Overcome Evil – with Good
Romans 12:17 & 21

Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. ... Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

A couple of months ago, a fictional action-thriller television series debuted on Amazon Prime and had millions of viewers the first week. It told the story of a Navy SEAL who seeks to avenge the murder of his family. This particular television show was all about revenge.

And there are many such revenge stories out there in our culture today. How is a follower of Jesus to faithfully navigate life in a way that heeds Paul's exhortations in Romans (above) about not repaying evil for evil? Sometimes it seems like revenge and the law of retaliation is what governs this world. But Paul is telling these Roman believers there is a better way than repaying evil for/with evil.

There has been a breakthrough of grace in our world in the person of Jesus Christ. And even if repaying evil for evil seems to be the cold and inescapable reality of life today, there's a reality that transcends this world—and that reality is Jesus. And Paul is saying that justice, and the execution of justice, is best left to God. This is the pathway forward for Jesus followers.

If we think of the terrorism and violence around our globe it seems to be unstoppable. It goes on and on in Africa, in the Middle East, in our own streets ... and in our own hearts. It seems like the law of retaliation is the only law. But the way forward, out of the desperate violence that dominates our world, is the way of Jesus. And the way of Jesus is the way of grace and the way of love and overcoming evil with good. How is the Lord speaking to you about overcoming evil with good?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, we know evil has been defeated by your cross. Thank you for showing us the way to overcome evil is by doing good. May we live in this way, a way that runs counter to the ways of the world. And may we trust you completely. Amen.

Live at Peace with Everyone
Romans 12:18

If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.

Living at peace with everyone. That sounds really hard!

A Lutheran theologian, Gerhard Liedke, writing in East Germany before the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, suggested a helpful tool (see the chart below) for peace. He said peace is a process rather than a position or state of being. This is a profound idea.

He wrote that peace must be grounded in the Shalom of God, and that to build peace four things must be minimized: violence, need, bondage, and anxiety. As we minimize (reduce) these four dimensions in the places we live, we act as God's agents for peace. He also wrote that our special Christian strategy will necessarily include suffering, renunciation of violence, and forgiveness.

To respond in gentleness to a hateful remark minimizes violence. You and I are called to be agents for peace and reconciliation wherever we find ourselves. As we follow Jesus, together, how should we endeavor to reduce need, violence, anxiety, and bondage to things like fear, loneliness, addiction, and despair? How can you be an agent of peace today?
Prayer: Lord, help me as I follow the Prince of Peace to pursue peace and be a peace-maker—if it is possible—and as far as it depends on me. Amen.

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Do Not Take Revenge
Romans 12:19

Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: “It is mine to avenge; I will repay,” says the Lord.

Paul is addressing a very common but sinister desire for retribution—the desire that the people who have caused us pain would suffer for what they have done.

We must admit that this shadowy desire has crept into all of our hearts at times. Does this text just indict us and our desires for revenge that we know run counter to the way of Jesus, or does God want to teach us something in this admonition from Paul?

Paul is encouraging these Roman Christians to give up their rights to justice. Holy anger has its place and the scriptures, especially the Hebrew prophets, exhort us to work for the rights of others. However, in cases concerning ourselves, we are urged NOT to seek retribution. Paul says, “Leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: ’It is mine to avenge; I will repay.’”

Paul is quoting Deuteronomy 32:35, which was from Moses’ final speech to God’s people (actually a song) warning them to be faithful to their covenant God who had delivered them from Egypt. This song goes on to indicate that God actually intends to restore and rehabilitate his people.

One of the reasons we are not to seek retribution is because we could be standing in the way of God’s unfolding plan of redemption. Paul is exhorting these Roman believers, and us too, to leave judgment to God.

How is the Lord speaking to you about not seeking revenge? Take some time to talk to the Lord about this exhortation from Paul. What do you think it means to leave room for God’s wrath?

Prayer: Heavenly Father, I surrender any desire that I would ever feel for revenge of any sort whatsoever. Help me to leave room for your activity instead. I trust your wisdom God. I will rely on your sovereign care, your provision, and your protection in my life. Amen.

If Your Enemy is Hungry, Feed Him
Romans 12:20

On the contrary:
“If your enemy is hungry, feed him;
if he is thirsty, give him something to drink.
In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.”

Heaping coals of fire is a metaphor that seems to have been pretty much lost to modern readers; however, we can discern it must entail a surprise that motivates a change in attitude and behavior on the part of our enemies.

We see this metaphor in Proverbs 25:21-23. And scholars believe it was actually an ancient Egyptian practice that found its way into Proverbs and this is what Paul is referring to here.
It seems clear that the “heaping of coals” is doing real and tangible good, not shaming or bringing embarrassment upon your enemy (that would be too close to revenge or retribution, which we've already covered on Days 1 and 3 this week).

It appears that the practice of heaping coals was an ancient practice that would lead to repentance and to forgiveness. The whole metaphor in Proverbs promises that when we react to our enemies by caring for them, God will make us whole.

This summarizes Romans 12:19-20. To be vindictive does not lead to wholeness for ourselves or for our community. Rather, it is in the giving up our desires for revenge, and in working toward meeting the needs of our enemies, that God brings his Shalom into the world.

Sometimes we are hard-pressed to say who our enemies are. Try this: Think for a moment about anyone you are having “relational drama” with. How can you do something good for that person? How can you—to use the cryptic phrase from scripture—heap coals of fire upon their head?

**Prayer:** Come, Holy Spirit, come. I need your power to love in the way Paul is describing. Help me to love my enemies the way Jesus commanded. I resolve to do good to people I am in relational drama with—even if that isn't my first impulse. Amen.

### PERSONAL REFLECTION & LIFEGROUP CONVERSATION

Start by reading Romans 12:17-21. As you read, underline words and phrases in your Bible that stand out to you.

**Day 1:** To whom might we owe an apology if we have “repaid evil for evil”? How can we find the courage not to want to get even when we are hurt by others?

Discuss with your group, or a friend, this command to overcome evil with good. How can we do this individually? How can we do this as a church?

**Day 2:** What are we doing to strive after peace and wholeness for our neighbors? What are we doing to make peace in our world? In what ways is our congregation at Living Word bringing peace to the community?

Discuss ways we can together be agents for peace in our relationships and spheres of influence.

**Day 3:** Do you have a desire for vengeance against anyone? How have we experienced in our lives the fact that vengeance is never helpful to us, steals our joy, and destroys our witness? How does it encourage you to know that once written, the scriptures remain written, and are therefore authoritative for our lives?

Discuss: Do we really believe that everything the Lord says can be trusted?

**Day 4:** What opportunities have we had to heap coals of fire on the heads of our enemies—to get them started on their way toward repentance? In what ways could we have responded to our enemies with love, but didn’t? What were the results?

Discuss: How does an emphasis on loving action, instead of vindication, lead to wholeness?

**Bonus Questions:** How have we seen evil overcome by good? What dimensions of our lives need a healthy dose of good to overcome things that are evil?