Overcoming Evil

David Carter

Unshakeable: Romans / Romans 12:14–21

My first car was a 1989 Buick LeSabre. Limited edition (I thought it was a pretty sweet ride). I worked all summer to save up for that car.

But the thing about being young and driving an older used car is there's always something to fix and you never have enough money to fix it. And that car always seemed to have an alignment problem.

Every time I drove it, it wanted to pull to the left. And if I took my hands off the wheel for even a second, it would drift right into the ditch.

So I learned to drive it with a tight grip, always steering just a little to the right, constantly correcting, just to keep it going straight. It was a bit annoying, but you do what you gotta do.

Eventually I took it in and got it realigned. And I remember that first drive afterwards — I let go of the wheel, just for a second, and it went straight. I didn't have to fight it anymore.

I think that's a picture of what Paul is getting at this morning. Because left to ourselves, our old sinful nature, we pull in one direction. Someone hurts us, we want to hurt them back. Someone curses us, we curse right back. Someone wrongs us, we want to get even. Take your hands off the wheel, and that's where we end up — right in the ditch.

But there is a transforming work the gospel does in our hearts, the gospel realigns us to God's will. Without the gospel we're always leaning to the ditch, but through Christ our hearts are realigned.

In our passage this morning, The calling of the gospel is to overcome evil with good.

How does that happen, how can I overcome evil? We need a gospel realignment.

We need a transforming work.

We overcome evil with good when we stop treating people the way they treat us and start treating them the way God has treated us.

Let's look at our passage this morning.

As we read verses 14-21, I don't think what Paul is saying is necessarily hard to understand, he's pretty straight forward.

Our reaction probably isn't confusion, our reaction maybe is, you want me to what? Bless those who persecute me? You want me to not repay someone who does me evil with evil? Not seek vengeance?

Those words seem to go against our natural instincts. I think that's the point.

I think we need to remember the context of the chapter that these verses have been written.

Left to themselves, plucked from the passage these are just 16 impossible commands.

But what do they mean when we step back and remember what's going on in chapter 12?

Remember that as we've come to Romans 12, we've turned a corner from Paul explaining the gospel, to calling us to live the gospel.

Remember that Paul is getting really practical, he's moved from telling us what it means to be in Christ, to showing us what it looks like to live as those who are in Christ.

Let's be clear, these aren't the normal, instinctive reactions of the everyday person. A normal person, reacting in their normal circumstances, does not want to bless their enemies, or repay evil with good.

This is what it looks like when you have been transformed by the power of the gospel.

Isn't that how Paul has started out this chapter? Remember, the calling of verses 1-2 that sets the table for this new section.

That in light of the mercy that God has shown us in the gospel, that our reasonable response of worship is to be living sacrifices, transformed by the gospel in the renewing of our mind and no longer living for our will, but living for the good and perfect will of God.

Well, what does that look like Paul? What does it look like when a person has been transformed, when they are a new creation? Chapter 12 begins to explain that all the way to the end of this epistle.

Last week, Pastor John began to show us that the transformed, gospel life is when we live in community with each other. When we freely offer our spiritual gifts to serve each other, to outdo one another in honour, to love genuinely, rejoicing in hope and patient in tribulation and constant in prayer.

That's what it looks like to live transformed, to live in God's will.

You cannot do that in your own strength, the normal everyday person who doesn't know Jesus doesn't live that way. Only one who has been transformed by the power of the gospel, who has the power of the Holy Spirit living and working within them, they are empowered, to live out the calling of the gospel.

Only someone who has been transformed by the gospel can live out what Paul is calling us to here. And I think we need to keep that in mind.

Like if you are here and you don't know Jesus, these commands mean nothing to you, they make no sense. You understand them intellectually, but you think, who would want to live that way?

You can try to live them out, but these commands are not the way you come to know God, these commands only come as a result of knowing God.

See the question we're asking really for the rest of Romans is this, what does a life that has been transformed by the gospel look like?

We know what the gospel is, that's chapters 1-11, I believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, I have been forgiven, redeemed, I am new creation, with God's Holy Spirit living in me, walking in the resurrected life. What does that look like?

