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**Series: Romans: The Just Shall Live by Faith**  
**Message: Overcomes, Not Overcome**

**Transcribed Message**  
**March 19, 2023**  
**Romans 12:19-21**

I might be the least qualified person here this morning to speak about anything related to movies. I try to go to one movie a year. That's kind of my average over the last however many years. But I do know that there is a genre of movies called revenge movies. In revenge movies, the very idea, the storyline is that an injustice has been done and somebody is going to correct it and they're going to correct it right now. That's the whole idea and that kind of appeals to who we are as people in our fallen mindset, that if we're going to see justice done we're going to be the ones that are going to realize it and achieve it and we're going to do it right now. That's kind of the mindset that's the idea behind it. It follows through with the famous line of Clint Eastwood: Go ahead; make my day.

It does remind me of the trucker who after a weary night stopped in at an all-night café just to rest and get something to eat. He went and sat down, his meal came to him, and no sooner had he begun to eat then three ruffians came in off of their motorcycles all leathered out. They began to harass him and give him a hard time. First of all, they did it just verbally and then some of them reached over on the counter and grabbed some of his fries. They just continued to harass him and disturb his hoped-for peaceful meal. He finally reached a point where he had had enough. He got up and walked over to the register, put his money down with his tip, walked out the door into the night, and got into his truck to drive off. The waitress had watched the whole thing unfold and she came back to continue helping these guys. They said to her he's not much of a man, is he? She said well, I don't know what kind of man he is but he is a terrible truck driver. He just drove over three motorcycles on the way out. That's the opposite of what we're going to look at today in Romans.

Romans is going to take us in a totally different direction from that desire that we all have. We may have that inherently within us to want to seek justice right in the

moment, but we're going to see again that as a fully devoted follower of Christ we're going to follow a different path and a different way. In fact, in Romans 12:19 to 21 in these last verses this is what Paul is going to say to us. I believe it's not enough to just be passive. It's not enough to just be passive in the face of mistreatment. We're actually called on to bless our enemies and do them good.

Our final review of Romans 12 sounds like this. Three things. This is one of the most consequential chapters in all the Bible. First of all, it is of course within the context of one of the greatest books in the Bible, the *magnum opus* as we called it of the apostle Paul. So here this chapter rises among all of these chapters and since it follows chapter 1 through 11, that great extensive teaching of Paul on the doctrines of our faith, we come to chapter 12 and it's like he takes us to another Mount Everest. If chapter 8 is the Mount Everest of Bible doctrine and truth of redemption, then I would suggest to you that the 12 chapters of Mount Everest at least within the epistles of this matter of Christian ethics and how it is that we live out our faith.

I think secondly it's one of the most challenging chapters in the Bible. How many times have we said that? How many times as we've gone through all of these imperatives have we said we can't do this. That's exactly the response that we're to have. We are to come to each one of these instances and say I can't do this. The Lord says, I know you can't do it and that's why I put within you the Holy Spirit of God to enable you and equip you to do it. We say again as we will this morning this is truly impossible.

Then thirdly, I think it's one of the most transformative chapters in the Bible. One of the most transformative. We live out the truth of these 21 verses and these 25 different imperatives and everything changes. Simply put. Everything changes. Your life looks totally different. If you're a fully devoted follower of Christ walking in the truth of Romans 12, and by the power of the enabling Holy Spirit living out as best you can these 25 imperatives that make up this chapter, I can simply say to you you are living a transformed life. That is the very idea behind it. It is truly to be transformative.

Let's look then this morning at when peace proves impossible, something better than revenge if you were to make a list of how it is that justice could be realized. Let's just start there. If you were to just comprise a very short list of how justice can be

realized in this life, I would suggest that there are three possible alternatives. Three possible different ways. The first one would be to leave it to God. Leave it to God. That of course is what you see in this 19<sup>th</sup> verse. Our God had said in verse 18 through Paul – if it's possible, live in peace with everybody. That is the very idea that we talked about last Sunday – if it's possible. It may or may not be possible for you to live in peace. There are some things that we can do, and some things we can't do. But we look to God to accomplish and to realize justice. In verse 19, he is going to say again leave it to God. God will ultimately do that.

