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Overcoming Evil with Good
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Romans 12:9-21

Good morning. For those of you who don't know me, my name is Nate Ryan and I have had the pleasure of serving as the Pastoral Duties intern here at Brewster Baptist Church this summer. When Pastor Doug gave me the opportunity to preach this Sunday, I was initially really excited. He told me he was planning on doing a summer series on the Fruit of the Spirit and I was immediately intrigued. I figured I could definitely write a sermon on the need to be patient, or a sermon on showing kindness towards others, or a sermon on what it means to be faithful. But as soon as he told me that my sermon would be on the fruit of goodness, my eyes got all big and I was all of a sudden really hesitant. Goodness? What does that even mean? How can I define what that is? How can I convince an entire congregation on the need to be good? It was a struggle.

When I finally sat down earlier this summer to try and figure out the direction I wanted to go with this sermon, I spent about three hours just staring at a blank computer screen with no inspiration. I honestly struggled to figure out where I could see goodness on display in our world today. I am 22 years old, an age most of you have been at one point in your lives, even if that was a long time ago. As I've made the transition from adolescence into young adulthood over the past few years, one strange thing I've noticed is an intense newfound realization of just how broken the world is. It's like I was living with a curtain veiling over my eyes on what I thought the world to look like only for that curtain to be lifted and a darker, lonelier more confused reality is what I found. I've become truly jaded by the sheer amount of anger, and bitterness, and resentment I've seen on display in our world from people of all walks of life, across all political spectrums, and across all racial and socio-economic divides. And the saddest part is that we are just steeped in this culture every day by what we see on the news and what we see on the many multimedia platforms we use.

One of the dumbest mistakes I've ever made came two years ago while I was a student at Gordon College. Someone in our class came up with the bright idea to create a Facebook page where individuals could freely post articles and questions on any topic they considered socially "taboo," while giving others free access to comment on these matters as they so desired. The intended hope was to stimulate much needed dialogue on a series of controversial issues in a way which bound our community closer together as we listened to one another and came to appreciate each other's' differences.

It turned out just about how you might think it would. People were cussing and swearing at each other, people were calling each other every name under the sun, people felt completely ostracized and ganged up on, and unfortunately in one serious instance, an individual was threatened. It was complete and utter chaos, and I am ashamed to admit that at the time, I was consumed by it. Have you ever had that unsettling feeling when driving past a car accident that you shouldn't look at it but at the same time you just have to look at it, out of

curiosity? That was me every day on this page. Over time I continually found myself overcome by all of the juicy gossip it created, “can you believe so and so said this,” “how in the world could this person believe that?”, “Oh you see that guy walking across the quad, that guy believes this.” It was horrible. And along with this, I found myself becoming more and more bitter as time went on. I became much more easily irritated and people I previously considered my friends were all of a sudden people I distained talking to because I knew they felt a particular way about abortion, or the war in Afghanistan, or the presidential election, or the death penalty that was different than my own. It was not a healthy way to live. I imagine the feelings of bitterness and hard-heartedness I experienced towards others during this time isn’t too far from the experiences you may have had in this political climate. We live in a broken world and are not living at peace with ourselves and one another. Fear has taken us hostage.

We are psychologically programmed towards self-preservation, and we respond to anything we consider a personal threat to our safety in one of two ways, fight or flight. And this is pretty much universally accepted in the field of psychology as you probably know. When we perceive ourselves to be in danger, we either face the threat head-on with fists up, or we run for the hills. This same idea applies to our response to the evil of division and hostility in our world. The fear we experience as the world around us becomes increasingly hostile towards others leads us to either join a particular side of the fight or turn a blind eye to the existence of evil altogether and live as if it doesn’t exist.

And this is true of all people, and unfortunately, it has infiltrated the community of believers in the church as well. Self-proclaimed Christians, both Democrat and Republican, are continually guilty of thinking that the best way to fight evil in this world is to completely humiliate and embarrass the other side while other Christians seem perfectly content standing idle while millions of men, women and children suffer every day from extreme poverty, hunger, homelessness, and unsanitary living conditions. Some Christians are even so convinced that the world is going to hell in a handbasket that they think the best way to live obediently to Christ is to seclude themselves, avoid its conflicts, and patiently wait for the Second Coming to just fall in their laps (as if that’s the way it actually works).

