



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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Overcome Evil with Good

Romans 12:14-21

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We live in the overlap of two ages and see it in the hostility of the world to the people of Jesus. The present evil age clashes with the age to come. In his death and resurrection, Jesus has inaugurated a new age, a new world, and he's given his people and the world hope. He will make all things new. But making all things new and setting God's Creation to rights also means judgement and wiping away ever thing and every one who stands against God and his world. We see his graciousness and his patience on display in the fact that he sent his Son, not to bring an end to the story by crushing and wiping away ungodliness, but by sending him into the middle of the story, to die for the sake of his enemies, in order to make a means of redemption. Jesus offers a way out of the coming judgement. Jesus offers an opportunity to be part of his new creation. We need only kneel in faith before him in acknowledgement that he is Creation's true Lord. In return, he forgives us and he makes us knew. In our baptism his plunges us into his own Spirit and his Spirit then converts ungodly hearts set on rebellion, and places in them a love for God and a love for each other. Jesus and the Spirit makes us part of God's new creation. Jesus could have brought history to an end, but that would have been the end of us, too. Instead, he's inaugurated God's new age, he's inaugurated God's new creation, and in this overlap—the new age inaugurated while the old age continues to trundle along—he sends his people out to proclaim his royal summons to the world, calling men and women to repentance, to faith, to take part in his new world.

But the people and the powers and the institutions invested in the old age don't like that. Jesus warned his friends: "A disciple is not greater than his master. If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you." Persecution is bound to happen whenever and wherever the old age and the new age meet. Paul knew this from first-hand experience. In fact, Paul had found himself on both sides of the clash. He knew what it was to be the persecutor and he knew what it was to be the persecuted. He knew that it was in this meeting of the ages, this place where the world and the kingdom come up against each other straight on, that Jesus' people find one of our greatest opportunities to be the people the Spirit has made us. This clash is the place where Christians have profound opportunity to live the gospel and to be and to manifest God's new creation here and now.

You and I, as Western Christians, really know nothing of persecution. Not first-hand. We've read stories of brothers and sisters martyred for their faith in China or the Soviet Union or the Middle East, but we haven't experienced real persecution ourselves. We sometimes face opposition and hostility. The older I get the more I think that an awful lot of the "opposition" we face here in North America isn't so much for being Christians; it's for being jerks about being Christians. But that highlights what Paul is getting at in our passage today. We'll be looking at Romans 12:14-21. We're continuing in this passage that began with Paul telling us to present ourselves as living sacrifices to God. To do that, he writes, is to worship the one who has saved us. He went on to explain what that looks like in practical terms. It begins with love and last Sunday we looked at his description of love at work in the Church. How we live with and treat each other is a profound witness to the world. In the Third Century, Tertullian wrote about the influence the Church has on the pagans around it. They didn't comment on what the Church taught

or said, but on how the Church lived. In the midst of a dog-eat-dog world, the pagans saw Christians and were astounded, saying, "Look how they love each other!" Here in the Church we are a microcosm of God's new creation. But Jesus doesn't intend for us to keep it to ourselves. Just as God's love spills out of us to each other, it then spills out of the Church to the world—and it often has its most profound impact when it comes up against opposition, hostility, and persecution. In these verses, Paul now carries this theme of love as he leads us out of the doors of the church and back to our neighbourhoods, workplaces, governments, and communities.

Paul knew this first-hand the impact of the love of Jesus can have when it comes up against the world. What he writes here is not what he grew up with. What he writes here is the opposite of what characterised the Jewish world he knew—not to mention the pagan world. The Seventh Chapter of 2 Maccabees gives us an idea of the mindset that Paul was raised with. We don't have time to read the whole thing this morning, but the story takes place about 160 years before Jesus was born. A group of Jews under the leadership of Mattathias Maccabeus and his son, Judas, rose up against their Greek rulers. The Greeks tried to suppress the faith of the Jews. In 2 Maccabees 7 we read about a woman and her seven sons who were threatened with torture in an effort to force them to eat pork. They refused and, one by one, the sons were brutally tortured and killed for their refusal to compromise. Each, in turn, as he was tortured called down curses on those Greek soldiers and on Antiochus Epiphanes, the Greek king. They became national heroes, not just for refusing to compromise and eat pork, but for having the courage to curse the soldiers as they were dying. The men who rose up to violently overthrow the Greeks in the revolt that came were national heroes too. (They still are.) The Maccabees were the spiritual fathers of the Pharisees.