We live in a moral universe. It may not look like it at times, but the reality is as God oversees the world that He has created, we live in a moral universe. That moral universe is ultimately going to be dictated by the truth and the principles of the word of God which say whatever a man or woman sows, that's what they're going to reap. Those are the moral laws that God has put in place in our world so we live within a moral universe. The writer of Hebrews says in the 9<sup>th</sup> chapter that it is appointed unto man once to die and then comes the judgment. That is the reality. There is a way that justice is realized and first of all it's realized when we leave it to God.

Secondly, we can let government bring justice. That's what we're going to see in a few weeks when we get into chapter 13 and verse 4 when Paul says the government, the state does not bear the sword in vain. What is that saying? There's a place and a time when we allow the government authority to realize and bring justice to a particular situation. We can turn to government. Within the context of the local church, we know if it's a governance matter then that is the responsibility of the elders to make sure that there is justice that is realized in whatever that context might be.

The third option of course is we can take it upon ourselves. We can take it upon ourselves. Now we've already seen in verse 17 and we'll see again in verse 19 that that option has literally been taken off the table. We are not to repay someone evil for evil. We're not to look for opportunities to retaliate and seek revenge. What are we to do? Well I'm glad you asked because that's exactly what he says in verses 19 to 21. Let's look.

The positive and the negative. Let's start with the negative. The first thing he says to us what are we not to do is given to us in verse 19. Look at 19 again. "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." It looks to me like when you begin this 19<sup>th</sup> verse that Paul begins a hard truth and he softens what he is going to say. A hard truth is softened. Now, why do I say that? Because the very first word of verse 19 is "beloved". It's Paul's way of saying my dear friends, my brothers and sisters in Christ, I know I am about to bring to you yet another hard truth. It's almost as if Paul, in extending that opening statement of the 19<sup>th</sup> verse, is acknowledging that once again something hard is coming, but he wants them to understand his heart. He wants them to see beyond these words. He wants them to realize that what he has in mind is their best. In a sense, I suppose you could say there's a little bit of a play on words. He is calling them his beloved, and at the same time he is going to be asking them to step into a spirit of love for those who they would normally not want to love. I think it begins in that way so that he can bring this truth to them and remind them of who they are.

The second thing I want you to see is some things are simply best left to God. Some things are best left to God because he says in that next statement never avenge yourselves. Never avenge yourselves. Here we have yet another exception clause or another no exception clause. How many times has Paul broken the rule that we often say don't ever say never. Don't ever say always. It always gets us in trouble when we start off a sentence that way. You never. You always. Usually there's something not so good coming after that. Here Paul is reminding us no, there are some circumstances there are some situations in which this word "never" is very appropriate. There is no wiggle room in this word "never". There's no excuses. When Paul says never, he's almost anticipating that we're going to come back and say but Paul, what about ... this is what happened to me though. What is this? Never. Never. There are no avenues to R&R. there are no avenues to revenge and retaliation. Don't let someone else's hostility become your hostility is what he would say to us. Fighting back is not allowed. In this circumstance, he is calling on us to leave it to God. Leave it to God.

As Paul makes that point, what does he point us to with regard to the nature of God's character? When he says just leave this in God's hands, don't ever take it upon yourself, he directs us to the wrath of God. He goes on to say beloved, never avenge yourselves but leave it to the wrath of God. I would say to you this is the biblical doctrine

of the wrath of God. I would say to you that it's probably an understatement to say that in many circles this is a doctrine that people do not want. They don't want to even acknowledge this truth. This in many ways is a doctrine and a truth that not everybody wants to acknowledge.