We live in constant fear for our safety. Taking a particular side of the fight or ignoring evil’s existence altogether seems to be far better alternatives than being on the receiving end of it, and I understand that. But that is not the direction the Scriptures call us toward nor the road Jesus ultimately takes.

Our scripture this morning comes from the crucial 12th chapter of the Apostle Paul’s epistle to the Romans. When the book of *Romans* was written, Paul was near the end of his ministry, a ministry that had taken him throughout the Mediterranean world, from the shores of north Africa to the Middle East and Jerusalem, and throughout the Greek isles. The only place it hadn’t taken him was to the end of the known world up to that point, which was Spain. Spain

was the place where Paul desired to go the most. Paul writes his letter to the Romans in order to introduce himself to them, to establish credibility with them, and to hopefully visit them as a pit-stop on his route to Spain. The first eleven chapters of this letter are written to give a clear and robust description of just who this Jesus of Nazareth was and why his life, death and resurrection matters.

- *Romans 1* focuses on the need to acknowledge that God is the creator of all things and that we are called to be obedient creatures of His will.
- *Romans 3* describes how we have failed to do this, how we have been disobedient to God, and fall short of His glory because of our sin.
- *Romans 5* describes how God demonstrated his great love for us in that while we were still sinners, he did not turn his back on us, but instead sent his son to die for us.
- *Romans 6* states that “the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ.” Because of our sin, we deserved death, but Christ died in our place so that we might not have to face this punishment. But instead, that we might live forever in eternal union with the God who loves us and created us.
- And *Romans 10* proclaims that in order to accept this gift of love and be saved, we must confess with our mouths that Jesus is Lord and believe in our hearts that Jesus conquered death by raising from the dead.

But it is the 12th chapter of *Romans* that is in many ways the most important in the entire letter, and unfortunately it is ignored. The 12th chapter of *Romans* asks us the question of “So what?” It asks the question of, “If all this is true, what are we supposed to do about it.” At this point, Paul turns his attention away from what Christ has done for us and turns his attention towards how we are to respond as a result. How we are to live in light of the reality of this love God has shown for us. And ultimately, how we are to participate with God in vanquishing the evil of this world in the way we treat others. I encourage you as I read this text to be attentive to all of the ways Paul urges us to put others above ourselves in light of the self-giving love of Jesus.

“Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves. Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. Share with the Lord’s people who are in need. Practice hospitality.”

“Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.”

"Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. 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. 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.'

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

Now if you were paying attention, I hope your eyes and your ears gravitated to the phrases Paul uses like "honor one another above yourselves" or "be willing to associate with people of low position" or "as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone." Throughout this whole passage, Paul is trying to make it as clear as he can that there is only **one** correct way for the followers of Jesus to properly live in this world. In response to the self-giving love Christ displayed for us on the cross, we are to display a similar self-giving love to others. **This** is the way evil is overcome in the world. Goodness reigns over evil when we emulate the self-sacrificial love of Jesus in our daily lives.

The word translated as "goodness" both here and in the list of the Fruits of the Spirit in *Galatians 5* is the Greek word "agathos." Unfortunately for us, agathos is a notoriously difficult word to render well into English because it has a dual meaning. When we are told to be "good" or we hear the word "goodness" in our everyday lives, our minds immediately gravitate towards either a fight between good and evil or a disposition to do the morally "right" thing to do. Both of these descriptions help point us closer toward the true meaning of agathos, but it doesn't quite completely get us there. Agathos also has a generous attitude associated with it. It describes both having a natural inclination to do what is morally right, but also a willingness to sacrifice oneself in order to see it through. It is **selfless** in nature. It does not respond to the evil of this world by taking a particular side or ignoring its existence, but instead, responds to evil by being willing to suffer its blows for the sake of other people.

In the early 1830's, American railroad systems were at the start of production in many major cities across the United States. When a young African-American slave named Isaac Woodbridge from Georgia first got word of the possibility to travel overnight from Atlanta to Washington D.C., he asked his slave master if he could one day be granted his freedom if he raised enough money to purchase a train ticket for himself. The slave master, mocking him because of how ridiculous of a proposal he thought it was said, "Sure, if you can raise enough money yourself, go, be free."

