

Sermon Title: Overcome Evil with Good
Biblical Text: Romans 12:18-21
Teaching Series: Justified by Love
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Romans 12:18-21

If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” To the contrary, “if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.” Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

We've been considering the Apostle Paul's first-century letter to Rome. From a practical perspective, he's writing to garner support—spiritual and financial—for his missionary journey to Spain (15:28). He plans to visit Rome on his way. From a theological perspective he's writing to instruct the Christians there about the nature of God and salvation. Namely, as we've been learning, that they have been justified by love. Generally the first eleven chapters were about that. And now, in chapter 12 which we'll finish today, he's begun to explain how then they should live in light of this love. He starts by teaching them how to respond to evil. Along with our spiritual forbearers in Paul's original readership, we're invited to bless those who hurt us and to refrain from repaying evil for evil (see vv.14-17).

Today, we're given a vision for how a gospel response to evil shapes us and the world around us. Our invitation is simply to peace. To *live peaceably with all*. As usually, Paul is building on the teachings of Jesus who instructed his followers to be peacemakers (Matthew 5:9). Jesus wants us to seek peace in a world filled with brokenness, chaos, and injustice. That's what I'd like to talk about today. I want to talk about the nature of peace and how peace reshapes our world.

And so, following the flow of Romans 12:18-21, here's how we'll organize our time together today ...

- The *call* to peace.
- The *foundation* of peace.
- The *power* of peace.

[Pray]

Movement 1: The Call to Peace (v.18, 5:12, Colossians 3:15)

Look at v.18 with me. *Read Romans 12:18 ... If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.* The controlling command is to live peaceably. It's an ongoing process of cultivating peace within ourselves and in the world around us. *But what's that look like? How ought we heed this call to peace?*

First we need to define peace ...

Lutheran theologian Gerhard Liedke wrote an important collection of essays focused on this very thing. It's call "The Christian Understanding of Peace." He wrote from East Germany before the fall of the Berlin Wall, and so he is writing from a perspective shaped by a world void of peace. Essentially he explains that peace should neither be defined positively nor negatively. That is peace is not simply the absence of conflict (negative) or the presence of justice (positive). To be sure, peace is connected to both of these ideas. Instead, Liedke encourages his readers to understand peace through the lens of God's character and nature. Peace should be defined by the peace of God.

We considered the peace of God back in Romans 5. Paul explained, ***Read Romans 5:1-2 ... Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God.*** So, peace is the result of justification. Peace is not predicated by the situation or season you are in. Positive or negative. Peace is about justification. It's about the kingdom of God breaking into human hearts. It's right standing with God. It's wholeness an joy. Jesus has made us right before God. Therefore by grace through faith we live in God's presence without conflict, full of justice ... which causes a new condition to take hold of your soul. In sin we could not be in his presence. We

did not have peace. Yet, in Christ we have peace with God. We have the peace of God.

In many respects we can define peace as new set of freedoms. The peace of God is freedom from guilt (Galatians 2). The peace of God is freedom from shame (1 Peter 3). The peace of God is freedom from hostility (Ephesians 2). That's peace upward. Peace inward. Peace outward. What's more, this freedom ... peace of God is meant to control our lives. **Read Colossians 3:15 ... And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful.** In Christ, we are innocent, clean, and in harmony with the Creator and creation.

- Knowing you're innocent before God means you can walk in holiness and love without fear of rejection.
- Knowing you're clean within my soul means you don't have to justify my existence to myself, or my parents, or my community.
- Knowing you're in harmony with God and his family means you don't have to fight for belonging in a community which is not made for me.

That's what it means to "***let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts***" ... his peace is the defining and guiding and grounding reality of our lives. In Romans, Paul's calling to *live peaceably with all* then, is an invitation to live within this justified identity in your community. It's to be who you are in Christ, with others. However, that doesn't mean peace is always possible. More specifically outward peace is not

always possible, but inward peace need never change again. Sometimes for no other reason than external peace does not always depend on you. Notice, ***Read Romans 12:18a ... If possible, so far as it depends on you ...*** There are times external peace is not possible. But you are still at peace inwardly and cosmically. There are times when peace does not depend on you. But you are still at peace. The call to peace is to never distrust the peace you have with God. It's steady. It's dependable. It's unflappable. The call to peace is to rest in God, even when peace is not possible.