What comes to mind when you hear the words the wrath of God? For many, it's cause for embarrassment. There is a caricature and I'm not necessarily proposing it, but there's a character of a hellfire and brimstone preacher. He is all about the wrath of God and he brings it every week. He brings the wrath of God down on whoever's there. For many people, they think of the wrath of God and they have this character in their mind with this particular image and persona. It's an embarrassment. Who really wants that as the idea of representing God in some way?

For other people, it's just a matter of incredulity. I just don't believe this. I don't think this is really the God of the Bible. Very often we have created this image of God after our own likeness in which we think of the Old Testament as a God who is intolerant. He's the God of wrath. He's the God who brings judgment regularly upon people. Then we flipped over to the New Testament and we have Jesus. We like to quote the fact that Jesus is the one who said he who is without sin let him cast the first stone. Everybody backs off because nobody is without sin. And so we have the opposite picture in mind. This wrathful vengeful God of the Old Testament and this gracious kind God who is represented in Jesus in the New Testament.

That kind of thinking has led to an unorthodox position with regard to our understanding of God. It's led to an image of God that views God as only being a God of love and kindness, a God of mercy and grace who would never exhibit wrath towards any of His creatures, certainly not those who are doing their best. AW Tozer emphasized this when he said, "The vague and tenuous hope that God is too kind to punish the ungodly has become a deadly opiate for the consciences of millions."

Here's what we know about the wrath of God. We know first of all that if we do have a false understanding of the wrath of God, it might be because when we think of wrath and we think of anger, we think of some human maybe within a close circle of ours that loses their temper and is rageful and angry in ways that are expressed in an uncontrollable way. That's not the biblical understanding of the wrath of God. If that is

the idea that we want to bring and put over onto this understanding of the wrath of God, rightfully we reject that. But we know that the wrath of God as it's presented in Scripture being a part of the very character of God, that wrath of God which God expresses is always expressed in righteousness. It's always based on truth. It's always with His holiness in mind. All of these things that are said in Scripture about the wrath of God are based on the justice of God. We also know of course that the wrath of God is eternal. We know that it's terrible. We know that it is deserved and we know that it is escapable. That's what we know about the wrath of God.

Now just for our further consideration, whether we want this doctrine or not, it's in the book. It's in the Bible. This is how God has revealed Himself. This is that aspect of His character that the Scriptures plainly teach. Let me just read some of the verses that are listed for you there. Psalm 7:11. "God is a righteous judge. He's a God who expresses His wrath every day." Psalm 9:7,8. "The Lord reigns forever. He has established His throne for judgment. He will judge the world in righteousness. He will govern the peoples with justice." Psalm 90:40. "O Lord, the God who avenges, a God who avenges, shine forth! Rise up! Judge of the earth, pay back to the proud what they deserve. How long will the wicked. O Lord, how long will the wicked triumph?" Isaiah chapter 5:16. "The Lord Almighty will be exalted by His justice and the holy God will show Himself holy by His righteousness." Romans, where we've already been, chapter 3 verse 5. "What shall we say then? That God is unjust in bringing His wrath on us? Certainly not! If that were so, how could God judge the whole world?"

And if we ever have the image that Jesus is all about kindness and love and mercy, then we haven't completely read through the Scriptures. When you come to Revelation chapter 6 and verse 15, listen to what it says about our Lord and about the coming judgment. Revelation 6 verse 15: "Then the kings of the earth and the great ones and the generals and the rich and the powerful and everyone, slave and free, hid themselves in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, calling to the mountains and rocks, 'Fall on us and hide us from the face of Him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb. For the great day of their wrath has come and who can stand?'" Here is just a little snapshot of some of what the Scripture says about

this doctrine of the wrath of God. We don't need to take these matters of justice into our own hands. We do rightfully turn them over to God to deal with these.