Well Isaac Woodbridge took this wager very seriously. Over the course of the next 35 years, he carefully saved up whatever money he could find to one day purchase a train ticket from Atlanta to Washington, DC. After finally raising enough money to do so, he showed the money to his slave master who begrudgingly granted his freedom. After everyone had boarded the train, the conductor walked through the aisle asking for everyone's ticket. Across from Woodbridge sat an older woman who seemed frightened. When the conductor asked her

for her ticket she said, "Sir, please forgive me, I've just received word that my younger brother is dying from tuberculous and I have no money to see him. I've snuck onto this train with the hopes that I could. With all the sincerity in my heart, I ask you, could please let me ride. The conductor said coldly, "Rules are rules ma'am, I must ask you to leave your seat and walk off this train before it leaves the station."

Overcome with compassion in his heart, Isaac Woodbridge got up and gave his ticket to the older woman and said, "I don't know what tuberculosis is, but when my mother and sister got sick, I was forced to stay away from them until the day they died. Please take my ticket and care for your brother." At that moment, Isaac Woodbridge stepped off the train, walked back to his plantation, and worked as a slave once again for the rest of his life.

Brothers and sisters, this is the self-sacrificial love of Jesus. This is what it means to respond appropriately to the undeserved love God has given to us. **This** is how we must overcome evil with good in this world.

For those who have not accepted the free gift of grace God has given us in Christ, it does not make sense how evil could be overcome by anything other than retribution and vengeance. To the rest of the world, the idea of Jesus conquering evil by handing himself over to be beaten, mocked, scorned, nailed to a cross, and executed seems like utter foolishness. But this is exactly what he does, and we are called to do the same. To pick up our cross and follow him daily means that we must be willing to sacrifice our personal safety and comforts to suffer on behalf of those who are suffering. Those that are downtrodden, oppressed, hungry, sick, and poor.

So I ask you, when was the last time you came into contact with some unspeakable tragedy or person in need and you felt compelled to do good? And if you didn't, I encourage you to examine why that was so. Was it a fear of your own pain or heartache? Was it a fear of what other people might think of you as a result? Or was it a fear of your own personal safety and comfort being threatened?

As I was meditating on this passage this week, I couldn't help but think about the scene in the Gospels when Pontius Pilate brings out both the flogged and beaten Jesus and the murderer Barabbas before the crowds. They mocked and jeered and spat on Jesus while Pilate had a conviction in his heart that this was an innocent man. I challenge you to ask yourselves, if God were to identify you today with any character of this story, who would it be? Would it be the crowds, who out of fear of their own safety condemned a man to die because of the love he had for those who they considered social outcasts? Would it be Pilate, who out of fear of revolt, sentenced this man to death and proclaimed, "This man's blood is not on my hands." Or would it be Jesus, who after having been whipped, mocked, scored, and nailed to a cross, continued to pour out His love for us all, and prayed, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

Brothers and sisters, may we be devoted to one another in love, and honor one another above ourselves. May we do what both the Apostle Paul and Jesus call us to do, to love our enemies and to live at peace with all people as far as it depends on us. If our enemies are hungry, let us feed them. If they are thirsty, may we give them something to drink, if they are naked, may we clothe them, if they are a stranger, let us invite them in, and if they are sick or in prison, may we look after them. For Jesus himself says, "Whatever you do for the least of those among you, you do so for me."

Selfless love for others, not fear. This is the way we participate in God's Kingdom on earth and work towards a future reality when all evil will perish, where every tear will be wiped away from our eyes, and evil will be overcome by the power of good. Let's pray.

Father, we come to you this morning in recognition that we are selfish creatures who often fail to do good. We continually put ourselves and our safety ahead of the individuals you have called us to serve. The least among us. May we overcome evil with good in the way we treat others. May you walk with us and may we listen to your Spirit as opportunities to do good present themselves before us in our homes, in our jobs, in our schools, in our communities, and around our world. May we seek peace and pursue it and spend little time contemplating the costs. And may we see the face of Jesus glowing from everyone we serve. Amen.