And in this section, Paul is saying the power of the gospel transforms how a person deals with evil.

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

What does that look like, how do I do that?

How do I overcome evil with good?

Here's what Paul says.

BE A BLESSING

When People are hard to love, be a blessing.

The calling of the Christian life is to be a blessing.

That's easy when people are nice and when we're being blessed by being a blessing, but there are times when it's hard to be a blessing, aren't there?

Romans 12:14–16 ESV

14 Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. 15 Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. 16 Live in harmony with one

another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight.

This is counterintuitive isn't it? Bless those who persecute you? What does that mean? Why would anyone want to persecute me?

But one of the things that becomes clear is that once you decide to follow Jesus, persecution is a natural part of the Christian life. The gospel of Jesus Christ is by it's nature offensive.

Jesus recognized this and he regularly warned his disciples, that people will hate you because of me.

John 15:18–19 ESV

18 "If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. 19 If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.

There is this natural tension, conflict that is going on, that once you decide to follow Jesus, you've decided to live contrary to the world. And so you just picture it, that you are living against the grain.

I'm sure each of us have been in a crowd where everyone seems to be walking one way, that's the natural flow of traffic in the crowd, but have you ever been the one trying to walk the opposite way of the crowd? And it seems that often as Christians, that we are the only ones trying to go the opposite way, and the whole time you're bumping into people, avoiding collisions, sometimes collisions are unavoidable. Sometimes you bump into people, because you're living contrary to the crowd, it naturally brings conflict.

You are no longer of the world, the world is contrary to things of God and living for the things of God creates conflict.

Sometimes that conflict isn't just from those in the world, but even those who come from your own household.

Maybe some of us live in that tension at home. With parents, with spouses, with children, with in-laws who don't know Jesus and don't understand the choices we make for our lives and maybe constantly criticize or belittle us for our faith.

Paul said everyone who desires to live a godly life will be persecuted.

Persecution is a normal part of the Christian life. And the severity of it is felt differently in different parts of the world, here in the west it may cost us some friends, maybe a job or a promotion, there is more social persecution.

But in some parts of the world, where some of you are from, it may cost you more, it may cost you your life.

And so feel the weight of Paul's words, when you are persecuted, when you are hated for being a Christian, when you are wronged bless those who persecute you.

Bless and do not curse. I appreciate that Paul added that in, because that's the instinct isn't it? Maybe that's just me. Like if someone is spewing hatred at you, if someone is verbally assaulting you, you want to curse right back at them.

That's the instinct but bless those who are against you. That word blessing it's not passive, it's active. It's pray for God to bless them yes, but it's even actively seeking their blessing.

Isn't this the example that Jesus gives us? It's not just something he calls us to but demonstrates for us. When on the cross as he was being nailed and mocked he cried out, "Father forgive them for they know not what they do."

It's something that even his earliest followers displayed. Stephen in Acts chapter 7, while he was being stoned to death cries out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them."

But it's not just ancient history, it's how Christians through the generations have responded to persecution.

I am remembering reading about Gladys Staines.

In 1999, in a village in Odisha, India, a mob set fire to the jeep where Australian missionary Graham Staines was sleeping with his two young sons, Philip and Timothy. All three were killed. Graham had spent over thirty years in India caring for people with leprosy.

And what did his wife Gladys say? She publicly forgave the men who did it. And she didn't go home. She stayed and kept serving the very people of the land where her husband and sons were killed.

Where does that come from? That doesn't come from human instinct. That comes from a heart transformed by the gospel.

When people are hard to love, be a blessing.

Paul goes on and he says rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep.

And that maybe on the surface that can seem instinctive and some of us here are just naturally blessed, just naturally kind that we can come alongside people and rejoice in their successes and weep with them when they need to.

But not everyone is wired that way… rejoicing with those who rejoice, well that's easy when you have something to rejoice about or when you are facing rejoicing circumstances as well. But what about when things aren't going your way?

What about when life isn't handing you anything that is worth rejoicing in, can we still rejoice when things are going well with others?

