

## **The Gospel Lived Out: How to forgive when you deserve to get even**

Romans 12:14-21

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On the evening of June 17<sup>th</sup>, 2015, a quiet, young man walked off the street to join a Bible study at Emanuel African Methodist Church in South Carolina. The regulars were eager to see a new face and welcomed him in.

And Dylann Roof sat there for the entire study until at the end they were in a circle holding hands in prayer. And then, out of nowhere, he pulled out a gun and exploded into a racist speech he had rehearsed where he decried how black people were taking over the country. He then fired 70 rounds killing 9 people including Myra Thompson, the wife of Rev Anthony Thompson.

A year and a half later Rev Thompson found himself attending court where the perpetrator was sentenced to death for hate crimes against humanity. And those personally touched were given the opportunity to speak to the court. Thompson said he had no intention of saying anything, he was only there because his children had wanted to attend. But as he sat there all of a sudden he felt God tell him He wanted to say something. And Anthony got up and gave that message, "I forgive you," he said. "My family forgives you. But you need to repent. You need to confess because you're in a lot of trouble right now. But, if you give your life to the One who matters most, to Jesus, He will forgive you and change you and you will be okay."<sup>1</sup>

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Good morning. If you're new with us we're at the beginning of the final section of Paul's letter to the Romans. For 11 chapters he's been outlining how grace works; How God initiated our redemption while we were yet sinners. In other words grace always starts with God and comes down to us free of charge and completely undeserved. In the vertical relationship between us and God, God is always drawing us and pursuing us and winning us with His love. But then everyone who receives God's grace gets transformed by it. We get a new heart.

And so Paul shifts in Romans 12 to begin talking about what happens to us once we've been transformed by God's grace. And Paul says God's grace works itself out in our horizontal relationships with the people around us. So while we never earn our forgiveness by how we live, the trajectory of our lives in the horizontal is evidence as to what has or has not in fact happened between us and God in the vertical.

And last week we looked at the implications of God's grace on our relationships with each other here in the church. Well, today we are looking at the implications of God's grace on those outside, or more accurately on those we are in conflict with.

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.cbc.ca/radio/asithappens/as-it-happens-thursday-edition-1.3932674/i-forgive-you-my-family-forgives-you-husband-of-victim-reacts-to-dylann-roof-death-sentence-1.3932678>

So if you've got a Bible go ahead and open it up to Romans 12. We are going to pick it up today in verse 14. Would you stand with me as we come before God's word? Hear now the word of the Lord.

[Read Romans 12:14-21]

This is the word of the Lord. You may be seated.

The key phrase in this text comes right at the end – “Do not be overcome by evil but overcome evil with good.” And this word “overcome” is a military word. It means to vanquish or suppress by force.

So this text is Paul's encouragement to a group of people who knew a lot about being treated unfairly or evilly. You see Rome was an incredibly hierarchical society where there were huge gaps between the haves and the have nots, which may not be very different from today. But what was different was that these gaps were codified by law.

So if you were a man, and if you were wealthy, then you owned the other people in your household and could do with them as you pleased. So if you were a labourer or a woman or a child then it wasn't just likely that you would be mistreated, your mistreatment wasn't even considered mistreatment by society. On top of this women couldn't testify in court, so if it was ever your word against his he always won. That was Rome in the first century.

And we know from history that in its earliest years it was predominantly lower class and marginalized peoples who were joining the church. So everyone receiving this letter knew what it meant to be taken advantage of. And Paul tells them “Do not be overcome by evil but overcome evil with good.” Vanquish it. Suppress it.

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So how do you react when someone hurts you or treats you unfairly? What's your initial response? Do you get angry and push back, or do you withdraw and retreat? Are you a fight person or a flight person?

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I've told this story before, but when I was 19 Nikki and I were on a date up on the cutbanks overlooking the Nechako. I'd parked my silver 1977 Porsche 924 in the little pull off area behind the cutbanks and we had spent an hour or so walking the trails and overlooking the city.

And while we were there we had bumped into these two guys who were snowboarding down the cutbanks. Well, eventually we were heading back to the car but just before we rounded the last corner I heard breaking glass. And so I ran around the corner and there were those same two guys – the bigger one walking up the path towards us, and the other guy running into the bush.

And so I yelled out, “Hey, what did you do to my car?” To which the guy walking up the path replied, would you like to fight about it?

Now, I'm not sure what answer I was hoping for, but that wasn't it. You see both these boys were bigger than me, and there was only one of me – and Nikki.

So while I was processing what my next line was the guy walked up and stood just above me on the path accentuating his prowess. At the same time Nikki decided that she would head down to the car to watch how her 5 foot 8, 120lb scrawny boyfriend was going to deal with this existential threat.

Fairly quickly I was realizing Goon One and I didn't have much to talk about. I offered him a couple more opportunities to repent and apologize, but his monosyllabic vocabulary seemed fixated on the fight option which I really wasn't interested in.

So eventually I walked down to my car where I found out they had broken a window, stolen a pair of cheap sunglasses and my gym bag with by Taekwondo black belt in it – oh, and they stole my pride.

