

Don't Be an Avenger

Romans 12:17-21

Introduction

Paul is continuing his description of the “transformed” Christian life. Such a life defeats evil by doing good.

The Aim

The aim of this sermon is to help Christians overcome evil by how they think, believe, and behave.

Outline

- I. Introduction: The Appeal of Justice
 - a. Reflecting on the success of Marvel’s Cinematic Universe
 - i. “Marvel’s “Cinematic Universe” (MCU), featuring now-household-name superheroes such as Iron Man, Black Widow and Thor, is officially the highest-earning franchise in movie history, outperforming both the Star Wars and Harry Potter movie series combined...”Stories are what we use to narrate our own culture. Movies reflect our culture and influence our culture,” Professor Roughan said.”¹
 - ii. “9/11 would turn the world inward, yes, but it would also create a distinct and simpler notion of who is good and who is evil, when in reality the distinction is rather grey. This Good vs Evil distinction would get further simplified into Us versus Them, where the 'Us' is more besieged, fighting for a better world, and 'Them' - always an amorphous collective, basically those who would not fit into predefined stereotypes, whether they be racial, or religious, or even regional. In the broken world that we’ve inherited, a superhero, upholding the virtues of these simpler notions of good and evil, becomes the metaphor for the security we think we don't have.”²
 - b. This sermon looks at the last bit of Romans chapter 12. And Paul is going to tell us that despite our broken world that we’ve inherited, despite the security we may not have, despite the “insecurity, invasion, and paranoia” that are drilled into our psyche by an unrelenting media Christians are not called to be vigilante superheroes. Christians aren’t Avengers. Christians don’t take justice into their own hands and punish the bad guy. Instead, Christians defeat evil by doing good.
- II. Body: How Christians Overcome Evil
 - a. Christians overcome evil by how they think (12:17-18)
 - i. The phrase “give thought to” (ESV), “respect what is right” (NASB), “be careful to do” (NIV) is literally “give thought beforehand.
 - ii. Paul uses this word only two other times (2 Cor. 8:21; 1 Tim. 5:8)
 - iii. Paul is saying “Think beforehand to do the kinds of things that all people would view as honorable and good.”
 - b. Christians overcome evil by what they believe (12:19)
 - i. The emphasis in verse 19 is on “mine” and “I”. Paul is quoting Deuteronomy where God says that vengeance is HIS and his alone. God says, “Vengeance is MINE.”

¹ <https://www.brisbanetimes.com.au/national/queensland/the-scientific-proof-of-why-the-marvel-movies-are-so-popular-20200227-p54554.html>

² <https://www.firstpost.com/entertainment/what-makes-marvel-films-so-popular-understanding-the-relationship-between-mcu-and-the-real-world-6443741.html>

- c. Jesus is an example of a. and b. (1 Peter 2:18-24)
 - i. Notice all the themes that resemble what Paul is saying:
 - 1. Mindful of God
 - 2. Suffering for “sin” vs. “good”
 - 3. When Jesus was reviled he did not revile in return
 - 4. Jesus continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly
 - 5. We are to die to sin (taking vengeance) and live to righteousness
 - ii. Jesus is both the power AND the example of the Christian life.
- d. Christians overcome evil by how they behave (12:20-21)
 - i. He quotes Proverbs saying “if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink...”, which is basically a way of saying, “Do every good you can.” But the rest of the verse, “you’ll heap burning coals on his head” is more ambiguous.
 - ii. Some think this means that you’ll put people to a good kind of shame. If you return their evil with good, then it can bring a sort of remorse or shame—it can be convicting. And we have examples of this, for example, when Christians are wrongfully imprisoned yet treat their captors with kindness.
 - iii. Others suggest that the phrase “heaping burning coals on his head” is always negative. In this way, just as Christians are to not take revenge because God will judge (v. 19), so too they are to do good because he will punish their enemies (v. 20). (BECNT, 675)
 - iv. Either way, the point is clear—one ultimately conquers evil by how one behaves. Paul says “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” “Overcome” is a military word. If we return evil with evil, then we’ve been conquered by that very evil. As New Testament scholar N.T. Wright says, “Revenge keeps evil in circulation.”

Application

Doing good in the face of evil is the will of God for your life. This is the fruit of a spiritually transformed life. This was Jesus’ life, and it’s the life he wants to live in his people right now. If you’re struggling with this, then you need to ask yourself a couple of things:

1. **Do I even have this life that God is describing?** Do you see that you deserve God’s vengeance? Do you see that Jesus took your vengeance upon himself? Have you accepted this great act of mercy on your behalf? This is where it all begins. You can’t give what you haven’t received.
2. **Are you thinking about the right things?** If you have said “yes” to the first group of questions, but you’re angry, bitter, impatient, frustrated, or anxious, then there’s a problem. Now don’t get me wrong, problems come and go, and life is hard. We have seasons of all of these things, but if you have prolonged anger, deep bitterness, and heightened emotional anxiety, then these might be symptoms that the grace of God isn’t penetrating your heart. It may be that the root cause of this is your thought-life.

What are you dwelling on? How are you renewing your mind, the way Paul describes in verse 2? Is your understanding of God increasing and your view of yourself decreasing? (schooling example?)

3. **Do you need help?** You are not called to suffer alone. Prolonged trial can wear you down—whether it’s a difficult relationship, marriage, job, circumstance, or something else. If you’re alone, then you need to bring in others to help.