For that past 5 months, we've been trying to sell our home, and we've had some discouraging occasions along the way. It's been a long journey, and there are times when I see homes in my neighbourhood sell, and I think, why not me Lord? Why are you making us wait?

Or we've had friends or family who have listed and sold their homes, and the natural instinct may not be to celebrate, but to wonder what about me?

But why not celebrate with them, be genuinely happy for them, because you understand the struggle. Again, only by the power of the gospel, can we rejoice, genuinely in the successes of others.

Only by the power of the gospel can we weep with those who weep. Not just give our condolences, or kind words. But genuinely enter into their pain and weep with them.

Again, on the surface that may seem like the most natural thing in the world, but there is pain, and loss, that runs so deep, things that happen in life that we don't know how to comfort those who are going through it, or we would rather just avoid because it's awkward for us.

But the gospel compels us to not just celebrate with people but enter into the hurt with people and it's not about finding the words to comfort them, it's not about taking the pain away, it's just about being there, letting them know they're not alone, they're not forgotten.

I remember when I first became a pastor, I was a young guy, like 24, 25 years old and what did I really know about life then? I would be called on to be with families in some unimaginable circumstances. I would get the call that a loved one was passing and I would come up to the hospital to be with them and the whole time I'm driving to the hospital I'm thinking okay, I gotta say something profound, I gotta have the right words, the right scripture, but what I found most often is that people just wanted you to be there. There are some circumstances that people face that there are no words, but it wasn't about what you said, it was about the ministry of presence.

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

That's how we overcome evil with good.

When people are hard to love, be a blessing.

Here's the second thing Paul calls us to.

When people hurt us, pursue peace.

PURSUE PEACE

We see his words there in verse 17-18.

Romans 12:17–18 ESV

[17] Repay no one evil for evil but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. [18] If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.

Repay no one evil for evil, that's counterintuitive isn't it? Like, it's kind of a natural instinct to want to get even. You hit me, I've gotta hit you back, you insult me, I want to insult you back. You get me, I want to get you back… again maybe that's just me and I'm telling on myself.

But that is the sinful human nature response. It's not the response of someone who has been changed by the Holy Spirit. I'm grateful for the work God has done in my own life in this regard.

Before Jesus I was an angry guy, who didn't take any thing from anyone and I prided myself on it. It was such an ego-driven, tough guy thing. I had to be the biggest, baddest guy on the block. No one is going to take advantage of me, no one is going to get the better of me, I've gotta prove myself that I'm the toughest one. There's always someone bigger and badder.

But then the Holy Spirit get's a hold of your heart, and those things start to matter less and less. He starts to strip you of your ego and what starts to matter more is that God is glorified in your life, in your actions. I think that's why Paul says to do what is honourable in the sight of all.

Paul is saying hey, remember that people are watching how this unfolds, they are watching how you handle conflict, they are watching how you respond to evil done to you. And how you respond reflects the God you serve.

A few years ago, one of our sister churches, Calvary Baptist in Oshawa, made a decision about church membership based on their biblical convictions about sexuality.

That decision went public and very quickly became a national news story. And the following Sunday, people showed up to protest outside their service.

Now think about that. What's the instinct? Lock the doors. Call the police. Defend yourself, fire back.

But you know what that church did? They served them Tim Horton's coffee. They brought out donuts. They opened up the building so the protesters could use the washrooms and come in out of the cold.

And the next Sunday, the protesters didn't come back. Neither did the media.

That's what Paul means when he says do what is honourable in the sight of all. People are watching. And when we repay evil with good, the story stops being about us and starts pointing to the God we serve.

But someone might say, what about the Old testament that says an eye for an eye?

Well it's interesting Paul is actually simply repeating something that Jesus himself taught and Jesus mentioned that command in the same teaching.

Matthew 5:38–42 ESV

38 "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.'
39 But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. 40 And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. 41 And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. 42 Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you.

Again that's doesn't sound natural does it? That sounds very counterintuitive. If someone slaps me on my cheek, I wanna slap them back. In fact, I don't just want slap them I probably want to one up them and clock them in their jaw.

If we're honest we identify more closely with the eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth.