They were heroes to Paul and Paul saw his opposition to the Church as being faithful to that heritage.

But something changed. It might have begun as Paul stood by while Stephen, the first martyr was stoned. Stephen preached Jesus and the Jews killed him for it. Paul held coats so that those throwing stones wouldn't be encumbered. And he heard Stephen with his dying breath cry out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them" (Acts 7:60). Just like Jesus, who was crucified, but did not curse or revile in return, but prayed, "Forgiven them, for they know not what they are doing," Stephen prayed for his enemies. This was unheard of. But, years later, here's what Paul wrote in Romans 12:

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

Someone reviles you for your faith in Jesus. Bless them. Someone has your church's tax-exempt status revoked because of your witness for Jesus. Bless them. You're fined for refusing to compromise your faith as it relates to your business practices. Bless them. You're arrested and put in jail for proclaiming the good news about Jesus. Bless them. Bless them. Bless them. Bless them. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Is that a hard thing to do? Of course it is. But do it anyway. If Stephen used his last breath to pray for the people who were stoning him, so can you. And Stephen's story reminds us of the key here. Stephen had his sight fixed on Jesus and the Cross. Brothers and Sisters, you can't revile, curse, and fight back when you have your eyes fixed on the one who gave himself up as a sacrifice for the sins of his enemies and who preached, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 5:44).

And it's not just the people who would persecute us for our faith. We're going to face hostility everywhere we turn in the world. The old age is filled with sin and corruption. Our

interactions are tainted with it every day. But instead of seeing this as an opportunity to get back or get even, as people of God's new creation, we should look at our life in the midst of the world as a means of lifting the veil on the new creation that is our hope—and that Jesus and the Spirit have made us a part of already. Look at verses 15-16:

Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight.

That means: Don't be a sourpuss. When something good happens to your pagan neighbour, be happy for him. When he throws a party to celebrate something, go and celebrate with him. Some people might get drunk in the process. You can still celebrate with him, just don't get drunk yourself and don't be a nag. When Veronica's brother got married it was by a druid priestess with a druid-Wiccan ceremony. We could have been sourpusses about it, but the fact is that marriage was instituted by God. Marriage is a good thing. It's what men and women are supposed to do. It's a joyful time. We went. We politely declined the smudging and stood outside the "sacred circle" and didn't take part in the pagan rituals, but we could still rejoice with them in their marriage.

The flip side of this is that we ought to weep with our neighbours or with the world when it weeps. Some Christians are really, really good at Schadenfreude. They sit and smirk every time something bad happens to unbelievers. Brothers and Sisters, don't be like that. First, it's self-righteous to be like that. Bad things happen because we—all of us, every human being who has ever lived—have sinned and contributed to the corruption of our world. Sometimes we suffer as the consequence of our

own person sins. Most of the time we suffer the cumulative consequences of thousands and thousands of years of sins committed corporately by the entire human race. The problems of this world can be laid at our feet too. We've all contributed and none of us has any business gloating at the misfortune of a fellow human being. But, second, you and I are privileged to be stewards of the *answer* to human suffering. In Jesus and the Spirit, we've caught a glimpse of the world set to rights. God, in his grace and mercy, saw fit to reach each of us with the good news about Jesus. We ought to show that same grace and mercy to others who suffer. Instead of gloating, we ought to take the good news about Jesus to them.

