OVERCOMING EVIL WITH GOOD

Romans 12:9-21
Key Verse: 12:21

“Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”

Last week, we studied Romans 12:3-8 with the title, “One Body in Christ.” The remnant church through which God does his world salvation work is one body in Christ, though it has many members. In order that many believers form one body in Christ, each believer must make a personal decision of faith to see him or herself with sober judgment. Jesus described this process as “coming into the light.” John 3:20-21 says, “Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God.” Worldly people fear sobriety as much as they fear judgment. But sober does not mean “depressing.” Rather, sober judgment means, “I cannot do anything, but God can do everything through me, when I just believe.” Praise God who is helping each of us through sober judgment to offer our gifts in service to the body of Christ here at WIU. In today’s passage, Paul exhorts the believers in Rome to love one another, and to love the world. Real love is love that overcomes evil. May God help us to pay careful attention to God’s word in this passage until we come to know and to practice real love.

I. Real love

First, real love is God’s love. Look at verse 9. “Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good.” Of course, for the body of Christ to even exist, there must be love. Without love, there is no human happiness. Without love, there is no joy. Without love, there is no meaning. This is the reason there are countless songs, books, poems and movies about love. Even godless people acknowledge that love has the power to bring selfish human beings together and make them one. But as ubiquitous as the songs and odes to love are, there is utter confusion about what real love is, and how to practice it.
According to the Greek thinkers, there are three kinds of love: Eros, or romantic love, Phileo, or brotherly love, and Agape, or divine love. It makes sense. One popular writer from the 1970’s said, “Love means never having to say you're sorry.” He seems to have in mind “unconditional love.” On the other hand, modern scientists are convinced that love is a “natural high” produced by the body’s own drugs. As a result, there is a new diagnosis that someone might be “addicted to love.” One can find in the Bible examples of all these kinds of love, even “love addiction.” But the Bible does not present a confusing picture about what real love is. In the Bible, real love begins and ends with God. Paul says, “Love must be sincere.” In short, Paul is urging the believers in Rome to practice God’s love for one another.

Look again at verse 9. “Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good.” The superficial understanding of God's love is that God's love is “unconditional.” No matter what we have done, God still loves us as our Father and Creator. This superficial understanding may make God's love seem comforting, but it certainly doesn't seem very real. With this understanding, how can anyone answer the question, “Why then does God, who is love, judge the world”? Paul is not advocating a superficial understanding of God’s love. Therefore, Paul follows up his admonition to love by saying, “Hate what is evil; cling to what is good.” Sincere love is not love that overlooks evil. Sincere love rejects evil, absolutely. On the other hand, sincere love spares no effort in promoting what is good.

God created this world to be good. But when the man and woman rejected God’s command and ate from the tree the fruit which he commanded them not to eat, evil came into the world. It was the most tragic moment in history when God came into the beautiful garden which he had made for man, and had to ask, “Where are you?” because they were hiding from God in shame and fear. They had rejected God’s best love. Indeed, the man and woman could no longer love one another but began to blame each other for what had happened. But God did not stop loving his creation, man, in spite of man’s evil actions. God began to make a way for sinful man to be restored in God's love through sending a Savior who would “crush the head of Satan.” Man began to commit more and more evil actions, until the
whole world was filled with his violence and corruption. God’s heart was filled with pain to see what man had become. So God said, “I will wipe mankind, whom I have created, from the face of the earth – for I am grieved that I have made them.” God, who is the Creator of heaven and earth, had every right to destroy that which he had made. Mankind, by rejecting God’s love and contending with his Spirit, condemned themselves.

However, Genesis 6:8 reads, “But Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord.” In a generation in which everyone was doing evil and following their evil desires, one man Noah did not follow the worldly consensus, but held on to God’s word and God’s truth in his heart. He lived a blameless life among men, and he walked with God. As much as God hated what man had become, and the evil he was doing, God loved Noah, and exalted him for his righteous life in God. He made a solemn promise to Noah. “Build an ark, make room for every kind of animal on earth, and I will save you and your family.” As God promised, so he did. A terrible flood wiped everyone off the face of the earth, but Noah and his family were spared when the ark he had built floated to safety on the top of Mt. Ararat. More than one year later, Noah got off the ark, built an altar and made sacrifices to God. God smelled the aroma and was pleased by Noah’s faith. He made another solemn promise to Noah. “Never again will I curse the ground because of man, even though every inclination of his heart is evil from childhood” (Ge 8:21a). Because of God’s hope for one man, Noah, God found hope for all men. But God’s hope did not come without a cost. In order to condemn evil in men, while sparing mankind, God had to judge man’s sin in the body of his own Son, Jesus Christ. In this way, God demonstrated true love to all mankind. He hated evil in man, and would not allow evil to remain in man. But he found something good in man through the one man Noah’s faithfulness. In order to preserve that one good thing, God was willing to sacrifice his own Son, Jesus, on the cross as the ransom payment for all our sins. God hates the evil in us, but God will do anything to preserve that which is good in us. In short, God loves us, sincerely.

