

## NOTHING SO EVIL IT CANNOT BE OVERCOME

Viktor Frankl, a well-known psychiatrist, wrote of his incarceration in a Jewish concentration camp, where he was confined to a small room. Through cracks in the boards, he could see the stairway immediately behind his wall. Hearing a thumping sound, he peered through the cracks and saw a German soldier dragging the dead body of his fellow prisoner down the stairs. So great was his own suffering that Frankl confessed feeling nothing at all; in his own suffering, he had become isolated and emotionally uninvolved in the sufferings of his fellow men.

Christians can do the same. We can become so caught up in our sufferings that we become isolated from our fellow human beings. If we would demonstrate the grace of God toward others, we must not sink in the mire of our own suffering and pain. We must identify with others and share their sorrows and joys. This empathy is vitally important for the unity of the body of Christ. It is also essential for ministry to unbelievers.<sup>1</sup>

Paul's purpose in chapter 12 of Romans seems to be a lesson in morality and the classic behaviors of a Christian, modeled after the life of Christ. We can look at this from the perspective of doing everything based on love and everything will turn out okay, but I think that's too over simplified considering the example of human suffering we just heard. We can't ignore the places where Paul repeats himself, not just for emphasis, but for us to stop and take note.

Life is not only made up of good days and bad days; sometimes for some people it's made up of bad days and worse days, which is surely the point of asking us to weep with those who weep. But it's the repeated use of the word evil that caught my attention this time through, because I've preached on this text more than once with an emphasis on love. I think it's time we put the emphasis on evil, to see what we might be missing in our attitudes and responses.

I know that occasionally it seems we clergy get a little overexcited about explaining what biblical words mean in Greek or Hebrew, but I'm not a scholar in that way. I just need to research so that I'm not presenting something incorrectly, and in this case I considered the Greek word for evil mainly because Paul did use it three times in this passage. What I learned was there are two different words for evil at play here.

Verse 9 tells us to hate evil and hold fast to what is good. In this case Paul used a word that means bad wicked, pain and trouble. This is evil as an active force in the world, one which takes pleasure in injuring others and is both dangerous and destructive. Does it

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<sup>1</sup><https://bible.org/seriespage/32-loving-your-enemies-overcoming-evil-good-romans-1214-21>

seem strange to speak of evil as something that enjoys its toxic effects? If God is good and He can take pleasure in the good that He provides in the world, why not the counterpart of good?

I know I hate evil, how about you? The one thing I hate most about evil is how powerless and helpless it makes me feel. That's a false belief, of course, for we are anything but powerless or helpless when we have the Lord on our side. But that's human nature for you. We want to be in control, able to fight the good fight and right the wrongs.

It's possible that what seems evil to me may seem slightly less evil to you, which makes me wonder if evil is relative to each person? Is it a personal definition or is it whatever we think it is? Surely evil is a universal concept. If you notice the word spelled backwards is live, so maybe evil is whatever does not nurture or sustain life.

The flip side of evil in this regard is good, those things we are told to cling to. It so happens that the word for cling shares something in common with the word collagen, that natural part of our bodies that makes up connective tissues. In essence we are instructed to glue ourselves to what is good, to make that our place of residence, the thing that holds everything in our lives together.

One source I read this week said that it is easier to hate evil **or** to cling to good, rather than doing both simultaneously. The godly person is the one who knows how to practice both, practice being the operative word. Nothing in this life comes so easily that a bit of practice would not improve us. Speaking of practice, it may interest you to know, or at least I hope it will, that Paul's second use of evil is a word that means a bad nature or not such as it ought to be.

This is a lack of something in a person that makes them what they could be. How often have you thought, "there is something wrong with that person"? Truly, in all honesty, there may be a different side to evil we've never explored, because neither of these words for evil are nouns; they're both adjectives, words used to describe a noun. So it would seem that there is no word for evil as something that stands alone.

This may be telling us that those who act in evil ways may do so because they lack something, not because they themselves are evil. When the brains of criminals are scanned there is some defect in their impulse control. If so that would put an end to the argument over whether humans are generally good or generally evil. If we are generally good but in order to do evil something must be missing from our hearts or our psyches we need to dig deeper to find out what that is.

From a clinical point of view, it may be the trauma we have experienced has hardwired us to retaliate against the world as a whole. That's a very real scenario and explanation for the use of evil in the world. From a Christian perspective if we are able to turn to evil actions what is missing is likely the love of God within us. God cannot be unholy or evil and as His people we must be the same.