In fact, even though the world around us is hostile to the good news, Paul says "live in harmony with one another." The Greek literally says, "thinking the same thing towards one another". The sense is that Paul is calling us to live alongside our neighbours, sharing life with them. We Christians are prone to withdrawing from our neighbours. We may not go off and form literal ghettos where we all live in the same place apart from everyone else, although there have been some groups who have done just that and it's been suggested by some recent Christian commentators. No, our problem is that we tend to minimize our association with non-Christians. That's particularly true of those of us who have been raised in the Church. We tend to form all of our close relationship with fellow Christians. And then we wonder where all the opportunities for evangelism have gone! It's good to ask ourselves—particularly if you've been a Christian for a long time—if we've isolated ourselves from non-Christians.

Paul says not to be snobs, but to associate with the lowly. We see this lived out very dramatically in the Church of Paul's day as slaves and

free people lived alongside each other as brothers and sisters in Christ. Paul, no doubt, had in mind the tensions between Jewish and Gentile Christians in the Roman churches. Those may not be the sorts of division we're prone to being snobbish about, but they make the point that the love of Jesus that has been poured into our hearts by the Spirit crosses boundaries of every kind.

Now look at verses 17 and 18:

Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

Responding in kind is the way of the fallen human heart. It's our most natural response. But the Christian is different. Again, the Spirit has removed our hearts of stone and in their places filled us with love for God and love for our neighbours. This is the most basic and fundamental characteristics of the Christian, which is why Paul beats this drum so often—he says almost exactly the same thing in 1Thessalonians 5. Love does not seek revenge. Love seeks the best, even for our enemies. If you struggle with this—and we all do—remember, again, the cross. *We* rejected God. *We* sinned. *We* sundered heaven and earth. *We* corrupted God's creation. But instead of repaying our evil with more evil, God sent his Son to forgive, to reconcile, and to restore. Why? Because he loves us. Think on the cross. Meditate on the cross. Keep the cross always at the centre of your vision and love will become easier and more natural.

And because of love and out of our desire to live out the good news and to manifest God's new age in the midst of the world, we'll always be thinking about how to do good. Paul knew that sometimes doing good and manifesting the kingdom will bring the scorn of the world. It took Jesus to

the cross. But he also knew that it's possible to live at peace with our neighbours. There are times when our integrity and refusal to compromise may lose us friends or get us fired from our jobs, but we can still rejoice with our joyful neighbours and weep with our weeping neighbours.

What comes to my mind as I read these words is that Paul understands that we will face the opposition of the world, but we should respond to that by being squeaky-clean. We should be living in such a way that when we do face opposition or persecution, it should truly be for the sake of Jesus and *only* for the sake of Jesus. I think this is something we modern Christians need desperately to hear. We can be terrible jerks, all in the name of Jesus. We can be horrible snobs in the name of Jesus. We can be horrible sourpusses in the name of Jesus. We often gloat at the sufferings of unbelievers—particularly those who actively oppose us—and we gloat in the name of Jesus. We can be horrible, self-righteous hypocrites in the name of Jesus. And we too often seek our own welfare—often doing so in the name of Jesus—through associations with ungodliness and ungodly people. Politics, in particular, has corrupted our gospel perspective and compromised our witness. And politics, too, has caused us to forget Jesus' warnings about violence and retaliation. We may never dream of taking up swords against our enemies, but we invest ourselves in winning control of the government so that we can turn its sword against our enemies. We must make every effort to live for the sake of others, following the example of Jesus, and seeking to show the love of God to all.

One Christians commentator pointed out in the last year that in some circles, Christians are seen as the new Nazis because of our stance on homosexuality. We're seen by many as bigots and haters. Brothers and Sisters, our refusal to compromise will

bring this sort of opposition, but we need to be sure that the opposition is truly for the sake of our commitment to Jesus and to the real love that Paul describes here. If the world is going to call us Nazis, we need to be squeaky-clean. We need to be the most loving people on the planet—as we should be—even if the world doesn't fully understand true love. The people who are going to call us Nazis on this issue, need to see us rejoice with those who rejoice, weeping with those who weep. They should never see us thinking more highly of ourselves than we ought. To the contrary, they should see us seeking out the lowly. They should know, even if they've suppressed it in the backs of their minds and seared their own consciences, that their accusations are utterly false.

