

Romans 12:9-21 ⁹ Let love be genuine; hate what is evil; hold fast to what is good; ¹⁰ love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. ¹¹ Do not lag in zeal; be ardent in spirit; serve the Lord. ¹² Rejoice in hope; be patient in affliction; persevere in prayer. ¹³ Contribute to the needs of the saints; pursue hospitality to strangers. ¹⁴ Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. ¹⁵ Rejoice with those who rejoice; weep with those who weep. ¹⁶ Live in harmony with one another; do not be arrogant, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. ¹⁷ Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. ¹⁸ If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. ¹⁹ Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is mine; I will repay, says the Lord.” ²⁰ Instead, “if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink, for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.” ²¹ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Romans 12:9-21

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“Overcome Evil”

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Some two decades or so ago now, I heard an interview on NPR when the war in Iraq was just starting up. They were interviewing a 23-year-old Christian Missionary, who, believing that violence is never the will of God, was desperately campaigning to get President Bush to invade Iraq with an army of do-gooders instead of traditional military. Basing his argument on this text from Romans 12, he believed that if thousands of Americans went in armed only with faith, love, food, medicine, and technology, and set about the task of educating, serving, and assisting in rebuilding, that the Iraqi people themselves would overthrow the extremists because we would have proven through love that the extremist propaganda about American imperialism is not true. He acknowledged that such an endeavor would be costly in American lives as well as dollars, but maintained it would ultimately be successful and that future historians would call it noble. As theories go, we’ve got to admit, it’s at least intriguing. After the interview, callers were invited to phone in questions and comments. I remember one particular call, which began with the caller offering two very practical words of advice: Get real. And I remember a kind of torn feeling within, for I will admit that my mind had already thought those exact words as I listened to the interview—get real. It’ll never happen. It would never work. Not only would it cost a lot of good, innocent lives and only wind up feeding the post-9/11 bitterness and resentment, but the logistics of such an endeavor are mind-boggling in their intricacy. And yet, deep within, there was a kind of hunger to believe it possible, to trust in the best of humanity, coupled with a faith-based awareness that such a nonviolent, do-good approach might just be as authentic, as truly loving, as *real* as it gets. Who knows? It really is a fascinating theory. But it remains just that—theory. Untried. Untested. And by and large, considered unwise and outlandish.

Now one may safely argue that Paul was not writing of governmental foreign policy in this instance, though that does not necessarily render his words irrelevant to the topic. But neither may one safely argue that for the Apostle Paul, this was all just theory. Quite the contrary. For Paul, this was getting real. This was where the rubber hit the road. Writing to a community who was daily being tested in the fires of persecution and tried in the lions’ dens of martyrdom, torture, imprisonment, and brutality, this was not a philosophical concept. As outlandish and counter-intuitive as it may seem, this was the very practical call to remember what is real—to live out the directive that we not conform to this world but be transformed by the renewing of our minds. This is super-hard stuff. And yet, this ought to appeal to something in each one of us—some kind of inward desire to rise above the baser instincts and live as one empowered to be light in the darkness. This speaks to that part of each of us that, when faced with injustice, with evil, with suffering and wrong, wants to cry out: I beg to differ!

Which is exactly what Paul calls us to do: differ. Be different, he says. Set yourself apart by responding out of the best and the highest within rather than the worst and the lowest. How? Well, he sets before us a list of behaviors, which at first glance, seem like a hodgepodge mix of random proverbs. But let me assure you—these. is not random injunctions. Paul begins by saying, “Let love be genuine”, or in the original text, “...sincerus”, which means “without wax.” It stems from a practice of the early Roman merchants who set their earthen and porcelain jars out for sale. If a crack appeared in one, they would fill it with wax the same color as the jar, so a buyer would not be aware that it was cracked. But astute buyers learned to hold these jars out in the sun, and if the jar was cracked, the wax would melt and the crack would be revealed. So the honest merchants would test their wares this way and mark them sincerus – without wax. [adapted from “Lessons On Living The Christian Life” by Michael Luke, www.sermoncentral.com.] Love needs no fillers.

Paul then proceeds to outline something about what genuine love looks like among the community of faith. Namely, it abhors evil, holds fast to good, is devoted to others, puts others first, is energetic, determined, and unwavering, rejoices in hope, is patient in suffering, perseveres in prayer, is generous in giving, and always welcomes the stranger. Those are all fairly straight forward. The most interesting on that list is one that seems equally straight-forward in English: serve the Lord. But it loses something in translation. What it’s trying to communicate is that we should seize every opportunity that comes along to show love to others.

With verse 14, Paul starts a new thought, inviting the reader to expand an understanding of genuine love beyond the community of believers to include the general population, and specifically, to those who may be hostile to the Christian faith. On this Labor Day weekend, it’s worth noting that Paul tells us outright that love is laborious. It’s hard work. The essence of his teaching is this: stay engaged. Do the hard work. Here we have a decisive injunction against country club churches. Don’t be aloof, says Paul. Don’t stick to your own kind. Interact with the non-believing community beyond the church. Know your neighbors. Go to their weddings, their funerals, their births, their sickbeds. Assume that your behavior as a Christian is being scrutinized by those around you, and think about how you want to represent Christ in the world. Of course, none of us can control others around us, but, says Paul, we can control ourselves. Thus, don’t be the source of trouble or disharmony.