This is what the Bible calls *shalom*. *Shalom* is our calling.

Movement 2: The Foundation of Peace (v.19,

Ephesians 2:13-16)

Paul moves from the call to peace to the *foundation* of peace. He's answering the question, *how do we live with peace when chaos and evil persist? When conflict is present? When justice is absent? How do we maintain inward peace when external peace is not possible?* Notice how he continues in v.19. ***Read Romans 12:19 ... Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord."*** The *foundation* of peace is the wrath of God. Now, this might seem a bit odd. But ultimately the reason you and I can resist the urge to avenge ourselves (v.19a) ... curse at our persecutors (v.14) ... repay evil with evil (v.17) ... is that God has promised that he will make everything right (v.19b). We don't have to repay evil, because God will.

Because God is going to make everything right, we don't have to fear or worry or manufacture justice ourselves. We can live peaceably. *Tracking with me?*

God's wrath is an aspect of his love. God hates sin because he loves his glory. He hates sin because he loves his children. And his love compels him to respond to evil. Therefore he says, "***Vengeance is mine, I will repay.***" And since God will repay evil, we don't have to. However, many modern people take issue with this. Mostly because in our present time (and certainly throughout history) it does not seem like God is repaying evil. In fact, the presence of evil and the claim that the God of the Bible is all-loving and all-powerful seems contradictory to many of our friends and neighbors. Perhaps even to you. You might ask, *how could a loving and powerful God allow evil and suffering? He's either loving and impotent ... or he's powerful but doesn't care about us. He can't be both.* One of the many answers to this tension is found here in Paul's words.

God does not allow evil and suffering forever.

He promises to have vengeance.

The answer to the tension is time.

Scholar N.T. Wright points us deeper still. Many describe what I've just laid out as "The Problem of Evil" ... however Wright redirects the tension to the human soul, describing what he calls as "The New Problem of Evil." In his book *Evil and the Justice of God* he lays out three aspects of this oft ignored tension. He says, "***First,***

we ignore evil when it doesn't hit us in the face. Second, we are surprised by evil when it does. Third, we react in immature and dangerous ways as a result" (23-24). He points out a couple things here. There is this moral apathy, which is innate in all of us. We have a hard time caring about evil that does not effect our lives directly. In other words, pure advocacy is much more scarce than we'd like to admit. But also, there's a biased expectation that's natural as well. We kind of expect good things to happen to us. *Right?* And when they don't, that's usually when we question God. We're even surprised. In other words, as a cultural, I think we are used to living with a false sense of peace based upon our perceived specialness. We think we have peace when we really we have privilege. And privilege can be lost, so we deal in fear and violence and bitterness when someone mistreats us. When evil does strike us we respond in some unhealthy or immature ways. We're offended. We're defensive. We seek vengeance without God. We even question God ... not because we don't have peace, but because we've lost our privilege. Privilege is threatened by evil. Peace is not.

Well, how do we excavate this shaky foundation of privilege and rest upon the foundation of God's peace?

Shalom, or God's peace, is about wholeness. The Apostle demonstrated this idea in his letter to Ephesian Christians. Meet me in Ephesians 2. ***Read Ephesians 2:13-16*** ... ***But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law***

of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. Writer Kelly Edmiston explains that "*Shalom means that something is complete and lacks nothing*" (*The Way of Peace*, June 2020). She went on to explain elsewhere that peace or shalom is "*a reality that exists as complex parts come to fit together*" (*Called to Peace*, June 2020). That's what Paul is saying in Ephesians. Complex parts are being fit together, so that we lack nothing. That's the vision of *Shalom*. Wholeness.

