

Natalie W. Bell
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Overcoming Evil With Good
Romans 12: 9-21

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 suffering, persevere in prayer.*
13 *Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend 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 haughty, 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 *No, "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.*

Have you found yourself **angry at what is happening** in the world, and in our country?

I know I have.

It seems like it's **pretty easy to get angry** these days—with all that's happening around us.

I find myself getting angry with **lies and corruption, and all the hatred**, and prejudice, and bigotry.

I could really be angry **all the time** if I watched too much TV, you know?

And that kind of anger **seems to make sense**, doesn't it?

I mean Paul says to **hate what is evil**, and we certainly see plenty of evil: *oppression, injustice, deception, manipulation, violence.*

And no one wants to sit back and do nothing about it, right?

Especially if we want peace, and freedom, and justice!

And isn't there a place for *righteous anger*?

The *prophets* of the Old Testament conveyed God's anger with the people, like when they took advantage of the weak, or failed to follow God's commands.

We can read how *God has gotten angry* when we hurt one another or turn away from those in need.

But what happens *with God's anger*?

And what happens with *ours*?

What do we *do with our anger*?

What does it *mean to 'hate evil'*?

What if it's much more *complicated* than just being angry?

After all, Paul follows his words with *love and mercy* towards our enemies!

How do we do that?

What's the *difference* between hating *evil*, and hating the *people* who perpetrate evil—our enemies?

I was reading Pastor Alan Brehm's blog this week.

He mentions a book called *Without Buddha I Could Not Be a Christian*, by Paul F. Knitter. Professor Knitter and his wife were very active in the efforts to *end the violence in Central America*, and to promote justice and peace in several countries.

Once he took a retreat with a *Zen teacher* in preparation for a trip to El Salvador in 1987. He told the teacher he wanted to do his part to stop the death squads, but he also felt the need for meditation.

And the Zen master responded, "they are both absolutely necessary.

You have to *sit* (in meditation).

You have to *stop the death squads*.

But you won't be able to stop the death squads until you realize *your oneness with them*."

At first he didn't understand.

But then over the years he noticed *the anger of the activists*, their *hatred* of death squads, and their *contempt* for corrupt government.

And he realized that all of those *attitudes* were in themselves forms of *violence*.

They were seeking to end the violence in Central America,

but they were going about it **with violence in their own hearts!**

Paul F. Knitter, *Without Buddha I Could Not Be a Christian*, 173, as shared in "Embracing Evil," Alan Brehm, *The Waking Dreamer*, 2014.

I think there's a big difference in **hating evil**—
the oppression and injustice and bigotry we see—
and hating **those who do** evil.

I mean, doesn't having violent thoughts toward our enemies,
make us more **likely to perpetuate evil ourselves**, than to stop it?
Doesn't protesting violence with violence
actually **hinder any progress** for peace or understanding?

I think Paul and Jesus would say **yes**.
I think they would say,
we are to hate the evil, but not the evildoers.

Paul sounds just like Jesus here in Romans 12:

Bless those who persecute you; *bless and do not curse them.*

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 No, "if your enemies are hungry, **feed them**; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink;

In Matthew 5:43-46, Jesus said:

"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'

44 But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,

45 that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.

46 If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that?

In Luke 6:27-36 Jesus similarly says,

Love your enemies, **do good** to those who hate you,

28 bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you.

29 If someone slaps you on one cheek, turn to them the other also.

If someone takes your coat, do not withhold your shirt from them.

30 Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back.

31 Do to others as you would have them do to you.

*...35 But love your enemies, do **good** to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High, because **he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked.***

36 Be merciful, just as your *Father is merciful.*

After all, **how can we hate** evildoers, if all of us are **children of God?**

If ALL of us are capable of **evil**, and capable of **goodness?**

And how can we **who have received God's grace** through Christ, act out of hatred in our own hearts?

We can and should stand up against what is wrong,

but not through **anger or violence...**

instead we are to fight evil with **love, mercy, and grace.**

With **blessings, and hospitality!**

Wow.

Talk about **counterintuitive, and countercultural!**

Today we heard in Matthew 16 how Jesus says we should respond to the world: **take up our cross, and follow Jesus.**

In other words, we have to **let go of our own ego** and agenda, and **follow** Christ—

Who said, we should **love our enemies.**

These are **not easy** words to **hear**, or to live by.

It's not easy to respond to hatred or violence, with love and grace.

Our **natural instinct is fight** or flight, not love and mercy, right?

Sometimes we want an **eye for an eye,**

even though that only leads to everyone becoming blind!

It's not easy for us, and it wasn't for the Roman congregation back then.

The context of our passage in Romans,

was the early Christian church **under the control of the Roman** government.

And what Paul was trying to encourage them to do,

was to be an **alternative community—**

a **different** kind of community within Rome--

People who ***loved their enemies and did good*** to those who persecuted them.
Wow.

Not an easy calling, was it?

But aren't ***we*** also supposed to be an ***alternative community***
in our world today?

Especially when our ***culture is so divided, and hateful***,
so quick to ***judge and condemn?***

Isn't it rather ***countercultural*** to react to your enemies with ***love and grace***,
instead of power and violence?