But here's the thing about the eye for an eye… It's often misunderstood. In fact, Jesus wasn't trying to do away with an eye for an eye, but rather he was correcting that misunderstanding, the same misunderstanding that goes on today.

See, that Old Testament quote was stated in regard to a legal system. Where two people brought their disagreement before judges. And it was meant to teach that in the judicial system the punishment should fit the crime, that if someone steals your ox, they should repay you an ox and 1/3 for the damages, that's fair, it means not only that the punishment should fit the crime, but that the penalty for the lawbreaker is limited.

If someone stole some bread or grain, the punishment shouldn't be their life.

Now listen, an eye for an eye works in a court of law, but it doesn't work when you're dealing with your neighbour. If your neighbour burns your house down, you don't then have the right to burn their house down. It doesn't work in your marriage where every time your spouse does something you don't like you get to get even. It doesn't work in your job, with co-workers.

Jesus was saying we never have the right to take the law into our own hands, that there is always more to be gained by extending grace.

But that does leave questions for us doesn't it? Like, what about self defense? Like, if someone is assaulting us do we just stand there and take it? What if someone breaks into our home and our families' lives are in danger, what about victims of domestic violence, people who are in abusive relationships?

Well, I think first it's important to recognize what Jesus is talking about when he says turn the other cheek. Jesus isn't speaking about someone striking you with a closed fist, but rather when you slapped someone on the right cheek, it was done with the right hand, and it wasn't so much an assault as an act of disrespect or insult.

Jesus isn't talking about a physical altercation; he's speaking of someone insulting you. Don't retaliate if you're insulted.

But getting back to Paul's words in our passage, I think its important to notice Paul's words in verse 18.

Romans 12:18 ESV

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

if possible, so far as it depends on you live peaceably with all.

Paul recognizes and I am grateful that there are instances when it is just not possible. Paul says if it's up to you, if you have the ability you should seek to live in peace with people.

But if someone is physically attacking you, then in my understanding, you have the right to defend yourself.

And if you are in an abusive relationship, living at peace doesn't mean turning the other cheek and suffering in silence, you need to speak up, get help, get safe.

In fact, physical violence is never okay in the home, in your marriage. If you become violent and abusive towards those in your home, you need to repent today, get help to deal with whatever it is that is causing you to think that violence is the answer.

I mean, just on the simplest front. So often as we look at Paul's commands in these verses we often think about how we interact with strangers, or associates or friends.

Bless and do not curse, live in harmony with one another, repay no one evil for evil. Love your neighbour, turn the other cheek, outdo one another in love and honour, serve one another.

These kinds of commands aren't just for people we come in contact with in the community, these commands start first in your home. Imagine the difference it would make in a marriage if we started treating each other the way Paul commands us here, the way Jesus commands us here.

If we stopped trying to get even or have the last word but live peaceably, not seeking revenge. Imagine the difference it would make if before we see a transformation with how we treat people in the world, that the gospel transforms the way I treat people in my home. My spouse, my kids, my brother, my sister, my mom, my dad.

The gospel helps us overcome evil with good, then when people are hard to love, be a blessing, when people hurt us, pursue peace.

But the question we may be asking is, what about justice?

If God is calling us to bless those who persecute us, to not repay evil for evil, what about justice, doesn't God care about justice?

Well here's what Paul leaves us with, he says when people do evil, we trust in God's justice.

TRUST JUSTICE

Trust in God's justice.

Romans 12:19–21 ESV

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

I think if we're going to talk about justice, I think we need to differentiate the difference between justice and revenge.

Like, is what we are longing for justice, or do we just want revenge? Because that desire in us to get even, for people to get what they deserve, because we have been hurt, we have suffered that we want them to suffer, that isn't justice, that's revenge.

So how do we know the difference? Let me give you a couple of ways to think about it.

Revenge is about my pain. Justice is about what's right. Revenge says, "you hurt me, so I want you to hurt." Justice says, "what was done was wrong, and it needs to be made right."

Revenge is personal — I want to be the one who settles it. Justice belongs to the judge. That's why we have courts, that's why we have police. It's not my job to make sure you get what's coming to you.