And finally, when wrong or harm is done, refuse to respond in kind. Do not perpetuate an endless cycle of hate, revenge, and distrust. “Rather than seek revenge, Paul sagely encourages doing good for the enemy, for the impact of that good promises to be more humiliating and far more effective than sheer repayment of evil. Verse 21 seems to make clear that...to ‘overcome evil with good’ is not to lie down before evil so that it simply has its way, but to conquer it by the skillful use of good.

So familiar is the doormat version of Christianity, in which Christians are taught that their duty is to accept whatever evil comes their way, that the craftiness of Paul’s words here slips by. Evil need not be passively accepted, nor need it be avenged, when we understand that, finally, God is the one who judges all humankind. In many forms, evil can be thwarted in the meantime by those who understand the capacity of good to humiliate and expose evil for what it truly is.” [2 ¶s from Beverly R. Gaventa et al, *Texts for Preaching Year A*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995) pg. 467.]

The phrase in all this that has always baffled me the most is this injunction from Paul that our doing good and caring for other is way to heap burning coals on their head. That seems like repaying evil with evil, which is directly against what Paul is advocating here. The truth is that we don’t know exactly what meant. The image of burning coals and corresponding ash may reference the human experience of repentance. After all, it’s hard to stomach being cruel to those who return kindness to you. Remember, also, that in ancient times, matches, lighters, and so-forth had not yet been invented, so people maintained a fire in their hearth constantly. They relied on it for warmth, cooking, and many household tasks. Thus, if the fire in one’s hearth went out, one was dependent on neighbors to give them burning coals by which they might restart the fires. Obviously, the more coals one’s neighbor gave up, the better chance one had of restarting the fire in their own hearth. Which may, in fact, be what

Paul is suggesting—a kind of sacrifice, whereby one gives extravagantly to their persecutor as a witness for good. But even more, it may be metaphorical – a call to give of ourselves to re-ignite another’s inward fire or passion – that through our sacrificial love, we become the catalyst by which another experiences the divine spark of love, hope, and peace.

Abraham Lincoln was once being criticized for his generous attitude towards his opponents. "Why do you try to make friends with them?" a colleague asked. "You should try to destroy them." To which the President gently responded, "Am I not destroying my enemies when I make them my friends?" [from “Lessons On Living The Christian Life” by Michael Luke, www.sermoncentral.com.]

He’s right. And David Holwick offers a case in point when he tells about the Hansen family, who, during the Depression in the early 1930s, lost their farm out on the north Canadian prairie. Mr. Hansen worried about how to provide for his family in such desperate times, until a friend told him of a farm available butting up to Jud Brewster’s farm. The problem was that few lasted very long there because Jud was so mean. Mr. Hansen said, "If he makes trouble, we'll just burn him out," and they moved to the new farm.

One week later, Jud Brewster appeared at their door in a rage. Their chickens were bothering him, and he threatened to kill them all, so the Hansen family locked them up in the henhouse.

Peace lasted only a short time, however, before Jud Brewster showed up again. "Hansen, your pigs have been in my garden. But, they'll never get in my garden again!" And there, in Brewster's wagon, was the Hansen’s small herd of young pigs, all dead. Jud Brewster had shot every last one of them. Without saying a word, Mr. Hansen buried the pigs.

A few weeks later, little Billy Hansen came rushing into the house. "Daddy! Quick! Get your gun! Jud Brewster's pigs are in our garden!" The Hansen children could already taste revenge. But Mr. Hansen put down his newspaper and followed his young son outside. "We won't need a gun," he told the children, "Let's just round up the pigs."

Now, any of you who have ever dealt with pigs know that dead pigs are a whole lot easier to load into a wagon than living ones! But, after a lot of trouble getting them in the wagon, they headed over to Brewster's farm. Mr. Hansen went up and knocked on the door. "Good evening, Mr. Brewster. Your pigs have been in my garden. I've brought them back."

The color drained from Jud Brewster's face. "My pigs? My pigs were in your garden?"

"That's right," said Mr. Hansen. "Where should we put them?"

Brewster's body sagged against the door and he said, "Just dump them over behind the barn."

Mr. Hansen concealed the grin that was desperately trying to leap onto his face, and answered Jud Brewster very matter-of-factly: "Well okay, but they'll just get out again back there."

When it had sunk in that Mr. Hansen had not killed the pigs, Brewster clutched his hand like a dying man. They talked for a long time, and in that conversation, Mr. Hansen finally received some insight into the tragedies and hardships Jud Brewster had weathered that had conspired to make him such a bitter man. Before night had fallen, Mr. Brewster gave him half the pigs to keep, and from that point on, he was a changed man—the best of neighbors and a lifelong friend to the Hansen family.

Later, little Billy confronted his father with a question. "Daddy, you said that if Mr. Brewster caused trouble, you'd burn him out. But you didn't! Why not?" Billy was just tapping into what he perceived from the community around him. You see, everyone in the north Canadian prairie town had always said, "Jud Brewster? Change? Ha! Get real!" Which brings us back around full circle. Mr. Hansen answered his son by quoting vs. 20 of our scripture lesson for today—the one that refers to that heap of burning coals. He explained, "I did burn him out. I showed him what real neighborliness is. That mean old Mr. Brewster has been burned out by the flames of loving devotion, and a new Mr. Brewster has moved in. And that new Mr. Brewster has a flame of loving devotion beginning to grow inside him now. It's the work of God, but oh my beloved son, aren't you glad to be alive to see it?" [story adapted from “Love Without Limits” by David Holwick, www.sermoncentral.com.]

To overcome evil, we must get real about the power of love. Amen.