You see, Paul is writing to a people who were fractured. He was writing to persons who were disconnected from God, dysfunctional within themselves, and divided from one another. He was addressing a problem which privilege only masks and ignores. Now I realize that word is weighty in our day and often used as a weapon against other. But I think privilege is easy enough to determine. In many respects, you can determine the degree of your privilege by the number of problems you can afford to ignore. *Make sense?* If you can afford to ignore when the property tax in a neighborhood increase. That's privilege. If you can afford to ignore the violence against Tyre Nichols, and other members of the black community. That's privilege. I've realized I can ignore nearly every national and state legislation. I can afford to ignore almost all new laws. That's privilege.

Privilege is about what you can ignore. But peace never ignores. Peace is not apathetic nor fearful. Peace addresses the upward, inward, and outward disconnect

and seeks to rebuild *Shalom*, brining disjointed parts of self, family, and society back together. That's justification. That's the kingdom. It's not that you are now a privileged few who God calls righteous. Rather you are the beneficiary of peace which has made you whole. Therefore we can rest assured that the God who put us back together ... will, in time, put everything back together again. He will repay.

Shalom is our sure foundation and our secured future. But even now, there is **power** in the peace of God. Because, *did you notice in Ephesians 2? Jesus himself is our shalom.*

Movement 3: The Power of Peace (vv.20-21)

Peace is our calling and foundation. This leads us to a new power which reshapes the world around us, one person at a time. ***Read Romans 12:20-21 ... To the contrary, “if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.” Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*** Since God has promised to cosmically repay evil, we can respond with love toward our enemies. We can bless those who hurt us. Now we can read this as a general principle, *meet the needs of those who hurt you*. But the evil and the need are not disconnected. Paul is quoting Proverbs 25:21,22. They are proverbs of King Solomon, whom many described as the wisest person who ever lived (1 Kings 4:29-31). Something deeper may be going on here. Let's think about this. Usually when someone hurts us unjustly it's because they are hurting. Wisdom instructs us, then instead of emotionally reacting ... to see the person and need beyond the evil, underneath the evil. Specifically,

someone might have hurt you because they're hungry. So feed them. Someone might have hurt you because they're thirsty. Give them something to drink. Someone might be sad or angry or jealous or scared. So, love them.

Solomon says this response to evil, "*will heap burning coals on his head.*" An odd statement. Likely, Solomon is borrowing from an ancient Egyptian custom. Someone who had done something wrong and was remorseful, or reconsidering their actions, words, or thoughts would carry a bowl of burning coals on their head. This was to symbolize a change of mind or heart in the person. And so what Paul is telling us is that responding to evil by seeing the person ... feeding the person ... giving a drink to the person ... loving the person ... ought to be done with a spirit of transformation. You see, our response to evil ought to reshape the world. This is how we make peace. This is the *power* of peace. This is the power of life ruled by Jesus.

This is hard to believe. We don't think peace has this kind of potency. *Do we?* We live in a world that fights fire with fire, brings guns to gun fights, and repays evil with evil. We believe that's how justice will be served. And yet this is exactly what we're being taught. In summary Paul says, ***Read Romans 12:21 ... Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*** Everything he's just described is what it looks like to overcome evil with good. We're invited to imagine a world where instead of powering up, we serve ... instead of lashing out, we love ... instead of seeing an enemy, we see an image bearer ... instead of mirroring the evil done to us, we mirror the love of Christ toward us. After all, God did not see our

sin and simply mirror our behavior back to us. You lie to me, I'll lie to you. You ignore me, I'll ignore you. You hurt me, I'll hurt you. He saw our sin ... and he saw us. He saw his image bearer. He saw hunger. He saw thirst. He saw brokenness and bondage. And he overcame evil with good. On the cross we see God's most profound good response to the evil in our hearts and world. He loved. He restored *Shalom*.

This kind of peace reshapes our world. Because our world is broken. And breaking it with evil deeds and words will not bring healing. Only shalom will do that. Only Jesus does that. He is calling us to reshape the world in his image by living with peace, being grounded in peace, and exercising the power of peace daily.