

ROMANS 12:17-21 OFFERING OUR VICTORY

I read this, and I don't know whether to laugh or cry.

"Upon hearing of her supervisor's sudden and unexpected death, a clerical employee of a Florida hospital joyously celebrated by shouting in the presence of co-workers and others: 'Praise the Lord, victory is mine. You don't mess with a child of God!'"...

"The supervisor, with whom the employee admittedly had a rocky relationship...had suffered a post-surgical stroke and died soon afterward..."

"Other remarks made after learning of the supervisor's death included: 'The Lord's will has been done. Victory is mine. I have conquered it. Vengeance is served. God bless this day!'"

Her words caused something of a ruckus at the hospital, and the happy worker was fired. She lost in the lawsuit she filed against the hospital for firing her. One wonders what she said about the Lord after that.

"Do not repay anyone evil for evil." But it is so easy, and so natural, and even so satisfying.

You cut me off in traffic, and I will curse you and cut you off in traffic.

You gossip about me, and I will gossip even more about you.

You oppose my idea, and I will wreck all of your plans.

You do evil to me, and I will do evil to you.

All through Romans 12, we have been asking and answering the question, "If the gospel is true, how do we live?" We have looked at our lives through the lens of this word "offering." Jesus offered himself for me, so I respond to his mercy, by offering myself for him.

We offer our gifts, our love, our honor, our passion, our blessing, our "witness", our humility, and now, our victory. In verse 21, Paul writes of overcoming. When you overcome, you win a victory.

But what kind of victory is this? Is this the victory of this woman in Florida? No, it is something quite different.

It is different, because of the mercy of Jesus, which is at the heart of all of our offerings - especially this one.

Think about it. What does it mean to repay someone? You are giving the other person what he or she deserves, for his bad driving, or his harsh words, or his stubborn opposition to you.

But what does the gospel tell us? God has not repaid us as we deserve. We deserve justice. For sinners, justice is bad news. But Jesus has taken God's just punishment for our sins upon himself on the cross, so that we have not received justice, but mercy. In view of his mercy, the call of the gospel is, "Do not repay anyone evil for evil."

To be clear, let me mention here what Paul is not writing about:

* He is not writing about the state's response to evil. We will read of that in the next chapter.

* He is not writing about our response to evil, when we are defending other people against evil. We are right to defend others against evil.

He is writing about how we relate to each other, in the church, and in the world. He is writing of how we respond to the evil we receive.

Let's start in the middle, in verse 19, then work our way out, and discover three phrases that capture our victorious response to evil.

Here is the first: **GOD IS GOD.**

Verse 19: "Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge, I will repay,' says the Lord."

Paul knows that I WANT TO MAKE IT RIGHT.

It is right for me to want to make wrong, right. God has given us a sense of justice. I want right, and even if I want right for me, that's not wrong.

If I am cut from the football team because of the favoritism of the coach, it is right for me to want this to be made right.

If I am cheated out of money by an unethical contractor, it is right for me to want this to be made right.

If I am falsely accused of spreading rumors about my co-workers, it is right for me to want this to be made right.

I want to make it right, and there are times when I may enlist the power of someone "above me" to bring justice.

But the righteous desire for right, easily becomes the unrighteous desire for revenge. I am thinking less of what is right, and more of what I want to do to hurt you, for hurting me. I want to repay your evil, with more evil.

I slander the football coach.

I just happen to walk by the truck of the contractor, with my keys in my hand, and I just happen to scrape my keys across his new paint.

I explode in anger at any co-worker who believes what is said about me.

That is when I must know that GOD WILL MAKE IT RIGHT.

Paul calls us to “leave room for God’s wrath.” The image here of giving something or someone an opportunity.

It’s like when you have a problem, and your spouse or friend or co-worker is trying so hard to solve the problem, and you think you can solve the problem, but they’re so busy not solving the problem, that they won’t give you a chance to solve the problem. You finally say, “Give me a chance!”

Give God a chance. God will make it right. Paul quotes from the book of Deuteronomy here, where the Lord promises that wrong will be made right.

God does not tell us how he will make it right. God does not tell us when he will make it right. But God assures us that he will repay wrong. He must make wrong, right. God is God, and he is just, and he will make it right.

We still hear lots about Hitler, but southeast Asia’s Hitler was a man named Pol Pot. No one knows how many people he killed in his tyranny over Cambodia, which ended with his death about a decade ago.

When Pol Pot died, just as rebels drew near to capturing and trying him, one newspaper headline read, “Bitter Cambodians say Pol Pot escaped justice through his death.”

No, he did not. He escaped the justice of man, but he did not escape the justice of God. No one does.

Sometimes God brings justice in this life. Sometimes he does not. But he promises that sooner or later, he will.

Do you know this? And knowing this, will you let God be God, or will you spend this life trying and failing to be God, by repaying evil with evil?

