

## OVERCOMING EVIL WITH GOOD

By SCOTT GRANT

When Saddam Hussein was executed last year, his enemies taunted him. He spit their hatred back at them with his dying breath. It could be no other way for a tyrant whose reign was maintained through brutal retaliation.

Consider, by contrast, the execution of Jesus of Nazareth. Roman soldiers at the scene were experts at watching men die, but they never saw any man die like this. The Jewish leaders and passers-by mocked Jesus. Even the rebels being executed by his side unloaded on him. The soldiers saw all this, and even added their own insults, but there's one thing they didn't see: They didn't see Jesus strike back. He even prayed, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." After Jesus breathed his last, the dumbfounded soldiers said, "Truly this was the Son of God." (Mathew 27:27-54, Luke 23:34).

Jesus died for the sins of the world, it is true. But if he didn't die the way he did, he wouldn't have died for the sins of the world. He absorbed sin instead of spitting it back into circulation. He defeated sin by refusing to pay back evil for evil. Peter observes that Jesus, "while being reviled, did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting to himself to Him who judges righteously" (1 Peter 2:23).

Jesus gave us an example, but he gave us more than that. He gave us victory over sin, death and Satan—over all that is opposed to God and true humanity. The death of Jesus Christ is more than an example; it is an accomplishment. And when we follow his example, refusing to pay back evil for evil, we are participating in his accomplishment. We are sharing in his victory. We are, amazingly enough, implementing his victory. We ourselves are defeating evil and hastening the establishment of the kingdom of God. That ought to stir our passions a bit.

In Romans 12:3-13, Paul's commands concerned how members of the church relate to each other. In Romans 12:14-13:7, his commands concern how the church relates to the world. The passage divides into two sections: Romans 12:14-21, which focuses on dealing with persecution, and Romans 13:1-7, which focuses on dealing with governing authorities. The passage is bound together by the words "good," "evil" and "wrath," which appear in both sections. Paul advocates doing what is good, whether dealing with persecutors or governing authorities.

Romans 12:1-13:7:

<sup>14</sup>*Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse.* <sup>15</sup>*Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep.* <sup>16</sup>*Be of the same mind toward one another; do not be haughty in mind, but associate with the lowly. Do not be wise in your own estimation.* <sup>17</sup>*Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men.* <sup>18</sup>*If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men.* <sup>19</sup>*Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, "VENGEANCE IS MINE, I WILL REPAY," says the Lord.* <sup>20</sup>*"BUT IF YOUR ENEMY IS HUNGRY, FEED HIM, AND IF HE IS THIRSTY, GIVE HIM A DRINK; FOR IN SO DOING YOU*

*WILL HEAP BURNING COALS ON HIS HEAD.”* <sup>21</sup>*Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*

<sup>1</sup>*Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God.* <sup>2</sup>*Therefore whoever resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves.* <sup>3</sup>*For rulers are not a cause of fear for good behavior, but for evil. Do you want to have no fear of authority? Do what is good and you will have praise from the same;* <sup>4</sup>*for it is a minister of God to you for good. But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil.* <sup>5</sup>*Therefore it is necessary to be in subjection, not only because of wrath, but also for conscience' sake.* <sup>6</sup>*For because of this you also pay taxes, for rulers are servants of God, devoting themselves to this very thing.* <sup>7</sup>*Render to all what is due them: tax to whom tax is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honor to whom honor.*

### **Relating to persecutors**

In dealing with the wider world in Rome, Paul issues a command that would be utterly radical if it were not similar to what Jesus had already commanded. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus offered an alternative vision of Israel. What posture should Israel adopt regarding its Roman oppressors? Speaking to Jews in Palestine, Jesus said, “I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you ...” (Matthew 5:44). Now a church of Jesus’ followers comprising both Jews and Gentiles has sprung up in Rome itself. In seven years, Nero, the emperor, would blame them for a fire that would sweep through Rome. He would have them slaughtered. Nevertheless, Paul urges his readers to “bless those who persecute you.” Paul would not have us curse our persecutors by asking God to punish them. Instead, he would have us bless them by asking God to favor them.

Blessing our persecutors also involves rejoicing with those who rejoice and weeping with those who weep.<sup>1</sup> Both believers and unbelievers share a common humanity. Again, Jesus’ words in the Sermon on the Mount are instructive: God “causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous” (Matthew 5:45). Most people both rejoice and weep in life, even if they do more of one than the other. As believers, we find ourselves in solidarity with all men and women, both in their joy and in their sorrow. We can be “with” them, present with them or in prayer for them.

In verses 3-5, Paul urged his readers not to think too highly of themselves and to value all members of the body of Christ. He uses similar language in verse 16, but now the context is believers’ relationship to the outside world. We should not only resist thinking too highly of ourselves in relationship to each other, we should resist thinking too highly of ourselves in relationship to the outside world. We are not to adopt a “holier-than-thou” posture toward unbelievers that would keep us from rejoicing with them and weeping with them.

