looks like. Love confronts evil. Love holds evil accountable. Love sets boundaries on evil. Love separates from evil. *Are you with me?* I think this is what our response will look like when we, *Read Romans 12:17b ... "give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all."*

### **Movement 3: God's Response to Evil (1 Peter 2:23, Colossians 2:13-14, John 16:33)**

When we respond in unhealthy ways. Evil persists. When we respond in healthy ways. Evil still persists. Our hope is not that all the right responses will eradicate evil. That's not realistic. Rather, we desire that our loving and righteous and healthy responses will usher in the fullness of evil's defeat. After all, we are not the only ones who respond to evil.

The Bible tells us that God responds to evil in a few ways, and we'll expound on these much more next week ...

- God endures evil. In Christ, God is not unaware of the pain evil causes. Nor is he unaware of the challenging of resisting the urge to get even. He endured evil and yet, did not repay evil with evil. The Apostle Peter tells us that, *Read 1 Peter 2:23 ... "When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly."* Specifically as Jesus hung on the cross, with the power that formed the cosmos, he did not return the evil words of his oppressors ... he did not respond to evil acts with evil action ... nor did he mirror the evil thoughts of his enemies. Jesus did not repay evil for evil. In fact, in a miraculous way, as God endured evil he was punishing evil.
- God punishes evil. It might be an odd thing to conceive, that as Jesus was dying he was putting evil to death. But that's exactly what was happening. Paul told the Colossian Christians, *Read Colossians 2:13-14 ... "And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross."* Evil and sin incurs a debt. Namely death. But in Christ we have a substitute who dies a perfect death in our place and for our sins. And so as evil thought it was winning, it was losing. Because in his death, Jesus punishes evil. Through this punishment, he was overcoming.

- God overcomes evil. Since in Christ God both endures evil and punishes the powers of evil, he also overcomes evil. That means evil is not in control. Evil will not win. All evil has and will finally meet its match in the love and truth of Jesus Christ. The stories of abuse, shame, failure, and discontent will not overwhelm you. The habits of addiction to money, food, sex, and power will not overcome you. Because Jesus said, ***Read John 16:33 ... "I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world."*** No temptation. No mistreatment. No sin. No mean word. No false identity. No injustice. No racist act. No greedy structure. No pain. No power. No problem. No suffering. No evil will overcome you ... but in Christ, God has overcome evil.

There are many unhealthy ways to respond to evil, but they all only foster more evil. In Christ, God has given us the means and method of responding in healthy ways to evil, yet evil will still persist. But in God's response to evil ... evil has found its end. And so may we daily give thought to how we respond to the evils of this world in the power of Jesus' name.