Look one more time at verse 9. “Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good.” As God’s children, we must love
sincerely. Then we cannot tolerate what is evil, neither in ourselves, nor in the other members of our fellowship. But we must build one another up in doing what is good, at very great expense to ourselves. How on earth can we practice this kind of sincere love? Aren't we too sinful to love others like this? Or perhaps we should leave this kind of “intrusive love” to the religious or scientific professionals? This is a controversial question only for those who do not honor God's word as God's word. God's word is crystal clear that we must practice sincere love among the fellowship of believers.

On the night of Jesus' arrest, Jesus was with his disciples to enjoy the Passover meal. But while the disciples were looking forward to munching on lamb, mint jelly, rolls and drinking a little wine, Jesus was preparing himself for Judas' betrayal, his arrest, trial and crucifixion. Jesus looked around at his disciples. They were full of human weaknesses. They had no idea to give their lives as witnesses of Jesus' death and resurrection for the sake of world salvation. So Jesus, instead of meditating on his upcoming suffering, decided to show his disciples his love to the end. Jesus got up, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. Then he filled a large bowl with water and began to wash his disciples' feet one by one, and then drying them with the towel. He came to Peter. Peter was humiliated to have Jesus wash his feet. But Jesus told him, "Unless I wash you, you have no part with me." Then Jesus explained: “Now that I, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you” (Jn 13:14-15). This is not a story about dirty feet. This is a story about real love. John 13:34 says, “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.” Paul urges all believers to participate in this foot-washing as our expression of sincere love for one another. Verse 10 reads, “Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves.” Just as our feet get dirty from daily use, so our hearts are stained with evil from daily contact with the world. Christian fellowship is God's way for us to help one another be cleansed of evil, and to grow in our capacity to do good. But this cannot happen unless we honor one another above ourselves.
Of course, “honor one another” means that we must be ready to learn from all the other members of our fellowship. We must be ready to learn from one another through each other’s struggles to live by faith and to practice God’s word. In this way, we must be continually rebuked by the struggle in faith of others. This is the point of sharing our Bible testimonies with one another. I thank God who rebukes me continually through one woman’s thorough and grounded understanding of the Bible. I thank God who rebukes me through one man’s zealous heart for American College students. I am rebuked most of all by my wife’s broken-hearted prayer and sacrificial service to everyone who comes through our door, day and night. In the world, worldly fellowship is bitter because of many insults that friends trade with one another in the name of fun. But Christian fellowship is joyful because of the many things that we can learn each day when we honor one another above ourselves. “Honor one another” also means that we must not speak down to others. Washing and being washed is a delicate business. So we must treat others with utmost respect, so that they receive the washing and not try to wash you back in retaliation, but in love. May God bless each of you to love one another sincerely, hating what is evil, clinging to what is good. May God bless us to speak the truth to one another in love.

Second, real love is zealous love (11-13). Look at verse 11. “Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord.” Zeal is an all-consuming passion, a consistent intensity in pursuing a goal. Zeal is identified with fanatics who will do anything to accomplish their goals. In spite of the current negative attitude towards zeal, Paul exhorts us to have zeal in our Christian lives. Why? It is because zeal challenges our easy-going desires, which come from the devil. Zeal is the opposite of indifference. Zeal is our faith put into action. When we are zealous for God, we can love others sincerely.

