

Romans 12:14-21    “Overcome Evil with Good”  
Deuteronomy 32  
Psalm 94

November 17, 2024

“Vengeance is mine” says the LORD.

The Song of Moses in Deuteronomy 32 reminds us of God’s faithfulness in the Exodus –  
as well as the continued rebellion of Israel in the wilderness (and beyond).

Do you believe that God will make all things right?  
Some things he will make right in your lifetimes.  
Many things he will make right at some point in history –  
maybe a few hundreds years from now...  
All things he will make right at the final Judgment!

The LORD will vindicate his people, and have compassion on his servants.

Now, as long as you think that you can handle it yourself, he will let you try!

How’s that working for you, anyway?!

Many of hundreds of years after Moses, Jerusalem was sent into exile –  
because the people of Israel – and even the sons of David –  
did not seem to learn the lesson of the wilderness!  
They kept trying to make things right –  
but they kept walking in ways that were not right.

Our Psalm of response – Psalm 94 – comes from book Four of the Psalms –  
a collection of Psalms that comes from after the Exile.  
Pretty clearly, the Psalmist remembers Deuteronomy 32,  
and God’s claim that “vengeance is mine.”

And so he calls out, “O Yahweh, God of Vengeance, O God of vengeance, shine forth!”  
You have said that vengeance belongs to you –  
so please do what you have promised,  
“and repay to the proud what they deserve!”

We’ll see in Romans 12 that Paul urges us to leave vengeance to God.  
So, if you think about it, that means that Psalm 94 is a very Christian song –  
since it leaves vengeance entirely to God,  
and asks him to take care of it!

Sing Psalm 94  
Read Romans 12

Is it okay to be ordinary?

In a world where everything is extravagant – special – amazing – and extraordinary! –  
we need to remember that God calls us to faithfulness in the *ordinary*.

When you look at Romans 12, there is nothing particularly extraordinary about it!

Paul describes here what ordinary life should look like as a Christian.

I think that part of our problem is that we are not satisfied with the ordinary.

We recognize that we have failed in the ordinary –  
and so we try to make up for it by doing “special” things.

Have you ever done that?

You feel like you’ve failed in the ordinary –  
and so you plan an extravagant outing to make up for it!

And maybe everyone feels good for a moment –  
but then you go back to the ordinary –  
and nothing has changed.

Some people may have the money to keep chasing the extravagant all the time –  
and never come back to ordinary life –  
but my hunch (and my observation) is that eventually,  
the ordinary always wins.

You can’t escape from the ordinary – the everyday – the normal.

Why not?

Think about those words:

*ordinary* – from the Latin meaning “customary, regular, orderly.”

*everyday* – in other words, the things that happen *every* day!

*normal* – again from the Latin, “according to the rule, pattern – or norm.”

Why can you not escape from the ordinary – the normal – the everyday?

Because God really did make this world!

And he made *you*!

And he made you to live in this world!

And so when things are not working in the *ordinary* –

there is no escape!

That doesn’t mean that there is no hope!

There is hope – *in repentance*!

We have *all* sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

But this is why Jesus came!

Jesus came in order to be the *sin offering* – the atoning sacrifice –  
that removes our sin and brings us to God.

And this where Paul started in Romans 12.

Because Jesus is the sin offering (Romans 5 and 8),  
because he is the atoning sacrifice – the propitiation for our sins (Romans 3:25),  
therefore,

*Present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God (12:1).*

He is the sin offering.

We are (in and with him) a peace offering –  
a sacrifice that expresses the communion that now exists  
between God and man *because* of Jesus.

And this is our rational worship  
(the word translated “spiritual” in v1 is the word *logikos* –  
from which we get our word, “logical”).

This means that our ordinary life is lived in union with Christ.  
Our everyday, normal existence is *normed* by life in the Spirit.

And that means that you don’t need to “make up” for failures in the ordinary  
through doing something *extraordinary* –  
but simply through *repentance*.

And what is repentance?

I like the Shorter Catechism’s answer:

“repentance unto life is a saving grace,  
whereby a sinner, out of a true sense of his sin,  
and apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ,  
does, with grief and hatred of his sin,  
turn from it, unto God,  
with full purpose of, and endeavor after, new obedience.”

