

## Overcoming Evil with Good

Romans 12:9-21  
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First Presbyterian Church  
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“Where love is absent, power fills the vacuum.” So says Kendall Roy, the rebellious son on HBO’s hit series, “Succession.” Played by Jeremy Strong, Kendall is a member of the famously dysfunctional Roy family – all of them billionaires who collectively own a global news-media empire.

The three sons and a daughter are continually battling each other to be first in the corporate line of succession, after Logan Roy, the aging patriarch, is no longer able to carry on as chairman.

That TV dialogue – “Where love is absent, power fills the vacuum” – is a paraphrase of psychologist Carl Jung, who wrote, “Where love rules, there is no will to (no need for) power, and where power predominates, love is lacking.”<sup>1</sup>

In today’s New Testament lesson, the Apostle Paul displays keen insight into this psychological principle – that with love we don’t need to be wielding power, and conversely, overemphasizing power stifles love.

In the first part of today’s reading where Paul says, “Let love be genuine,” he’s instructing the Christian community – instructing us – on how to treat each other as fellow Christians.

In the second part where Paul says, “Bless those who persecute you,” he’s teaching us how we – as Christians – should treat those who are less than Christlike toward others, and particularly those who are outside the community of Faith.

So, let’s start with how we need to be treating each other as fellow Christians. And when I say, “need,” I do so because that’s what Paul says. The Greek words he uses for “love” are more of a command and expectation than something to work toward or fall into, like romantic love.

When Paul says, “Let love be genuine,” he’s talking about agape love, the unconditional love of the Christian community. And when he says, “love one another with mutual affection,” he’s talking about brotherly love, sisterly love.

Being a Christian means that we show unconditional love to one another as brothers and sisters in Christ. And it means that we “hate what is evil” and “hold fast to what is good,” as Paul says.

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<sup>1</sup> Carl Jung, *The Psychology of the Unconscious* (1943).

Christians at their best are actually repulsed by that which is evil and unloving. That's how strong Paul's word is for "hate" – repulsed. And we "hold fast to what is good." We cling to the good in whatever way we can, in who we are, how we treat others.

Furthermore, in our love for one another, in hating for what is evil and clinging to that which is good, Paul says that we must "outdo one another in showing honor," in showing respect for each other.

Genuine, unconditional love and showing mutual respect for each other – that is a must for us as Christians. It's a matter of belief dictating behavior. It's why we do what we do.

Equally important to our love and respect for each other is our acts of Christian service. This is why Paul instructs us, saying, "Do not lag in zeal, be ardent (or be on fire) in the spirit, serve the Lord."

Now being on fire in the spirit and serving the Lord with zeal is easier said than done. Serving the Lord is tiring. But we do it anyway because that's what Christians do. And to help us do that, Paul encourages us, saying, "Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer."

Paul is acknowledging that the life of a Christian is hard and it takes a steady stream of hope, patience, and perseverance, as we rejoice in serving the Lord.

In serving the Lord, says Paul, we are called to "contribute to the needs" of fellow Christians and "extend hospitality to strangers," to those brothers and sisters in Christ whom we don't know very well but love, nonetheless.

That's how we treat fellow Christians. But what does Paul have to say about those who are not brothers and sisters in Christ? How should we treat those who have no use for the Christian faith and the church, and how should we treat those who treat us badly.

Well, Paul says, "Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them."

Now of course, Paul was witnessing the Roman Empire's persecution of Christians, and anticipating its later brutal attack on Christianity itself. And while, thank God, we don't face that, it can feel like we are under attack. It can feel like the Christian faith – the church – is being torn apart by a society that doesn't value what we value, a culture that makes no room for us, wants no part of church.

In that case, says Paul, we kill them with kindness, so to speak. "Rejoice with those who rejoice," he says, and "weep with those who weep."

In other words, treat everyone in Christlike fashion, joining in their joys and their sorrows. And, says Paul, “live in harmony” with them; “do not be haughty (or superior), but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are.”

This type of Christian love and hospitality even for those who don’t value Christianity, even for those who reject the church, even for those who are actively threatening the future of the church – that’s the Christlike way to respond.

I met Zelda on Tuesday. Zelda sleeps on the cement slab outside the doors right over here. She’s been homeless for three weeks. She had an apartment but felt like she was getting “abused” by the system there, whatever that means for Zelda. I just met her, so I don’t know, I don’t have all the background.

What I can tell you is that this church will do what we can to help her find another place to live, which isn’t easy. It takes time, it takes work on both sides, and in many ways, it takes an act of God.

And God is active here. God sent me around the corner that day to meet Zelda. She was packing up at the time. She thought I came to kick her out.

But I didn’t. I was there to meet her, to show her some Christian love and hospitality on your behalf, for the sake of Christ, even though I didn’t know anything about her, except that she’s homeless and in need. And that’s all I needed to know in deciding to help her in whatever way I can, in whatever way is safe and appropriate.

I’ve contacted a Housing Specialist on her behalf; the same guy who helped when Matt was homeless; you remember Matt, our friend from the community. And I’ll let you know if and when it’s ever appropriate for us to do more for Zelda; right now, I just don’t know her well enough.

For now, it’s enough that we continue to live peaceably alongside Zelda and show her Christian love and hospitality, as we pray that she gets a break in life, with God’s help, and that she is able to do what she needs to in order to receive God’s blessing.

Life is hard for people like Zelda, and the world can be cruel. And for both Zelda and us, the government and society that’s supposed to help us to help Zelda can be very frustrating. We’re all struggling in the midst of it.

It’s all part of what Paul is laying out for us today – two different ways of living, the one we know as Christian, and the one we know as tragically misguided if not out-right evil, the one that creates a society where people like Zelda can’t get the help they need.

In the face of all of this, Paul says to us, “Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God,” the justice of God. “... I will repay,” says the Lord.” In other words, God has this, God will work things out.

And God will use us as instruments of his peace, as channels of his justice, flowing down like a river. “Do not be overcome by evil,” says Paul, “but overcome evil with good.” That’s what it is – and has always been - to be a Christian in a less-than-Christ like world, overcoming evil with good. May it be so. Amen.

## **PASTORAL PRAYER**

God in Heaven! Thou hast loved us first. Help us never to forget that thou art love, so that this sure conviction might triumph in our hearts: over the seduction of the world, over the inquietude of the soul, over the anxiety for the future, over the fright of the past, over the distress of the moment.

But grant us also that this conviction might discipline our souls so that our heart might remain faithful and sincere in the love which we bear to all those whom thou hast commanded us to love as we love ourselves.

- Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855)

O Lord, we love and pray for those in need whom you have put on our hearts and in our lives. We pray your peace and comfort upon those who grieve. We pray for the healing, health, and wellbeing of those dealing with illness, injury and disease. We pray this and all our godly desires, worldly needs and spiritual joys and laments in the name of your greatest gift to us, Jesus the Christ, as we join in prayer that he taught us:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.  
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors;  
and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.  
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.**