Jesus demonstrated godly zeal through his action of cleansing the temple of the moneychangers and animal sellers. He drove them out with a whip, and then shouted at them, “Get these out of here. How dare you turn my Father’s house into a market?” Jesus, who was so gentle in helping the sick and demon-possessed, was zealous in defending his Father’s house from those who would use it for their own
profit. But in fact, both actions revealed his zeal for God. He did not love God’s sheep from a distance, or with sentiment only. He loved them in action, touching their most wounded and fragile bodies and healing them with a word of love. Nor did he love God with words and tongue only, but in action and in truth. He demonstrated his love through what he did. Here we can begin to understand that a zealous life is not the life of a fanatic. A zealous life is a life of wholehearted obedience to God. Zeal is not the enemy of love; indifferent tolerance is. In building up the body of Christ, we must never abandon our zeal for the sake of “getting along.” We must grow in zeal until we can truly love one another, in actions and in truth.

A zealous life in Christ must begin with a zealous attitude in seeking God. Indifference towards God's word and God's command breeds indifference to one another, leading to a self-seeking life that God condemns. Instead, we must zealously study the Scriptures. We must not be satisfied with a hazy understanding of God’s world salvation plan or God’s hope for me. We must imitate the psalmist who says, “Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers. But his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night” (Ps. 1:1-2). Look at verse 12. “Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer.” In short, our heart must always be turned upward to God, as the flower follows the sun for the sake of diligent growing and bearing fruit. A zealous life is one that is filled with God’s abundant blessing, and leads to generous sharing with others. Look at verse 13. “Share with God’s people who are in need. Practice hospitality.” A zealous life changes lazy, couch-potato like people into generous shepherds, and a source of blessing for their nation and for the world. A zealous life is the prerequisite for participating in the work and blessings of the body of Christ.

Third, real love is harmony. Look at verses 14-16. “Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice, and mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.” There is a time for singing solo. But the constant of Christian life is learning how to sing in harmony. Selfish
human beings tend to be like little birds in the nest, competing with one another for the juiciest pieces of worm, or the zestiest regurgitation of their mother. It is joyful to hear them growing. But among adults, it is unbecoming to say the least. Those who know the grace of God must learn how to harmonize with others, by supporting those who are in need, and modifying their own demands for the sake of the common good. We must be mindful of who is carrying the heaviest burdens, and grow in faith until we can share those burdens. It is not for the sake of personal glory. It is for the sake of the body of Christ, and the hope of God for world salvation.

II. Overcoming evil with good (17-21)

Look at verses 17 and 18. “Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.” As we have studied in Romans, we are engaged in a spiritual battle for good against evil. We are struggling to do what is good as instruments of righteousness, and no longer do the evil our sinful nature demands. How nice it would be if the world would support us in our spiritual struggling! Instead, we find that those around us are continually egging us on to engage in the kind of dog-eat-dog fighting Satan loves. What should we do? We must do our best to do what is right before God, shrugging off the evil that others do to us. It is not always possible, and we feel ashamed that we could not imitate our Lord Jesus in his humility and love. But we not give in to our desire to retaliate or seek revenge. Our goal must be peace, as far as it depends on us.

But what can we do when others do mistreat us? Look at verses 19-20. “Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to repay. I will avenge,' says the Lord. On the contrary, 'If your enemy is hungry, feed him. If he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.'” We all have a sense of justice, in particular when it involves ourselves. When things seem unfair, we want to right the balance, right away; an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. But Paul teaches us not to do so. Instead, we should leave room for God's wrath. What does it mean? It means that we must trust
in God’s sense of justice more than our own. God is very fair, fairer than we could ever be. But, God’s fairness is not instantaneous. It is doled out according to his mercy and grace, not to satisfy our need for revenge. Is it fair that Jesus Christ should come to this world and suffer and die on the cross for our sins? Is it fair that God should have to provide a way to eternal life for those who rejected him and followed evil? We should not be too confident about our own sense of fairness. We must humble ourselves, and trust in God’s fairness, justice and grace. It will win out, sooner rather than later.

What we must understand is that in the spiritual battle against evil, we are not alone. We are God’s children, and we are members of the body of Christ. If we try to fight mano-a-mano with the devil, we will be defeated, humiliated and eviscerated. But we don’t have to. When we love one another fervently, as Christ loved his disciples and us, we can stand together against the evil of the world, and we can overcome. The weapon of the enemy is also his greatest weakness. He seeks to defeat God’s people through a spirit of selfishness and division. But as a result, he himself cannot stand against those who are united in love. If we keep ourselves from evil, we can overcome evil with good as one body in Christ.

Let’s read verse 21. “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”