But now look at what we are to do. What we are to do in verses 20 and 21? Here's what he says. "To the contrary, if your enemy is hungry, feed him. If he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by doing so, you will heap burning coals on his head. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." What are we to do? The first thing we do is we go back to SOTM. What is SOTM? The Sermon on the Mount. We go back to the Sermon on the Mount. Listen to what Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew chapter 5 verse 43: "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For He makes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the just and the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward you have? Do not even tax collectors do the same? if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others. Don't even the Gentiles do the same? You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." it's a very similar statement that Paul makes in Romans 12. Obviously he was very familiar with the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount. He brings the same principles over here and he takes us back to the teaching of Jesus.

The second thing we notice is you can go back even farther than that. You can go back to Proverbs. When we go back to Proverbs and the 25<sup>th</sup> chapter and verse 21, listen to this with Romans 12:19 to 21 ringing in your mind. "If your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat. And if he is thirsty, give him water to drink, for you will heap burning coals on his head and the Lord will reward you." what you have in Romans 12 is Paul drawing on the Old Testament Scriptures of Proverbs chapter 25 and basically quoting what we find in Proverbs. You don't need to be the judge. God has taken that on. He will do that. You don't need to win right now here on earth because we have a God who is righteous and just and holy and he will accomplish what needs to be accomplished in His time.

Then I would suggest thirdly what Jesus and Paul and the writers of the Old Testament say to us and put forward in this principle is nothing less than a subversive morality. This is a subversive morality. When you look at what we're been told here, it

goes against all of our natural thinking. It subverts all of the thinking of the natural man. It subverts all of the thinking that we just inherently bring to mind when we are in these kinds of circumstances. It undermines all of that. In times when we are under attack, it's really an attack on our faith. When someone is doing us wrong and is creating a sense of injustice against us, it's at that time that our very faith perspective is under assault. When our own flesh wells up and says, I will repay you for what you have done to me. I will get revenge and I will retaliate against you. This is subverting all of that thinking. This is going completely against the grain of that thinking. This is telling us to do something totally different. It is to look at everything through a divine perspective that sees the justice of God being accomplished maybe yet even in the future.

What does it do? It takes us right back to Romans 12:1, 2. I appeal to you brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God that you present your bodies as a living sacrifice, wholly acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service of worship. Don't be conformed to this world but in this subversive morality, be allowing the word of God to change the very way you think and how you act. That's what he's doing here. He is ending the chapter by taking us right back to the beginning of the chapter and saying yes, this is what is happening. The world looks at this kind of response and says this is absolute foolishness. If justice is going to be accomplished, it needs to be accomplished right now. Forget about the future. Forget about some coming judgment. I want justice now. The world looks at this response and says no way is that person getting away with this. I'm going to make them pay. They're going to get back from me more than what they gave to me. Justice from the standard of our human reasoning needs to be done now and it needs to be accomplished by us. When I see beyond the here and now, and when I see beyond my own response, and I see what it is that God wants to do and accomplish, that's where he brings us here.

Now let me step back in as we've done before and in the context of the situation let me remind you that there are things that we can do within this subversive morality that are within the precepts and principles of Scripture. We're undergoing an injustice. There is something that is happening to us that is wrong. It doesn't mean, as we've said repeatedly, that we just lay down and get run over time after time after time. No. what we can do is we can stand up for ourselves in the right way. If we're in a situation where



there is abuse, we can get out of the situation that may not be safe. We don't have to remain in a place that isn't safe in the name of this teaching. That's to misunderstand what he's saying. If that were the case, then obviously we would place ourselves and people we love in danger and harm. He is not saying that to us. There is a place for justice to be done and for your case to be put forward. You can present your case to whoever that might be. A boss, a superior, somebody that needs to know that injustice is being done. You can do that within this framework. But what you can't do is you can't seek revenge. What you can't do is you can't seek to retaliate out of the spirit of let's-get-even. You can seek to even restrain the one doing the evil. All of those things are in play.