Again, I speak here especially of injustice against us as individuals. When you try to take God’s place, you never will bring justice, the way he does, and the way he will. When he brings justice, it will be right. When you try to do it, you will simply heap evil upon evil.

What about the words that hurt, the job that is wrongly taken away, the reputation that is destroyed, and all the ways you are hurt?

Who is God? Are you? Or is he? Are you confident that God will right wrong? Will you leave room for him to make wrong right?

I want to make it right, but God will make it right. God is God.

Now a second phrase that captures our victorious response to evil: I AM GOD’S.

Let’s keep working out from the center, and consider verses 18 and 20. First, verse 18: “If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.”

I am God’s, so I STRIVE TO LIVE GOD’S PEACE.

Remember, again and again: God has made peace with me, so I am his. My response is to live the peace that he has secured for me.

This is a great verse! It wonderfully captures what our lives are like.

Look at the words that prepare us for this idea of peace: “If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everybody.”

What is the point? Paul knows that it all does not depend on us! He knows we are not always able to bring the peace that we desire. Just as we are not God when it comes to justice, we are not God when it comes to peace.

But our call is to do all that we can, to live at peace.

I often face this issue in counseling. Let’s say “Ahab” and “Jezebel” come to me. Maybe they are married, or relatives, or friends. Ahab is so quick to tell me everything Jezebel has done to him. Jezebel is just as quick to tell me about Ahab’s sins.

I have had to stop and say, “Wait! Ahab, you tell me what you have done. Jezebel, you tell me what you have done. What have you done, to bring or break peace?”

But what is peace? If you know anything about the peace that the Bible commends to us, it is not just the absence of conflict. Peace is not just when we go off to our separate corners, and stop yelling at each other for now.

The biblical concept of peace is so much richer! Paul’s call here is to a genuine harmony. We may be different, and we may have our differences. But we are at peace. We think well of each other. We can embrace each other with genuine joy. We do this because we want to glorify the One who has given broken people like us, peace with God.

I strive to live God’s peace. I do what I can, to secure peace in all kinds of relationships.

Do I? Do you?

* Young people, as you relate to each other, do your words to each other encourage peace, or discourage peace?

Proverbs 17:9 teaches, “He who covers over an offense promotes love, but whoever repeats the matter separates close friends.”

* Everyone - in your extended family, have you sought to divide and conquer, or have you sought to unite

and reconcile?

Proverbs 29:22 declares, "An angry man stirs up dissension, and a hot-tempered one commits many sins."

* In the world, are you striving just to be proven right, or are you seeking for your relationships to be right?

Proverbs 14:9 proclaims, "Fools mock at making amends for sin, but goodwill is found among the upright."

Peace is not avoidance. Sometimes I must confront wrong. But peace is the fruit of God's Spirit, where I am willing, able and anxious to forgive, and to reconcile, and to move forward in harmonious peace.

I am God's. God has made peace with me, so I strive to live God's peace.

I am God's. I STRIVE TO SHOW GOD'S GRACE.

In verse 20, after Paul reminds us of God's promise to avenge, we read, "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.'"

What does this mean? These words come from Proverbs 25, and some believe they refer to an Egyptian ritual, in which people would display their sorrow for doing wrong, by carrying a pan of burning charcoal on their head.

That may be so, but what do I really want in this situation, where I have received evil, and I am supposed to do good?

Do I want to increase his judgment? I am nice, and you are bad, and God will really get you now. Maybe, but that does not sound like an attitude driven by the mercy of Jesus.

Do I want to stimulate his shame? I am nice, and you are bad, and now I want you to feel bad about it. Maybe, but that attitude is not fully driven by the gospel.

Do I want to confront his heart? If I am offering yourself in response to God's mercy, that is what I want. By doing good to my enemy, I am displaying God's grace to him, and I am showing his heart, what the gospel is all about.

Yes, I want him to be ashamed of how he has wronged me. But even more, I want him to see how he has wronged God. I want him to turn his shame over to Jesus, who will make him new.

I strive to show God's grace. God is God, and I am not. I cannot control even what that person does, as I "heap burning coals on his head."

But I am God's. He has made me his own, by his grace. So I strive to demonstrate grace, as I do good to the one who has done evil to me.

I will tell the truth about you, even if you have lied about me.

I will help you, even if you have hurt me.

I will care for you, even if you care nothing for me.

I strive to live God's peace. I strive to show God's grace. I am God's.

But then, as we move out to the verses that start and end these words, we must wrestle with a third phrase - the phrase that drives us to the core of the Lord's claims upon us here.

God is God. I am God's. WE WILL WIN.

Pastor James Boice once told the story of a man named John Perkins.

"John Perkins was born in Mississippi. He left the south for California when he was still a teenager, became a Christian in California, and later returned to Mississippi because he believed God was calling him to preach the gospel to the poor black people he had been raised with, and help them by developing and supporting black leadership.

"On February 7, 1970, a Saturday night, a van of black college students who had been taking part in a civil rights march was pulled over by highway patrolmen from Brandon, Mississippi, and the students were arrested.