Paul's advice was not to repay evil. Just walk away. Don't rise to the occasion. You can go ahead and hate evil as much as you want, but you can't stoop to its level. To repay evil for evil is to add one evil to another. If we hate evil, how can we add to it? Instead, we are to do what is right in the sight of everyone, including our enemies.

Saying you shouldn't take revenge isn't a way of saying evil isn't real, or that it didn't hurt after all, or that it doesn't matter. Evil is real; it often does hurt, sometimes very badly indeed and with lasting effects, and it does matter. The question is, what are we going to do about it?

The Buddhist greeting, "Namaste," is a way of acknowledging that everyone we meet has all the same goodness that is in us. And when we acknowledge that, it enables us to relate to others with genuine compassion. This also has implications for our attitude toward evil. If we can recognize that others have all the goodness we have, we also should recognize that we have the same capacity for evil as those whose actions we hate.

In the 1980's a man named Paul Knitter and his wife were very active in efforts to end the violence in Central America and to promote justice and peace in several countries. He tells the story about how 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."

He relates how at first he didn't understand this, but it sank in over the following years as he carried out his convictions in working for peace and justice, and he saw the smugness of the activists, their anger over the wrongs, their hatred of the death squads, and their contempt toward governments and others how seemed to respond ineffectually. And he realized that all 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!<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup><http://thewakingdreamer.blogspot.com/2011/09/embracing-evil-rom.html>

When we oppose those who do evil in our world with anger, we are more likely to perpetuate the evil they do. Jesus told us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. John Wesley's first two rules for the people called Methodist were Do no harm and do good. The apostle James wrote that blessing and curses cannot come from the same mouth because they are mutually exclusive. We cannot ask a blessing for someone and at the same time seek his harm.

The solution is found in verse 21 of this passage, freeing us of all obligation to solve the world's problems, as we often joke about at coffee with friends. We are called not to be overcome by evil, but to turn evil on its head by showing it something good, namely the amazing and matchless love of God. As Booker T. Washington said, 'I will not allow any man to make me lower myself by hating him.' The only real way to destroy an enemy is to make that person your friend.

Do not become the person you condemn. Always repay with kindness. The phrase "kill them with kindness" is not just an empty one. We're not trying to kill the person but the evil state of mind that lies within them. Your good example may be just the thing to change that state of mind. Sin is only overcome by good. When the sins of others prompt us to do good to our enemies in return, sin is defeated and righteousness prevails.

When I was in seminary and probably even in college they taught us about logic using a formula like: If A is true, then B is true. B is true; therefore, A is true. In a similar style one author put forth this argument: God is all powerful. God is all good. Terrible things happen. You can reconcile any two of these propositions with each other, but you can't reconcile all three. The problem of evil is perhaps the greatest single problem for religious faith.

Christianity ultimately offers no theoretical solution at all. It merely points to the cross and says that, practically speaking, there is no evil so dark and so obscene, but that God can turn it to good. And that is exactly where Paul leaves this argument, in the capable hands of God. After all, evil has already been defeated, and that cannot be undone. That is absolutely the way Jesus left it at the cross.<sup>3</sup>

But the world is not over yet, therefore, we still must live with what is at hand. Ignoring evil is also not an option, not when we have good at our disposal. In the words of another pastor, "I'm not sure there's a calling in human experience that's more challenging than embracing those we consider evil with compassion. I'm not sure it's possible to do that without 'denying self,' setting aside all the selfish ego needs we have.

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<sup>3</sup>Buechner, Frederick, *Wishful Thinking – A Theological ABC*, pg. 24

Only when we can embrace those who do evil in our world with genuine love can we hope to respond to what they do in a way that will bring real change; responding to violence with forgiveness, responding to hatred with compassion, responding to hostility with peace. When we do, we have the chance to change not only what they do but more importantly who they are. As we embrace those who do evil, we have the chance to make a change that can create peace and justice and freedom.”<sup>4</sup>

The answer to evil is not simply to hate it and hope it goes away. The answer is to throw all the love you can at it, force it to see that good is a force in the world as well, and the combined efforts for good will one day be rewarded by a savior who fought evil not with retaliation or force but with sacrifice and death. Who would have thought?

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<sup>4</sup><http://thewakingdreamer.blogspot.com/2011/09/embracing-evil-rom.html>