Paul says, “Do not be wise in your own estimation.” In Romans 11:25, he used almost identical wording to warn Gentile believers against being arrogant toward unbelieving Jews. Now he’s warning all believers not to be arrogant toward the outside world. The wisdom of God dictates humility.

God's wisdom also governs Paul's admonition in verse 17, which is in line with his command to bless persecutors instead of cursing them.<sup>2</sup> We should not retaliate against those in the outside world by paying back evil for evil, because we are concerned for what is right—literally, what is “good”—for all people. The reputation of Jesus is on the line. The way his followers act toward others reflects on him. If we don't retaliate, when the way of the world is to pay back evil for evil, others may take notice. Revenge is unsatisfying, anyway. When we want revenge, we think we will profit from someone else's pain, but we never really do.

The hypercompetitive Silicon Valley is a breeding ground for ill will. Almost anyone, it seems, is a potential enemy. Earlier in my life, I edited a weekly newspaper. Although the publisher and I had different visions for the paper, I thought we could co-exist. She thought differently. She fired me. It seemed unjust to me, and some in the business suggested that I pursue legal action. Although I was angry, I decided not to retaliate. Instead, I decided that I needed to forgive her. A year later, I received a phone call at my new and better place of employment from a former co-worker who informed me that the board of directors had fired the publisher who fired me. The co-worker thought the news would lift my spirits. It didn't, and I told her so. I hadn't hoped for the publisher's demise, nor did I feel vindicated when it came. For I knew then, as I know now, that you never profit from someone else's pain.

The kind of attitude that Paul is encouraging believers to adopt would help them live in peace with others. Nevertheless, Paul knows it is not always possible to live in peace with all people. Despite our best efforts, others may not want to live in peace with us, or they may lay down unacceptable conditions.

Despite his radical approach, Paul would not have us throw justice out the window. He would have us recognize that it is not our prerogative to administer justice when we're wronged. We're not impartial. If we retaliate, we take God's place. If we don't retaliate, we, literally, “give a place” to his wrath. We give God a place to work.<sup>3</sup>

God's wrath is seen as working in three ways in the book of Romans. First, it is being revealed as God gives people over to their own desires (Romans 1:18-32). Second, it is being administered through governing authorities (Romans 13:4). Third, it will be revealed in a final sense on the day of wrath (Romans 2:5). Until the day, God's wrath is redemptive, for God is not wishing for any to perish (2 Peter 3:9). When we take revenge, we're interfering with what God is doing. When we refuse to take revenge, we let God work redemptively.

But if we want to help, we can give God a hand. Paul, quoting from Proverbs 25:21-22, advocates giving a hungry or thirsty enemy food or drink. Hunger and thirst are metaphors for human need. Instead of retaliating against your enemy because he hurt you, meet his needs. It's another way to bless your enemy instead of cursing him. The reason for providing for the needs of one's enemy is that “you will heap burning coals on his head.” In Egypt, a repentant individual would come to the offended party bearing on his head a clay dish containing burning coals.<sup>4</sup> If this is the background for Proverbs 25:22, then Paul would be saying that your kindness may contribute to an enemy's repentance. Your mercy would illustrate for him God's mercy. The reason to “give” God a place for his wrath is that vengeance is his prerogative. Apparently, the reason to “give” an enemy food and drink is to help him repent.<sup>5</sup>

Evil defeats us when we pay back evil for evil. Evil defeats us when we do what evil does: when we seek revenge, when we seek to wound, when we wish for another's

misery. We defeat evil when we resist its influence by refusing to retaliate and by meeting the needs of those who hurt us. When you don't seek revenge, when you do tend to wounds, you are saying for all creation to hear that Jesus is Lord, and that his kingdom will prevail. When you respond this way, the forces of darkness are turned back, and Satan knows that his time is up. You are participating in the establishment of the kingdom of God.

The ability to be obedient to the outlandish command to meet the needs of our enemies begins with recognizing that God has reconciled us to himself even though we were his enemies (Romans 5:10). Because God has been gracious to us, we can be gracious to our enemies. It also helps to recognize that those who wound us have needs. How do you get in touch with that? By recognizing your own needs. Taking the metaphor literally, for example, you can identify with hunger and thirst. You can empathize with needs, because you have needs. The fact that your enemy has struck out at you is all the more illustrative of his or her needs. It is often wounded people who wound others. But what about your needs? You've been wounded, and you want justice. God knows that, and he'll take care of it. Knowing that God will meet your needs liberates you to meet the needs of others, even those who have wounded you.

Jesus serves as inspiration, not only by his inaction on the cross but also by his action in the upper room. He offered his betrayer, Judas, the best food and drink: the bread and wine of the Last Supper, which represented his own body and blood. He offered to meet his enemy's deepest—and eternal—need. In following Jesus' lead by suffering without retaliating, we embody the gospel. Our call is not only to know and preach the gospel story but also to live it.