You see in spite of having a black belt, the reason I walked away from that fight wasn't because fighting is wrong, it was because I was a frightened wimp, and this had just been exposed in front of the pretty girl I was interested in.

So when you've been wronged how do you respond? It's usually fight or flight. But Paul says both these options allow evil to win. However there's another option available to Jesus followers by which we can actually vanquish and suppress the evil that confronts us. And this passaged unpacks that option along with the power to implement it. That's where we're going.

So first, look how Paul addresses our fight tendency. He says:

Never pay back evil with more evil.... Dear friends, never take revenge. Leave that to the righteous anger of God. For the Scriptures say, "I will take revenge; I will pay them back," says the LORD. (Romans 12:17,19)

Now this is hard, but Paul says, when you are wronged never, never take justice into your own hands even though this is exactly what we want to do.

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So in my house there are four little sinners and two big sinners, and Jesus uses the little sinners to teach the big sinners about themselves – it's just classic. So one little sinner will come into the room and poke the other. And it's just a small poke. But it's injustice.

And the desire for justice will immediately spring up in the second little sinner so he pokes the first one back. But of course justice demands that he not just poke the same, he also has to poke for the emotional damage he received from that unprovoked first poke. So there's just a little extra in his response.

And all this would end here except sinner one doesn't see things the same way. Now they've been wronged and justice demands they respond as hard as they can.

So if sinner one happens to be particularly linguistically gifted they will give a scathing rebuke that dehumanizes the offender. But if they are more gifted with brawn, they will opt for a quick kick to the shin. Or if they are gifted with deception they choose the theft of a valuable possession. Or if they are the smallest sinner they will wail loudly to bring down the wrath of mom.

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But in all this God says to me, “Dan, you’re the biggest sinner in this house and this is what you’re like; you want justice when you get hurt, but when you pursue it evil wins.” And that’s because the first thing that gets damaged when we get hurt is our ability to determine what justice actually is. And so Paul says never seek revenge.

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Now one caveat here. Does this mean that when we are wronged, we don’t pursue justice at all? Like should we not call the police or press charges if we are wronged?

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I need to say at this point that Christians have answered this question differently, so this is tricky, but I don’t think Paul means we are never supposed to seek justice from the law. And that’s because in Romans 13, which is the very next text, Paul talks about how God uses governments to implement His justice. So Paul says:

All authority comes from God, and those in positions of authority have been placed there by God.... [so] if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. (Romans 13:1,4)

Now we are going to unpack this more next week, but as far as today’s text goes, I take this to mean that the governing authority – as broken as it might be – exists as one of God’s tools to carry out His justice in the world. So I don’t think it is wrong to turn to the justice system in hopes of dealing with perpetrators of injustice.

But let’s leave that there for now because at this point you might think, “well, if we aren’t supposed to get revenge, maybe it’s more godly to just run away when people hurt you. Don’t stand up for yourself. Just be passive. But that’s not what Paul says here either.

So notice how every verb in this paragraph is active. It’s all “Bless those who persecute you. Don’t curse. Live in harmony. Don’t be conceited. Do not repay evil with evil.” Paul says, be active in the face of evil. And as such there’s a parallel here to one of the often-misunderstood statements of Jesus. So Jesus says:

You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ But I tell you... if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. (Matthew 5:38-39)

Now this might sound passive but it’s not. This is a Jewish metaphor that we have to work to get our heads around. So first, you need to know the damage here is a damage of offence rather than physical violence, and it’s probably one received unintentionally from someone you are in relationship with.

And here's why: nobody tries to hurt someone by slapping their cheek. Like there is no move in Taekwondo where you go for the cheek – that's not a move. So what's happened here is you've been offended by someone. Now if your tendency is to fight then you would slap back and offend them – but Jesus says don't do that. On the other hand, if your tendency is to flight then you would turn the same cheek back allowing them to wrong you again – but Jesus says don't do that either.

Instead turn the other cheek. This is to say to the offender, “the way you've treated me is wrong, and if we are going to maintain relationship you can't do that anymore, but I'm still going to choose to trust you. I'm going to open myself up to you even if it means I get hurt again. To turn the other cheek is to choose to trust someone again even after they have hurt you.

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Now, one more caveat. Neither Jesus nor Paul are saying “stay in an abusive relationship” – the Bible does not say that. So if you're in an abusive relationship – and here I'm thinking a criminally abusive relationship because we're all in abusive relationships. But if you're in a criminally abusive relationship then you need to get out. How do I know? Well in verse 18 Paul says:

If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. (Romans 12:18)

And this means sometimes it's not possible. And in those situations, you need to get out. The other side to this is what we talked about last week – it's not loving to stay in an abusive relationship. To love someone means to do what is best for them, and it's not loving to let someone hurt themselves by hurting you. So if that's you, don't be passive, you need to get out.

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So don't fight back, don't get revenge. But also don't flight, don't be passive allowing yourself to be taken advantage of. Instead, Paul says, vanquish evil with good.

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Well, easy to say, how do we do this? How do we actively overcome evil with good? Well, look where Paul concludes. He quotes Proverbs 25 which says:

If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat;  
if he is thirsty, give him water to drink.