Repentance includes a clear recognition of how you have fallen short –  
as well as grasping hold of what God has done in Jesus to deliver us from sin!  
And when you clearly see your sin – and God’s grace and mercy in Jesus –  
then you hate your sin for what it is –  
and turn away from sin – and turn towards God!  
Learning to live an ordinary life the way God calls you to live!

And that ordinary life is a life of genuine love.

This is what we saw last time –  
that single sentence from verses 9-13!

- 9 Let love be without hypocrisy,  
detesting the evil,  
clinging to the good,  
10 loving each other affectionately with brotherly love,  
leading the way in honoring one another,  
11 not hesitating in eagerness,  
seething [or boiling] in the Spirit,  
serving the Lord,  
12 rejoicing in hope,  
enduring in tribulation  
persevering in prayer  
13 sharing in the needs of the saints  
pursuing hospitality.

This is the “ordinary,” everyday, normal pattern of life that must characterize us!

### **1. The Humility of Love (12:14-16)**

I call this the “humility of love” – because love is not proud.

Love puts the *other* first.

Love is more concerned with the good of others than with my own good.

As Jesus said, “the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve,  
and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Mark 10:45)

#### **a. Love Blesses Those Who Curse (v14)**

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

If Jesus said from the cross, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do,”  
then we cannot do other than he did.

We may not curse those who persecute us.

We may not damn them to hell.

We must bless them.

I pointed out last time that the last phrase of verse 13 is “pursue hospitality” –  
using the same word “pursue” as the word in verse 14 –  
“bless those who pursue you, bless and do not curse them.”

The word can either be translated “pursue” or “persecute” –

and obviously Paul is using it in two different senses here!  
You are to pursue the love of strangers  
with the same zeal that you see in people who persecute Christians!

And so when you are pursued – when you are persecuted –  
you are called to bless those who persecute you.

Now – let’s think about how this works!

We were told in verse 9 that we must abhor what is evil and hold fast to what is good.

That means that must abhor – we must detest – the evil in those who persecute us.  
But we only detest that evil because we *love*.

We love those who persecute us – because they are made in the image of God!  
When I look at the one who pursues me, I see one who reflects the God I love –  
of course, in his actions, he is not expressing love for God or neighbor –  
and so I detest him for that!

But that still does not give me the right to curse him.

Paul will circle back to this at the end of the chapter, so hold to that!

But if we think about how to bless others,  
it means to enter into their experience – as Paul will say in verse 15:

**b. Love Enters into the Experience of Others (v15)**

*15 Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.*

Since love considers the interests of others ahead of our own,  
we rejoice when they rejoice –  
and we weep when they weep.

Of course, since love abhors what is evil and holds fast to what is good,  
we do not rejoice in evil!

Origen points out that “Here we must make a clear and appropriate distinction.

For the joys of Christians are not to be linked with every sort of joy...

For if I see people rejoicing because they have made a lot of money,  
or acquired a lot of property, or gained worldly honor,

I ought not to rejoice with them,

because I know that sorrow and tears follow joys of that kind....

[But] if we see people turn from error, leave the darkness of ignorance behind  
and come to the light of the truth and the forgiveness of sins,

we ought to rejoice with them....

Likewise....we should weep for someone who is weeping for his sins,  
who after doing wrong is converted to repentance

and who is washing his error in tears.” (Origen)

So we do not rejoice in evil – nor do we get excited about fleeting pleasures –  
but we rejoice in that which brings joy to God and neighbor!  
And likewise we weep over that which brings sorrow to God and neighbor.

When our sister rejoices – we rejoice.  
When our brother weeps – we weep.

And this is an expressing of that harmony that Paul calls us to in verse 16.

**c. Love Does Not Exalt Oneself (v16)**

*16 Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly.  
Never be wise in your own sight.*

While you would never guess it from the English,  
we are back to our “thinking” words in verse 16.

The root “phren” – to think – is used three times in this verse!

“Live in harmony” could be literally translated  
“thinking the same with one another”  
“Do not be haughty” is actually  
“not thinking the high things”  
And “never be wise in your own sight” is  
“not becoming thoughtful in yourselves.”