"Perkins and two of his associates went to the jail to post bail, but when they arrived they were surrounded by five deputy sheriffs and several highway patrolmen who arrested them and began to beat them...

"Perkins was beaten most of the night, along with some of the others. They stomped on him and kicked him in the head, ribs, and groin. One officer brought a fork over to him and said, 'Do you see this'? Then he jammed it up his nose. After that he shoved it down his throat. For part of that terrible evening Perkins was unconscious and so mutilated that the students who were watching over him in his cell thought that he was either dead or about to die...

"But the beating changed (Perkins) and gave him a new vision. He wrote,

"I remembered their faces - so twisted with hate. It was like looking at white-faced demons. For the first time I saw what hate had done to those people. These policemen were poor. They saw themselves as failures. The only way they knew how to find a sense of worth was by beating us. Their racism made them feel like 'somebody'...

"When I saw that, I just couldn't hate back. I could only pity them. I said to God that night, 'God if you will get me out of this jail alive' - and I really didn't think I would, maybe I was just trying to bargain with him - 'I

really want to preach a gospel that will heal these people, too.”

Who won that night, in that jail cell? It was John Perkins, even while he lay there, maybe even dying.

Or answer the question this way: if John Perkins had left that cell and dedicated his life to doing evil to white deputy sheriffs and highway patrolmen from Mississippi, who would have won? Not John Perkins, and certainly not the Savior John Perkins claimed as his own.

God is God, and I am God's, and we will win, not as we repay evil with evil, but as we live out the words of these verses. Repaying evil with evil is really so easy, so natural, and often so satisfying that we think we win, by repaying evil for evil. But God through Paul turns our hearts the other way. We truly win, when we offer the radical response of repaying evil with good.

How will we win? The gospel will win, and the good will win.

THE GOSPEL WILL WIN.

Verse 17: “Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody.”

What is Paul calling us to do here? As one writer said, Paul “wants us to commend ourselves to non-Christians by seeking to do those ‘good things’ that non-Christians approve and recognize.”

How does the gospel win? How does the good news of Jesus Christ, shine from me, when I receive evil? If I return evil with more evil, if I do what is wrong in the eyes of everybody, I am showing all the world that Jesus Christ changes nothing and no one. I am just like everyone else.

They take revenge. I take revenge. They give as good as they get. I give as good as I get. They repay evil for evil. I repay evil for evil.

But when I do what is right, even when I have been done wrong, I am doing what even non-believers will commend. I am demonstrating that I am serving a Savior who is radically heart and life-changing. I am showing that Savior to people, as I resist the temptation to repay evil with evil, and seek to return evil with good.

Why do people reject the gospel in our culture? There are many reasons, but here is one: too often, Christians are just like everyone else. We treat other people just as badly as others do - sometimes even worse.

But why would people be attracted to the gospel, in our culture? Again, there are many reasons, but here is one: as Christians, we are so different. We do what is right, even when we are wronged.

The gospel will win. Is that what we want? Is not the passion and the joy of the Christian to display the gospel in heart and life? If the gospel is true, and if the gospel is yours, how can you respond any other way?

But let's take this a half-step further. The gospel will win, and **THE GOOD WILL WIN.**

Verse 21: “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”

Once again, this idea of “overcoming” is the idea of “victory.” Think of what Paul is saying here: when we repay evil with more evil, evil wins! I am adding evil to evil, and I am ultimately doing the work of Satan, because he loves to see evil flourish.

But when I return evil with good, good is conquering. In a world of evil, those evil forces are being driven out by the force of my God-given, Jesus-driven, Spirit-empowered good. Me and my Savior are winning, as we strive against the temptation to add evil to evil, and seek to defeat evil with good.

Have you ever thought of it that way? Will you think of it that way, the next time you receive evil?

Who is “my Lord and my God”? If God is God, and I am his, I want the same good that he wants! I want the victory of his good.

The gospel will win, and the good will win, when the woman who is caring for my parent in the nursing home is unkind to me, but I respond with kindness and even compassion for her situation.

The gospel will win, and the good will win, when that hard person unfairly shames me in front of a group of other parents, but I respond with a heart for listening carefully and responding truthfully, but helpfully.

The gospel will win, and the good will win, when I am the victim of a crime, but even as I let the state do its work, I offer to speak to the criminal, and to offer forgiveness, as I have been forgiven.

John Perkins said, “I really want to preach a gospel that will heal these people, too...I wanted to return good for evil.” John Perkins has done this, through a ministry that works for racial reconciliation.

What about you, and what about me? Do we want to preach the gospel with our lives? Do we want the goodness of our good God, to win?

Where is the victory we offer? Is it found in returning evil with more evil, or is it found in showing the gospel and good of Jesus Christ?

“Victory is mine!” said the woman. Victory is ours to have and to offer, when God enables us to overcome evil...with good.