Brothers and Sisters, Paul gives us a sombre warning in verse 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."

This isn't always an easy thing to do, but, again, look to the cross. God's people are loved by God. That God would give his Son for our sake is the proof. We're Christians because we trust in God—in his goodness and his wisdom seen first and foremost in his provision for our forgiveness and renewal through Jesus. Brothers and Sisters, we *know* that God is good. We *know* that God takes care of us. We *know* that God will set all things to rights in the end and that his justice will prevail. We don't need to take justice into our own hands by seeking vengeance. To do that is to perpetuate the very cycle of evil that Jesus died to end. Have you ever considered that your faith is witnessed to others when you choose to trust in God to deal with your enemies? Think on that the next time you're tempted to repay evil with evil.

Then in verses 20-21 Paul writes,

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

Instead of cursing our enemies, we need to devote ourselves, as Jesus said, to praying for our enemies and seeking out ways to do good to those who persecute us. Paul quotes Proverbs 25:21-22. Don't just leave it at not taking vengeance on your enemies. Look for ways to actively do good to him or to her. This goes along with being squeaky-clean. Manifest the love of God to your enemy.

There's some disagreement about exactly what Paul means by heaping coals on his head, but Paul's point seems to be this: First, doing good to your enemies is the right thing to do, because it models the love that God has shown us in Jesus. Never forget that we were once God's enemies. Second, vengeance is God's prerogative and we need to trust in him in these situations. And, finally third, Paul's thinking that—even if it's a long-shot—loving our enemies may bring them to repentance. That may seem a stretch, but Paul knew this first-hand. Remember Stephen. Paul stood there holding coats for the stone-throwers. He heard Stephen's prayers for his enemies. Paul didn't change his mind about Jesus that day, but Stephen's witness stayed with him and was part of a long sequence of events that would eventually bring Paul to Jesus.

Paul really knew how evil is overcome, not with more evil, but with good. He'd seen it in his own experience. But he understood it, first and foremost, because of the cross of Jesus. Paul understood the way in which violence compounds violence and evil compounds evil just as we do. Someone hits you so you hit back harder and the violence spirals. It's in

our fallen nature and has been from the beginning. In Genesis 4 we're told of Lamech who boasted that a man hit him so he retaliated by murdering the man. A few years ago the bylaw enforcement officer came by my house. I'd accidentally watered my lawn on the wrong day. He told me that he was obligated to say something to me, but also said not to worry about it too much. He explained that a week before someone on the street behind us called in a bylaw violation on a neighbour. These reports are anonymous, so the guy who was reported responded by calling in reports on every neighbour he could get some dirt on. Some of them started calling in violations and the whole thing spilled over the fences and sucked in neighbours on my street as it escalated. It was silly, but illustrates how these things spiral out of control. The same thing happens on the international scene with horrible, bloody conflicts breaking out as a result. Evil only begets more evil.

Brothers and Sisters, Jesus stepped into history to break that cycle. Evil concentrated itself in one place, rose up to its full height, and did its worst at the cross. Peter drew his sword, but Jesus knew that evil begets evil, that those who live by the sword die by the sword. Jesus told Peter to put his sword away and then allowed himself to be led to the cross. Jesus let evil do its worst and in doing so, he broke the cycle. He returned death with life and evil with love. And now he's filled us with that same love and calls us to break the cycle wherever we find ourselves in it. It's not a question of if, but when. The spiral of evil and violence finds us every day, even if only in small ways. How do we respond? Brothers and Sisters, think on that. Focus your eyes on Jesus and his cross and meditate on his love.

Let us pray: Heavenly Father, as we remember Mary Magdalen today, remind us that like she, we have been redeemed from sin and sent as

witnesses of the cross and resurrection of Jesus. Teach us to manifest your new creation through love. Teach us to love, not in our own power, but in the power of the Spirit you have placed in our hearts and as we meditate on the cross of Jesus and seek to love as he loved. We ask this through him. Amen.