

# “Confronting Evil”

Matthew 16:21-28 and Romans 12:9-21

Sunday, September 3, 2017

Covenant Presbyterian Church

The first reading from Matthew challenges us with the hard call of discipleship. Jesus tells his followers: “Deny yourself. Take up your cross and follow. Lose your life in order to save it.”

This is one description of the Christian life, of what we sign up for when we join a church. (It’s not just donuts.) Our second reading gives another description of the Christian life, with a few more specifics.

As we read this it’s important to remember that Romans 1-11 makes a deep and compelling argument that we are saved from our sin by God’s grace, through faith. Chapter 12 offers guidance on how to live as saved people, as loved people, as God’s people. You could say that Romans 1-11 is about Learning the Christian life, and Romans 12 is about Living it.

One note on the reading: the reference in verse 20 to burning coals sounds harsh, but it probably suggests some sort of ritual act of repentance. An alternative translation could be “let them burn with shame.”

Listen for God’s word:

<sup>9</sup> Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; <sup>10</sup> love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. <sup>11</sup> Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. <sup>12</sup> Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. <sup>13</sup> Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. <sup>14</sup> Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. <sup>15</sup> Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. <sup>16</sup> Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. <sup>17</sup> Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. <sup>18</sup> If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. <sup>19</sup> 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.” <sup>20</sup> 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.” <sup>21</sup> Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Romans 12 is one of my favorite chapters in the Bible. Years ago, when I visited Cuba with a small group of seminarians, we met with church leaders. One of those Cuban church leaders encouraged us as Christians to read Romans 12 every day.

I haven't done that, but I've read it a lot. There are many wonderful teachings in there, verses that easily could have been among the "Ten Vital Verses" that we focused on this summer. Several verses give us guidance after the destruction of Hurricane Harvey:

**Show hospitality. Weep with those who weep.**

**Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer.**

But in reading on Romans 12 this summer, the word **evil** jumped out at me. It comes up five times in these verses.

We don't like to talk about evil, but it is real. We see it in hunger and warfare and terrorism and religious fanaticism, and we see it in human interactions, even in our own hearts, if we're honest.

Right in the beginning of the Bible, in Genesis 4, after creation, we read about family strife, with Cain killing Abel. In the middle of that narrative, as Cain is angry, with options, God speaks to him saying:

**sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it.**

Cain is unable to master it, unable to overcome the evil, and he kills his brother.

I think Jesus was aware of the evil of sin, and he encouraged his followers to pray about it, with a prayer we say every Sunday. Part of the prayer goes:

**Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil**

Even at the happy times when someone joins the church or comes for baptism, the first question we ask is a question about evil:

**Trusting in the gracious mercy of God, do you turn from the ways of sin and renounce evil and its power in the world? **I do.****

So confronting evil is clearly a central part of the Christian life.

That's why I think Romans 12.21 is one of the most important verses in the Bible.

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

This isn't just a teaching for us. It's what God has done and is doing in Jesus Christ.

The reality of our life is that too often we fail to love one another, we are greedy, foolish, and selfish, and we ignore God's teachings. But instead of punishing us or responding with spite, or giving up on us, God responds with love.

God confronts our sin, our evil, and is not overcome by it, but instead God offers us a fresh start, calling us through Jesus to live as new people.

Through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, God confronts evil with the goodness of forgiveness and love.

Overcoming evil with God is like changing the story, change the narrative, breaking the cycle of bad with good.

And as Christians, as followers of Jesus, we are called to join in the process of breaking the cycle, of overcoming evil with good—in the world, in our families, and in our own hearts.

That means if someone does something mean, hurtful, stupid, we have to be careful about our response.

It's not easy. In my own journey, in my own efforts to overcome evil with good, I have been challenged and encouraged by this verse, from the end of Paul's letter to the church at Corinth:

**Keep alert, stand firm in your faith, be courageous, be strong.  
Let all that you do be done in love.**

I also am inspired by the example of those who show us how to confront evil, how to overcome evil with good. Martin Luther King, courageously fought for civil rights in the US. Archbishop Desmond Tutu, led the non-violent struggle against Apartheid in South Africa. Mahatma Gandhi, was a trailblazer in non-violent resistance, as he led people against British rule in India.

You are probably familiar with those names, those heroes who confronted evil. But have you heard about the clowns in Nashville, TN?

About ten years ago, a group of white supremacists and KKK people gathered for a protest in Nashville. As often happens, a counter protest was planned, but this one was special.

People dressed up as clowns, with horns and whistles and balloons. Leaders said that they wanted to meet the hate with love. So when the KKK people chanted “White Power” the counter-protestors chanted “white flour” and threw white flour into the air, you know the stuff you bake with.



They tried to redirect the energy of hate into a festive and fun atmosphere. They didn't want to return evil for evil. They tried to overcome evil with good, or at least with fun, with their festive clothes, painted faces, and big red floppy shoes.

Musician David LaMotte has written a Dr. Seuss-style poem about the events of May 26, 2007 He published it as a book, with illustrations by Jenn Hales, which you see today.

<https://www.whiteflourbook.com/poem/>

The book closes with this:

And what would be the lesson of that shiny southern day  
Can we understand the message that the clowns sought to convey  
Seems that when you're fighting hatred, hatred's not the thing to use  
So here's to those who march on...in their big red floppy shoes.

Let us pray.....