Let's look at the last statement of that 20<sup>th</sup> verse. "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." I can spend a lot of time here because it is simply not possible I don't think for us to be dogmatic about how we're going to understand what that phrase means. But when we look at that, there are three options it seems to me. What does it mean when instead of seeking revenge, instead of seeking to retaliate, we may respond in a measure of kindness. We certainly aren't going the other way. There's something very different about our behavior, about our words, about our actions that clearly the person who is creating this injustice is going to realize and see. They might very well expect that we would strike back, that we would retaliate, that we would seek revenge. We're doing none of those things. Paul says in not doing those things, you're literally heaping coals of fire on the top of their head.

What does that mean? It could mean first of all, and some take it to mean that this is a figurative way, this is a metaphor for saying we're bringing shame on that person. They mistreat us, they seek to bring an injustice against us, and we don't respond in kind. It causes them to experience a measure of shame. They look at their own actions in light of yours and that's the end result. You're heaping coals of fire on them and they're ashamed of their actions. Another way that this has been understood and interpreted is very similar to the first one. It is simply to say that this is going to cause them to come to repentance. To heap coals of fire on their head not only creates a sense of shame, it creates a way of response on their part that causes them to see

themselves as they are. But it takes them a step further and they repent. Now that particular view is very common in many of the commentaries as to what is happening here.

The third one is this. The coals and fire represent God's judgment. Now for many, that is not an acceptable position because they read this whole chapter and especially these latter verses and they say that kind of an attitude goes completely against everything that we've just read in verses 19 to 21. This now almost seems vengeful. You're going to heap coals of fire on the head of your enemy with the view to your enemy being judged. Good! I'm going to keep doing that! And so they look at that and they say that doesn't fit with the flow of the chapter. But I would push back against that for this reason. There are two realities it seems to me at work all through this chapter, but especially in these closing verses. We saw the first reality back in verse 14. Your enemy does something to you, don't curse them back. Don't seek revenge. Remember what we were to do? We were to bless our enemy. The whole idea there was in effect we want for them to understand what we know. We want them to hear the gospel. We want them to respond to the gospel. We want them to experience the blessings of God that we've experienced. That's verse 14. That's one way that we are to respond to those who would seek us harm and bring injustice.

But here's the other reality. The other thing that's going on in this set of verses is in verse 20. That is there is a sense of justice and the wrath of God that's being put before us. Both of these realities are presented within the context of 14 to 21. We want our enemies to be blessed because we want them to know and understand what we know with regard to the gospel and the grace of God. But we also know (verse 18) if it is possible, you be at peace with all men. But what do we know? We know it's not always possible. There are people who it doesn't matter how much coals of fire are heaped on their head, they're not going to feel ashamed and they're not going to repent. It seems to me that it is fair with an understanding of this chapter to say no, this isn't against the flow of the chapter to see this as God's judgment. This is in fact in harmony with that because there are people whose consciences are hardened in the response of a believer in the way that is described to us here. They have no sense of shame. They have no desire to repent and they are not open to the working of God in their life.

I think it is exactly what Paul said back in Romans chapter 2 and verses 4 and 5. Listen to Romans 2:4, 5 and see if you don't see it mirrored in verse 20 and 21. "Or do you presume on the riches of His kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?" that's verse 14. Verse five says this: "But because of your hard and impenitent heart, you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed." Both of these truths are put forward in verses 14 to 21. Do respond to your enemy and pray for them that they would be blessed. And if God the Spirit works in such a way that their heart is softened and they turn to the gospel and believe, then they experience what you experience and that's exactly what you want. But the reality is there are some people who, Paul just said it in Romans 2, are so hardened in their heart against the truth of God and the people of God that they are not going to respond in the way that we would desire according to verse 14. I think both of these are in play. I think what happens when we respond as we are supposed to against someone who seeks injustice against us and someone who perpetrates an act of unkindness against us, seeks to harm us, when we respond without retaliation, without revenge we are in that sense heaping coals of fire on their head. They may very well anticipate and realize the judgment of God.