In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head (Proverbs 25:21-22)

Now at first this sounds like exactly what we want to do when someone hurts us – I just know my kids are going to want to try this out when we go camping. But this is another one of those pesky Jewish metaphors that we have to work to get our heads around.

So to heap coals on someone was a way of saying “do something shockingly good with the hope of winning your enemy's affection.”

You see burning coals were valuable in ancient Israel, and so to give them to someone instead of hurting them back was shockingly kind. And the intention here is to bring them to their senses and to repentance – that's what we want. It would be kind of like putting smelling salts under someone's nose to wake them up to their own evil.

But there's fire here too. And so the other side of this metaphor is that if this doesn't work, then your kindness actually makes them more guilty before God who is going to deal with them in the end. Vengeance is Mine, I will repay.

But it's the intention here that's really important. You're hoping your offender is going to wake up to their evil and repent. And this is the heart of the gospel Paul's getting at.

So you've probably heard people say, "don't bring a knife to a gun fight." But Paul says, don't bring evil to an evil fight, if you want to win, bring the gospel. If you bring evil to an evil fight evil always wins regardless of whether you fight or flight. But Jesus follower, if you're going to fight, bring the weapon God uses and win. Vanquish evil with good.

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The book of Genesis ends with a story about this; it's the story of Joseph. So Joseph is the guy who got betrayed by his brothers and sold into slavery as a teenager. Now sure he might not have been wise or humble when he decided to share the visions God gave him of his family bowing down to him, but being sold as a slave is certainly the over reaction of some stupidly jealous brothers. It's a terrible injustice.

But you know how the story goes. In spite of the disadvantages he receives, Joseph's story is about an incredible reversal that turns him into the second most powerful man in Egypt. And it's at the height of his strength when his brothers show up begging for food and totally at his mercy.

And we say, "ha! This is the perfect moment for vengeance." But Joseph won't go there. Instead he pours hot coals on their heads. He puts the money they brought to pay for food back in their sacks. And the result is exactly what he hopes. When they opened their sacks they looked at each other and said:

"Surely we are being punished because of our brother. We saw how distressed he was when he pleaded with us for his life, but we would not listen; that's why this distress has come on us... My silver has been returned... Here it is in my sack."

Their hearts sank and they turned to each other trembling and said, "What is this that God has done to us?" (Genesis 42:21;28)

This is the moment they begin waking up to their sin. And then the story climaxes with the brothers confessing their sin and begging Joseph for mercy, but he replies:

As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. (Genesis 50:20 ESV)

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Don't miss this. Joseph says I know you really tried to hurt me, and God's going to work that out with you, but as for me, I realize that God has been overseeing and orchestrating everything such that even your evil intentions have resulted in my good and the good of God's kingdom.

That's the power of the gospel brought to an evil fight. And that's what Paul admonishes us to do in the face of injustice. Never seek revenge and get even. Never be passive and let just evil win. Instead overcome evil with the gospel by trusting God.

You see, like Paul said in Romans 8, God is working all things out for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purposes – all things! He is sovereign so you know evil is never going to win. And trusting that is what empowers us to be shockingly loving in the face of offence. You don't have to win against evil, God's going to do it.

But the amazing thing that happens when we embrace the gospel like this is that we actually partner with God in redeeming the world and inadvertently win against evil without even trying.

You see when we turn justice over to God by actively choosing to be kind in the face of evil, our enemies have the opportunity to meet Jesus the same way we met Him. You see Jesus didn't change you by giving you what you deserve. He changed you by taking what you deserve and giving you what He deserved. He was praying for us and our forgiveness and clothing us in His righteousness while we were crucifying Him.

And when we image Jesus to the people who hurt us they get the chance to meet that Jesus too – the evil in them gets the chance to be redeemed. But it's not just them who win, it's us.

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Four years after the murder of his wife, Anthony Thompson told a reporter "People still ask me, why did you choose to forgive that man who murdered Myra?"

And my answer to them is always the same. I chose to forgive the racist killer because I believe and trust God's Word when He tells me that vengeance is His to repay, not mine.

Scripture tells me that I am forgiven by Christ, and I am therefore obliged to forgive others who hurt me... [Now] my forgiveness did nothing for Dylann Roof. He claimed he was not sorry for the deaths he caused, and did not regret what he had done. He held onto his anger and hatred... [and] now lives inside a closet-sized cell... awaiting his execution.

But my forgiveness for the unrepentant young racist changed me. As I refused to harbour anger, hatred, and un-forgiveness I refused to allow it to rob me of my... well-being. Had I chosen not to forgive Dylann, I would be living inside my own dark, self-made cell. But I'm free.

[And it's not just me.] As the years pass, the benefits of forgiveness continue to amaze me." I could cite so many examples where this forgiveness has born fruit in my children and our city, and our nation.<sup>2</sup> Evil lost that day, when God let me speak His word.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.foxnews.com/opinion/thompson-george-forgiveness-change>

Works consulted:

JD Greear <https://summitchurch.com/message/loving-your-enemies>

Tim Keller <https://gospelinlife.com/sermon/love-and-forgiveness/>

D. Moo "The Letter to the Romans"