And revenge always escalates. You hurt me, I hurt you back a little more. That's how feuds start, that's how families stop talking for decades. Justice doesn't escalate; it just wants the wrong addressed.

Here's the simplest way I know to test our hearts. If the person who hurt you came to Jesus, repented, and God forgave them completely, wiped their slate clean — would you be glad? Or would you be angry?

If we'd be angry, then what we wanted wasn't justice. We wanted revenge.

Revenge wants them to hurt. Justice wants things made right.

And that's exactly what Paul is getting at in verse 19. It's not up to you to seek revenge, revenge is always more destructive.

But trust that there is an ultimate justice in this world. That's the hope we have as Christians. We have some form of justice in this world; we have a judicial system that seeks to put bring justice to broken situations.

But often in spite of people's best efforts the justice system at times falls short. But there is a justice system higher than the Canadian judicial system. And the promise of God is that one day, when Christ returns all wrongs will be made right. That all that is done in the dark will be brought to light and those who have done evil, will be held to account and every wrong will be made right.

That's why Paul says that it's not for you to seek revenge, but leave them to the Lord, trust that he will ensure that what is wrong will be made right. Vengeance is mine says the Lord, I will repay.

Paul says rather than seek vengeance, he gives us again something that can only be done in a transformed heart, if your enemy is hungry feed them, if they are thirsty give them a drink.

You think what? Why would I do that, why would anyone ever dare to do that?

Because isn't that what God has done for you in Christ? Like weren't you and I at one time enemies of God? Didn't we at one time rebel against him? And how did God repay our evil against him?

He showed us mercy. That while we were sinners, Christ died for us.

This is what mercy does for you, this is when you begin to understand grace. This is what it means to walk in grace.

That you begin to show that same grace, that same mercy towards those who don't deserve it. Because I didn't deserve it.

And what that does is it puts the gospel on display, even for your enemy.

And by doing so, Paul says you will heap burning coals on their head.

And you think, well wait a minute, that just seems like vengeance masked doesn't it.

Like I'm just going to be nice to this person so that the wrath of God will just be turned up on them, or man you just wait, you just wait God is going to get you.

Be nice to them so it burns. But that's not what Paul means. The picture is of conviction, of kindness that burns in someone's conscience until they can't ignore it. Our kindness either leads them to repentance, or it leaves them without excuse before God. But our hope, our prayer, is always that they would come to Jesus.

Remember Gladys Staines? After her husband and sons were killed, she said, "I have forgiven the killers, but the law must take its own course." That's it. No revenge. But trusting justice to take its course.

And do you know what's happened in that village where they were killed? Today there are three churches there. Many have come to faith in Christ.

That's what it looks like to overcome evil with good.

So how do we overcome evil with good?

When people are hard to love, be a blessing. When people hurt us, pursue peace. When people do evil, trust God's justice.

But let's be honest. None of us do this naturally. Left to ourselves, we pull right back toward the ditch.

But here's the good news. Jesus didn't just call us to this, he lived it. Listen to how Peter describes Jesus at the cross:

1 Peter 2:23
"When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly."

Do you see it? He didn't curse back, he blessed. He didn't retaliate; he made peace. He didn't take revenge; he entrusted himself to the Father's justice.

At the cross, evil did its very worst. And Jesus overcame it with good. Three days later, the empty tomb proved that evil doesn't get the last word.

That's why we can do this. Not because we grip the wheel a little tighter, but because the gospel has realigned us.

Maybe you came in this morning with a name on your mind. Someone who's hurt you, wronged you, maybe still is. What would it look like this week to bless them? To pursue peace? To put them in God's hands?

This is the calling of the Christian life.

But if you are here and you are not a Christian this morning, these commands aren't for you, not yet at least.

The calling of the gospel is to first come and be transformed by the power of the gospel. Come and give your life to Jesus. Come and see the mercy and the grace that God has shown to us by sending his Son to die on the cross in our place, for the forgiveness of our sin, come and see the power of the resurrected Christ, who brings new life to those who call on his name.

Come and be transformed and then go and overcome evil with good.

Let's pray.