Paul says that how you *think* is important.  
How do you think of yourself?

He said in verse 3 – “I say to everyone among you not to think of himself  
more highly than he ought to think,  
but to think with sober thinking.”

Because what you think – what you *really* think –  
is what will guide your actions.

This is why I started by talking about the *ordinary*.  
Because too often we try to ignore the ordinary  
and move on to the “special.”

But what you think in the ordinary time – in the everyday time –  
in your normal routines of life –  
*this* is what guides your actions.

You may say, “I believe in Jesus – he is my life!!”  
But if that is not what characterizes your ordinary life –  
then it’s not really how you think!

How you really think about yourself is expressed in what you do in ordinary life!

“Living in harmony with one another” is only possible  
if we have the same mind in us that was also in Christ Jesus  
(and yes, Philippians 2 uses the same root – phronew).

Living in harmony only works if we are thinking together.  
And this won’t work if we are all thinking “high things” and not humbling ourselves.  
Always “be ready to accept the advice of others.” (Theodoret)  
Do not be thoughtful in yourself – do not be wise in your own sight,  
but think together.

When people around you say “hey, you’re missing something!”  
Take them seriously.

## **2. But What About... (v17-21)**

But – what about when things go wrong?  
What about when others wrong you?  
When someone pushes your buttons...  
“He made me so angry!”

Oh... Wait...  
*He made me* so angry?

Remember Jesus’ words:  
“Out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks.” (Luke 6:45)

Whatever is in *your* heart will come out when you are bumped.

That is why Paul says:

**a. Do Not Repay Evil with Evil (v17)**  
*17 Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all.*

Others will sin against you.  
And it is impossible to make someone else change.  
I cannot make you live at peace with me.  
But I *can* live peaceably with you.

I can love you, regardless of whether you love me.

This helps us understand what Paul meant when he said earlier, “abhor what is evil.”

You hate evil,  
but you do not repay evil for evil.  
After all, if you *hate* evil,  
why would you endorse evil by practicing it?

The one who repays evil for evil does *not* actually hate evil!  
The one who repays evil for evil  
prefers evil to good!

“You think you’re good at doing evil, well, let me show you!!!”

No – brothers and sisters! – do not repay evil for evil!

Rather, give thought – think ahead –  
to how you can do what is good and honorable in the sight of all.  
Paul has already made it clear that you do *not* compromise on doing good.  
But you are to think ahead for how you can make peace.

**b. Live at Peace – so Far as It Depends on You (v18)**

*18 If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.*

If your life – if your “ordinary” life is characterized by the peace that passes understanding –  
if you are joined to the Prince of Peace, our Lord Jesus Christ,  
then you are capable of living at peace with everyone around you!

So far as it depends on you!

In Jesus’ words, “Blessed are the peacemakers.”

We live in a world at war.

When everyone seeks after their own interests –  
when everyone seeks after their own happiness –  
then there is no peace!  
There is no *shalom* – no well-being.

But there is nothing easy about surrendering self-interest!

“If I surrender my self-interest, then people will take advantage of me!”

Yes – they will.

“If I seek peace, then I will leave myself vulnerable to their attacks.”

Yes – you will.

“Why would I do that?”

That depends!

Do you believe in Jesus?

Or not?

This is the way that our Master trod – let us deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow Jesus!

Or to use Paul’s language in verse 19:

**c. Never Avenge Yourselves (v19)**

*19 Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.”*

Do you believe that God is just?

Do you believe that he will make things right?

Do you believe that vengeance belongs to the Lord?

Then leave it to him!

The code of vengeance in the ancient world was very strong.

The Desert Fathers tell of a monk who visited Abba Sisoes

and explained that he had been wronged

and could not rest until he had vengeance.

So Sisoes said to him, “My brother, let us pray.”

Raising up his hands, Sisoes prayed,

“God, we don’t need you. We can avenge ourselves.”

At this the brother fell on his face and begged forgiveness,

realizing that “vengeance presupposes a godless world.” (Harmless, 236)

The only reason why you would need to take vengeance

is if you don’t believe that God is in charge.

