

Overcome Evil with Good

Romans 12:9–21 — Proper 17, Series A

Grace, mercy, and peace be unto you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO DO WITH THAT?

The room was not friendly. Washington, 1969, a Senate subcommittee with the power to cut public television's funding in half, and in the chair, Senator John Pastore, who opened by saying he was tired of hearing testimony and wanted this over in a minute or two. Fred Rogers, a children's television host nobody in that room owed anything, sat down across from a man who had already decided the answer was no.

We know that room. Maybe not with a gavel, but we know what it is to sit across from someone who has already decided against us, who has the leverage and intends to use it. And we know, if we're honest, our first instinct in that seat. It isn't defeat. It's calculation. What are you going to do with that. How are you going to answer him. Paul writes plainly to a church that knew hostility from every direction: bless those who persecute you, bless and do not curse them. He has to say it because the other thing, the cursing, the calculating, the quiet plotting of the comeback, is what actually comes naturally to us. Love that's genuine, honor that goes first, these aren't difficult because we don't understand them. They're difficult because something in us is already composing the reply.

THE SENATOR CAME IN SKEPTICAL

Verse nineteen puts a name on something we'd rather not admit: we do not simply want the person who wronged us to face justice, we want to be the one who hands it to them. Picture the ledger we each keep, not on paper, we're too careful of that, but somewhere down in the chest, where every unpaid account gets logged with interest. We do not balance it. We cannot. It only grows. And Paul's word here is not forget the ledger, as though that were possible. It is close the drawer and hand

over the key. Someone else will settle it. That is either terrifying or it is the best news we have heard all week, depending on whether we still want the drawer open.

Paul writes:

*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."*

Romans 12:19

Pastore wasn't wrong to have power in that room. He had every right to cut the funding, every right to end the hearing in a minute. That's the trouble with real grievances, they usually come with a real claim attached. We're not asked to pretend the claim isn't real. We're asked to hand it to someone else.

HE DIDN'T ARGUE BACK

Rogers didn't argue with Pastore. He didn't defend public television's budget line by line. He talked, quietly, about a child's anger, and what a child does with it when nobody has shown them anything better. He recited something he'd written, plain words, almost nothing to them on paper. And something in the room came apart. Pastore, gavel still in hand, said, "I think it's wonderful. I think it's wonderful. Looks like you just earned the twenty million dollars." The hostility didn't win. It met something it didn't know how to answer.

That is a small and human picture of something far larger. Christ stood before a claim infinitely more legitimate than Pastore's, the claim of sin against us, real, documented, owed, entered against every one of us in full. He didn't argue it down. He didn't dispute the ledger, or ask for a lesser charge, or point out the mitigating circumstances. He let the whole of it be entered against him instead, at the cross, and paid it there in a currency none of us could raise: his own body, his own blood, his own breath given up. That is what it means that he was, in the fullest sense, overcome by evil. Not bruised by it. Not inconvenienced by it. Overcome, all the way to a borrowed tomb, with a stone across the door and Roman soldiers standing guard to make certain it stayed that way.

And on the third day, evil discovered its victory had purchased nothing. The stone was rolled back, not to let him out, the tomb couldn't have held him regardless, but to let us in to see that it was empty. He rose, bodily, the same hands that were nailed now breaking bread and bearing wounds you could touch. He ascended in full view of witnesses who staked their own lives on having seen it. And he reigns now, this morning, over that room in Washington and over whatever room you're sitting in with your own grievance held tight in your hand. That is exactly why the drawer can close. Not because the debt was waved away, and not because vengeance is finally unnecessary, but because it already belongs to someone. It is not unclaimed. It is not being ignored. It is in the hands of the one competent to judge rightly, who bled to settle what could not otherwise be settled, and who is coming again to finish what the empty tomb started.

Paul says it as plainly as anywhere in this letter:

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

Romans 12:21

You are not asked to overcome evil. You couldn't. He already has, and he hands you the good you now get to give away, not to earn anything, but because it was given to you first.

WHO IS MY NEIGHBOR

Who is my neighbor. Not a category. Not people in general. The man on the other side of your actual fence, the one who let his dog bark through your granddaughter's nap for the third summer running, the one you've stopped waving to because the wave started feeling like a lie. That's not a hypothetical. You know his name. You know which house.

This week, before next Sunday, you knock. Not with a complaint prepared, and not with an apology you don't owe either, the drawer is closed, remember, not denied. You knock to ask how he's doing, or to bring over the extra zucchini nobody in your house will eat. That's the whole transaction. It will not feel like triumph. It will feel like almost nothing, five minutes on a porch, forgettable to

anyone watching. That is exactly what handing someone a key is supposed to feel like from the outside.

Who is my neighbor. Sometimes it isn't the man behind the fence at all. It's the coworker who got the promotion you'd quietly assumed was yours, and you have since perfected a tone with him, pleasant enough that no one could call it unkind, cold enough that he knows exactly where he stands. This week it might be one sentence past that tone, a real question about how his new role is going, asked and actually listened to.

Who is my neighbor. I keep at least one of these myself, most weeks, and it's rarely the person who hurt me most. It's usually the smaller one I've let sit the longest, because nobody was making me open that drawer.

Rogers ended every program the same way, in that same neighborhood, with the same plain sentence: it's such a good feeling to know we're lifelong friends. He could say that to a camera and mean it toward strangers because someone had first said something like it to him and meant it infinitely more.

The drawer in your chest has already been closed once, at a cost you didn't pay. Not denied. Closed. The key isn't yours to keep, and it was never yours to guard. Whoever you're carrying this morning, the neighbor behind the fence, the one who got the promotion, the name only you know, hand it over again, this week, one ordinary act at a time. He is not still on the cross arguing his case. He is risen, and seated, and coming back to close every account that's ever been opened. Until then, we get to live like people who already know how the ledger ends. Amen.

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