As we have learned last week, Paul says early in Romans 12 that we should
present ourselves to God as a ***living sacrifice***, sharing our gifts...
and now he tells us how to treat enemies, strangers, and those who are
different.

Paul also says we should let our ***love be genuine***.
This Greek word is the ***opposite*** of the word ***hypocrite***—
so to be genuinely loving means ***we can't fake it!***

We have to ***learn to love***,
even those on the other side of the political ***aisle***,
even those with different ***ideologies***,
different ***perspectives, and prejudices***,
even those who take those differences and ***act out*** of hatred!

Paul says ***when we suffer*** (which we will),
we should be ***patient, prayerful, and even rejoice!***
He says we should bless our enemies, live in peace and harmony,
and ***never repay*** evil with evil, or try to ***avenge*** ourselves—
because that's God's job!

He says we should have such ***hospitality*** that if our enemies are in need,
we should give them something to drink and eat!
Finally, he says we should not be overcome by evil,
but we should overcome evil with good.

I was reading this week about a ***real life example*** of creative love in the face
of hatred.

The small town of **Wunseidel, Germany** has been a neo-Nazi destination since it was once home to the grave of Adolf Hitler's deputy, Rudolf Hess. In response to a neo-Nazi march to be held in their town in 2014, a group of organizers gathered **pledges of financial support** to an organization **against Nazism** for **every meter** the neo-Nazis walked!

Instead of greeting the group with protests, They put up **banners** welcoming them to Nazis against Nazis walkathon! Signs throughout the route **encouraged them to keep walking** to raise more money, and organizers put out a table of **bananas** for them, so they could keep walking — and keep raising money!

They even **painted numbers in the ground**, so the neo-Nazi marchers would see how much money they'd collected at every milestone.

At the end, they passed out **certificates** showing how much they'd raised to fight Nazism! It was 10,000 euros, or close to \$12,000, going to EXIT Deutschland, a group that helps neo-Nazis to defect from the movement. See: <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/neo-nazi-walkathon>

Amy Allen wrote about this, saying: *It was a lovely spin on Paul's command, "if [your enemies] are thirsty, give them something to eat and drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads" (Rom 12:20).* ["The Politics of Overcoming Evil,"](#) Amy Allen, Political Theology Today, 2017.

What if when we are faced with evil and hatred,
We find a way to step out in **grace** instead of hate?
What if there is always the opportunity for a **loving response**?
I **don't** know that we can do this on **our own**,
I know I can't.

But I believe in the **power of Christ** to help us choose what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 12:31 is '**a more excellent way**'.
That's our calling—to choose the better way, the way that is **good and noble**.
Isn't that how we **hold fast to what is good**?
Isn't that how we **outdo one another in affection and honor**?

And how do we choose this more excellent way in our daily lives?
 How do we model Christ's transformative grace?
 What if we were to remember that ***all people are children of God?***
 That all are capable of ***evil***, and all are capable of ***good?***

What if we took Paul's words here in Romans 12 (alongside Jesus' words), and
 used them as ***a guide to dealing with everyone?***
Kind of like loving your neighbor, as yourself?

What if we asked ourselves,
 could these words be on the ***walls of our church***,
 for all to see what we live by?
 What about in ***our homes?***
 Are we willing to see these words as a ***covenant*** for our daily lives?

It's a great question to consider when the whole country seems so divided by
 political party and ideology.

How are we to treat one another, when we don't see eye to eye?

And do we realize that how we treat one another
is a witness to the world about our Christian faith?

What do we want them to see?
Genuine love, or fighting?
 Mercy and grace, or hatred?

I was struck this week by all the suffering in southeast Texas,
 after ***Hurricane Harvey***, it's just ***heartbreaking*** isn't it?
 It's ***overwhelming*** to think of how many people have lost everything,
 some have lost their lives,
 as the floodwaters took away homes, businesses, even whole towns.

And we have seen such amazing and life-giving stories of ***heroism***, and
sacrifice, of ***loving neighbor***, and helping fellow Americans.

And as I was working on this passage and watching the news last week—
 I thought about how such ***disasters bring people together***.
 We've sure seen that, haven't we?
 We've seen the best of humanity in the worst of conditions!
 And I was struck by this realization:

You know, *no one in those rescue boats* was *asking* stranded people waiting on their roofs and cars—

Hey, are you *Republican or Democrat*?

Who did you *vote for*?

Where do you stand on the *issues*?

Of course not!

They *didn't have a litmus test* for rescue—

every person was just *a human being*,

in need of help,

and the *rescuers helped everyone in need*.

Isn't that *how we are supposed to love our neighbor*,

every single person we encounter?

Whether we are facing a disaster, or not?

Aren't we supposed to *show the love and mercy of God—to everyone*?

It's *not easy*, but it's who *we are called* to be,
with the help of Jesus.

And it's who the *body of Christ* is called to be,
together in this world.

Friends, hear the *Good news of the Gospel* today:

In the face of *evil*, we are called to *goodness and love*.

In the face of our *enemies*, we are called to *mercy and grace*,
to *hospitality and welcome*.

This is the *way of Jesus Christ*,

and this is *OUR way*.

And to that, all God's people said, Amen.