Look at the final truth. Verse 21: "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." These are Nike Christians. These are not Under Armour Christians. These are Nike Christians. These are overcomers. That is the whole point of this closing segment. We are to be overcomers. Verse 21 is a summary in many respects of the whole chapter. When he says that we are to be the ones who overcome, it's the word *nikao*. What Nike did, they just took a Greek word *nikao* and said we're going to make it Nike. But the idea is that they're overcomers, conquerors, victorious. That's who we are to be. We're to be Nike Christians. We're to be overcomers. We're to be conquerors.

How do we overcome? We overcome, according to verse 14, when we do not curse those who would seek us harm. Verse 17. We overcome when we don't repay evil for evil. Verse 19. We overcome when we don't seek revenge against someone who has wronged us. Verse 21. We overcome when we don't seek evil for evil. And then add to that this final thought: How is it that God treated you? How is it that God viewed you

when you were his enemy? Paul spoke to that in Romans 5 and he basically said when we were still sinners, when we were the enemies of God, Jesus came and He died for us. That's the picture. It brings all of this in place. We can think of many situations over our lifetime and somebody may be in one right now where there's an injustice being done in your life. something that is undeserved, something that someone or some situation is bringing against you and in which you are up against it. What he is saying to us here is that we as fully devoted followers of Christ, we step into a subversive morality and we live differently than the world. We respond differently than the world because that's exactly the way God responded to us. When we were His enemies, Christ came and died for us. It is not enough to be passive in the face of mistreatment. We're called on to bless our enemies and to do them good.

It was in 2015 that a young man named Dylan Roof went into a church Wednesday night Bible study in Charlotte, South Carolina, and in an act of murderous hatred killed nine people in that Bible study. When he went on trial, the husband of one of those ladies that was killed said to the judge and said to Dylan Roof, "I forgive you for what you have done to me and my family in murdering my wife. I appeal to you, judge, to spare his life because that's exactly what Jesus has done for me." That is the witness of the gospel in a real-life situation that I cannot imagine the intensity of emotion and feeling in the face of such hatred and murder.

What do we take away? There's nothing that compares to the gospel. This is an apt summary of this 12<sup>th</sup> chapter. There's nothing that compares to the gospel of Jesus Christ. It alone changes us and it changes the way we live. We look at this 12<sup>th</sup> chapter and we say it's overwhelming. We say it's convicting. We say it is countercultural. But you know what else I say to you? I say to you that it is beautiful. It's beautiful because the gospel is beautiful. When the gospel is on display in our lives, when we are living out these 25 imperatives, I say to you again that nothing stays the same. Everything changes. There is a transformation that takes place within our lives, within our marriages, within our homes, within the context of parenting, within our workplaces, within our schools, within our neighborhoods. There is a representation of the beauty of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

All of us are born into this world as an enemy of God. That's what the Bible says. For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. But God, when we were yet sinners, sent His Son Jesus to die on the cross for our sins. And when we believe that what Jesus did is all that needed to be done, that I can't add one thing to it, I can't do one good work, that in some way causes God to move towards me and give me salvation. Not one work is either required or allowed. It is simply the exercise of faith and belief in what Jesus did when He said it is finished and it is enough. I believe that and trust that alone for the forgiveness of my sins that God gives me the gift of eternal life, the forgiveness of sins, and introduces me to the beauty of the gospel. Our heart is to know God. It is to love others, and it is to live out this gospel.

Let's pray. Father, I pray that by the power of Your Holy Spirit right now in these closing moments, You would open the eyes and hearts of those who have not yet believed to put their faith and trust in Jesus alone for their salvation, to experience the forgiveness of sin, to experience the gift of eternal life. I pray, Father, that You would cause each one of us to live out the beauty of this gospel in our life every day for Your glory. We ask in Jesus's name, amen.