

“Overcoming Evil”

**First Presbyterian Church
Pastor Dave Carlson
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**Old Testament lesson: Psalm 119:33-40
New Testament lesson: Romans 12:9-21**

In the early 1990s in Georgia’s 9th congressional district, many people missed a 30-minute campaign commercial purchased by State Sen. Tom Ramsey. “Aired on the eve of Ramsey’s runoff election, ... the half-hour spot was immediately preceded by a 60-second ‘test pattern,’ which also featured a high-pitched audio tone. (Beeeeeeep!)”

Many viewers thought the station had gone off the air or was experiencing ‘technical difficulties,’ so they switched channels. Turns out Ramsey’s political opponent bought 60 seconds of airtime just to show that test pattern beeeeeeep so that people would switch channels, never seeing Ramsey’s 30-minute campaign commercial.

Ramsey lost by just 6 percent of the vote and his opponent was elected to Congress.¹ When did competition and differences of opinion become so deep rooted as to push aside all civility and common decency?

Our New Testament lesson tells us how to get along with people despite major differences and competing agendas. In fact, this is a lesson in how to deal with the struggle of good verses evil.

Do you wish your brother or sister would treat you better? – it’s a matter of good verses evil. Do you wish our political leaders would work together rather than tear each other apart? – it’s a matter of good verses evil, but not how you think. Do you wish society would take care of those in need? – it’s a matter of good verses evil.

The key to the Gospel when it comes to good verses evil is that we often use the wrong weapon in battling evil. It says right here in Holy Scripture, “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”

There are two parts to today’s scripture lesson. The first part tells us how to care for one another as Christians. Things like showing love and mutual affection, and outdoing each other in things like honor, patience, perseverance, giving to the needy, and welcoming the stranger.

¹ Common Cause Magazine, Winter 1992, 6.

The second part of today's Bible lesson is about how to respond to those who attack us or get in the way of being a good Christians. It's hard to be a Christian when society is so "me" oriented. It's hard when society has such little value for church and family life. It's hard when everything is about money and power and winning.

It's hard because that's not what Christianity is all about. Christianity is all about building people up, giving of ourselves for the sake of others, embracing the power of Jesus Christ to forgive, redeem, unite and uplift.

The only way we win as followers of Christ is to do things his way, even in the face of intense pressure and extreme temptation to do things the easy way, the flashy way, the me-first way, the brutal way.

It's not easy to bless those who persecute you. And yet the Bible says right here, "bless (them) and do not curse them."

It's not easy to remain humble and not get indignant when faced with misguided foolishness and outright, defiant evil. And yet, the Bible tells us, "Do not claim to be wiser than you are." And elsewhere, it says, "For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength."

The Apostle Paul says that in 1st Corinthians. And he makes the same point throughout today's scripture lesson from his letter to the church in Rome. The church in Rome – think about that. Imagine you are a new Christian living in Rome during the 1st century when Christianity is anything but accepted. Few people share your values. You've got temptations at every turn – people worshiping the mighty dollar, sexual gratification, power, laziness, gluttony.

But you, you are committed to a different way of life. You know in your heart of hearts all this "me, me, me" way of living is sure to be your ruin and the ruin of all that is good and decent and promising in the world. What do you do?

How do you ensure that the Gospel will win the day, that Jesus and all he taught and embodied will go on to bless your life, the life of your children, your children's children, and all that inhabits this planet we live on?

If you're up for that challenge, then listen closely. If you want what God has to offer – for you and all the world – than hang on tight. Because what I'm about to say is going to blow your mind. It flies in the face of all common sense and everything you've come to know about how this world works. In fact, it goes against our very nature as human beings.

The Bible tells us, "Do not repay anyone evil for evil, ...never avenge yourselves, ...if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink...." Why would you do that?! Do we really believe that is the way to get ahead in this world? Well, believe it or not, it's true. And in fact, there is absolutely no way to win and nothing to gain by fighting with misguided people and meeting evil with evil in return.

As we heard in today's scripture reading, "Vengeance is mine..., says the Lord."
So, if everything is up to God to handle, -and that includes through justice system where's that leave us as individuals, particularly in this fallen world of ours?

It leaves us right where we started in today's sermon. We are to show love and mutual affection, even when that's hard to do. We are to outdo each other in things like honor, patience, perseverance, giving to the needy, and welcoming the stranger. We are to bless those who curse us and overcome evil with good. Do you know how many people ever try to do that-overcome evil with good? Not many. But imagine if more did.

It's like the joke about God looking down at Earth and seeing way too much evil going on? He decided to send an angel to check it out. When she returned, she told God, yes, it is bad on Earth – 95% bad and only 5% good. Well, said God, maybe I better send a second angel to get another point of view. When the second angel returned, she told God the same thing – 95% bad and 5% good. God was not happy, but he had an idea.

He decided to E-mail the 5% who were good and encourage them, give them a little something to help them keep going. Do you know what that E-mail said???? What, no one here get the email? Bad.

Well, if God were to send an email to straighten us out, it would say, "Bless those who curse (you) and overcome evil with good." God is good, and in no way is God evil. So the only way to make any headway in the world is to overcome evil, misguided ways with good, with godly responses. By staying true to our Christian values and godly principles, we not only can stand up to evil, we actually become a beacon of light to those who sit in darkness.

So the next time you know you're right in any fight or disagreement, look for a way to bless those around you, even those standing in opposition. As crazy as that sounds, it is so disarming. Nobody and nothing can stand up against God. And God is good, and has no part in evil. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

There are times when our hearts ache and our souls wander and we are full of doubts. Even so – or especially so – we turn to you in prayer, gracious God.

We hear of the loss of loved ones, or see news' senseless violence. We know that bullying and aggression happen in our schools and workplaces.

We mourn these tragic events and pray for those who have suffered. Closer to home, we find ourselves struggling with situations or issues that trouble us. We are overcome with doubts.

And still we pray, and, in this time of silence, we listen for your assurance.
(Pause here.)

In the stillness, we hear only the serenity of silence and the sense that you can handle our doubts and misgivings.

After all, when all else fails, you are still God and our faith has not left us.

So it is in faith that we listen to and pray the prayer of the one who walked this earth and knew the effects of evil and the burden of sorrow, Jesus the Christ, who taught us to pray, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name.**

**Thy kingdom come,
thy will be done,**

on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread;

and forgive us our debts,

as we forgive our debtors;

and lead us not into temptation,

but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.