If God is in charge, then you can endure unjust suffering,

because you *know* that in the end *he* will make all things right.

I want you to think about this for a minute.

“Vengeance is mine, says the Lord.”

We have developed a strange idea in the modern world

that vengeance is wrong.

But God does *not* say,

“Vengeance is wrong.”

What he says is “Trust me to make things right.”  
You are called to imitate Christ.  
As he suffered unjustly, so also will you.

But unjust suffering will not last forever.  
“Vengeance is mine, *I will repay*, says the Lord.”

If we take vengeance, we will not accomplish the righteousness of God.  
“But if we reserve these things to the vengeance of God,  
he will without doubt punish them far more severely than we ever could.” (Origen)

As so Paul says in verse 20:

**d. Love Your Enemy (v20)**

*20 To the contrary, “if your enemy is hungry, feed him;  
if he is thirsty, give him something to drink;  
for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.”*

This is quoted from Proverbs 25:21-22.  
The picture of “Heaping burning coals” is the idea of “killing him with kindness.”  
He probably expects you to return evil for evil –  
but when you respond to his evil with good,  
that has the effect of showing the utter foolishness of his evil.

As you bless the one who persecutes you, you pray for his conversion.

But as you bless him – as you feed him – as you show love to him,  
you are heaping burning coals on his head.  
He will have no excuse on the day of judgment.  
Because he witnessed a love that was authentic,  
a love that was without hypocrisy.

Is our love without hypocrisy?  
Are we a place where Christian love is authentic?  
Do we respond to evil with good?

Insofar as we do, we show forth the love of Christ –  
and thus we overcome evil with good!

As Paul concludes in verse 21:

**e. Overcome Evil with Good (v21)**

*21 Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*

This is the language of conquering!  
Do not be conquered by evil.  
But conquer evil with good.

We do not fight with the weapons of this world!  
We do not return evil for evil – instead we overcome evil with good!

This is the pattern that God has shown us in his own humility and conquest.

In the days of Samuel the ark of the covenant was captured by the Philistines.  
Evil had conquered!

And the ark of God was taken into the temple of Dagon  
To all outward appearance, Yahweh had been humbled by Dagon –  
overcome by evil.

But in the morning Dagon lay on his face before the ark of God,  
with his head and his hands cut off.

Yahweh overthrew Dagon,  
not by sending a mighty army to smash the temple,  
but by coming himself, alone and unaided –  
and, what is more, humiliated and captured –  
but all by himself, he forced the god of the Philistines to bow before him!

As Hannah had sung in her song in 1 Samuel 2,  
“He will guard the feet of his faithful ones,  
but the wicked shall be cut off in darkness,  
for not by might shall a man prevail.  
The adversaries of the LORD shall be broken to pieces;  
against them he will thunder in heaven.  
The LORD will judge the ends of the earth;  
he will give strength to his king  
and exalt the power of his anointed.” (1 Sam 2:9-10)

Of course, it was Mary’s son who humbled himself more than anyone ever has.  
For though he was in the form of God,  
he did not consider equality with God a thing to be grasped.  
But he humbled himself,  
taking the form of a servant.  
And when he saw that “doing good” would require him to lay down his life for us,  
when he saw that conquering evil would require him be run over by evil,  
he did not swerve from the path,

but he went forth in to battle as the conquering hero, the Divine Warrior,  
the Mighty One,

who humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death,  
even death on a cross. (Philippians 2)

“The person who appears to be overcome by evil for a time  
in fact may be overcoming evil, just as the Savior overcame evil by not resisting it.  
Evil works against itself, and when it is overcome it thinks that it has won!” (Ambrosiaster)

But we know better!

Because Jesus did not stay dead – nay, he was raised from the dead,  
and in his resurrection he was declared to be the Son of God in power  
according to the Spirit of holiness! (Rom 1:4)

Therefore God has highly exalted him,  
and given him the name above all names,  
that at the name of Jesus, every knee should bow in heaven and on earth –  
and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,  
to the glory of God the Father! (Phil 2)

So in all our ordinary, everyday lives,  
let us think these thoughts – let us have this mind in ourselves that is ours in Christ Jesus!