Atticus Finch, the protagonist in Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, illustrates the disposition toward enemies that Paul is trying to cultivate. In the story, set in a small southern town, Bob Ewell, a white man, regularly beats his children. After beating his daughter Mayella, he falsely accuses a black man of raping her. Atticus, a white attorney, defends the black man, drawing the ire of the girl's father. One day, as Atticus is leaving the post office, Ewell spits in his face and threatens to kill him. Atticus responds by taking out a handkerchief, wiping his face and walking away. His refusal to retaliate troubles his son Jem. Atticus tells him:

The man had to have some kind of comeback, his kind always does. So if spitting in my face and threatening me saved Mayella Ewell one extra beating, that's something I'll gladly take. He had to take it out on somebody and I'd rather it be me than that houseful of children out there.<sup>6</sup>

Instead of retaliating against evil, Atticus absorbs it in order to take it out of circulation.

### **Relating to governing authorities**

In Romans 13:1-7, the general topic remains the same: relationship to the outside world. Now, however, a specific facet of the outside world is in view: government.

For more than 800 years, the law of the land for the people of God was God's law, which came through Moses and was to be administered through the kings and priests of Israel, with the prophets holding them accountable. Even then, most kings and priests and

so-called prophets were disobedient to God, as were most of the people, so his law was largely ignored. In Paul's day, Rome and its king, Caesar, ruled God's people. How are God's people to live in relationship to governing authorities that don't believe in him? The question was particularly relevant for Paul's readers inasmuch as they resided in Rome itself, the seat of Caesar's power, and because they would not have enjoyed protections that were sometimes afforded to ethnic enclaves in that they comprised both Jews and Gentiles.

Paul affirms the Old Testament contention, endorsed by Jesus himself, that God has established governing authorities (Daniel 2:21, 4:17; John 19:11). Rome and its kings, however, would not take kindly to the proposition that their power is derivative. If God is responsible for the power to rule, he can both give it and take it away. Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, among others, learned this lesson the hard way (Daniel 5:20-21). The church of Jesus Christ has the responsibility to remind governing authorities, if necessary, of their God-given commission to be ministers of justice and to call them to account when they misuse their office. Jesus held Roman authority accountable, telling Pilate, one of its governors, "You would have no authority over Me, unless it had been given you from above" (John 19:11).

If Jesus is Lord and Caesar isn't, the Roman believers may have wondered whether God wanted them to live in subjection to Caesar. Failure to do so, of course, would provoke the wrath of Caesar. For Paul's purposes, the derivative nature of governing authorities means that the Roman believers should be "in subjection" to them. To live in opposition to them, as if God did not raise them up, is to oppose what he decrees. Paul says that those who oppose governing authorities will be judged, both by the authorities and by God.

Judgment is to be feared, however, only if one's behavior is "evil" instead of "good." Moreover, Paul urges the church not simply to passive obedience but to active involvement in society by doing "what is good." He wants the church to participate in public life and work for the welfare of society. Paul says that authorities will take notice in a positive way.<sup>7</sup> Some of our people built a hospital in Kashmir last year and garnered praise for our brothers and sisters in Pakistan by governing authorities.

When Peter did "what is good" by healing a lame beggar, he drew the notice of people in Jerusalem, who were "filled with wonder and amazement." Then he preached the gospel to them. Jewish authorities apprehended Peter and John but then released them because the people were supportive (Acts 3:1-4:22). If we do what is good in our world, people will notice. Some may take umbrage, because we follow and preach a different Lord, but many will be supportive—and many will be blessed.

Our ambition as elders and pastors at Peninsula Bible Church is for our members to be increasingly involved in doing what is good in the world. Many of you are involved in many ways, both locally and around the world. In the days ahead, we plan to lead more outreach initiatives that you can join. But don't wait for us. Historically, some of the best PBC ministries have been launched by members of our body who are not part of the "official" leadership. The "ministry of the saints," which Paul speaks of in Ephesians 4, is in the DNA of this church. If you're part of a small group, consider how it can bless those outside itself. If Jesus' method of discipleship is our model, consider that he didn't gather 12 men simply to nurture their spirituality; he gathered 12 men so that they would preach and embody the gospel.

Doing what is good also includes laboring on behalf of justice. A recent film called *Amazing Grace* featured William Wilberforce, an English Parliamentarian who campaigned relentlessly for the abolition of the slave trade. Wilberforce was a deeply committed follower of Jesus, although the film downplayed his faith. He persevered for 20 years through opposition, setbacks and ridicule before the abolition bill became law in 1807, 200 years ago. A month after his death in 1833, Parliament finally abolished slavery altogether. Wilberforce, despite the opposition he faced in life, was honored in his death by governing authorities with a burial in Westminster Abbey. He did what was good, and governing authorities praised him. He is praised today, even if many of those who praise him, and make a film about him, are uncomfortable with his faith.

Like Wilberforce, we must labor, pray and vote for a just world. Biblical justice, however, often doesn't fit into the convenient left and right categories that have emerged in American politics. Too often in our world, evangelicals are identified only with the Right, and only with only two issues: abortion and homosexuality. These are important issues, and we must speak to them with all the wisdom God gives us. But they are not the only issues. In recent years, more evangelicals have been speaking up, and taking action, concerning poverty, social justice, the environment and the arts. These developments deserve our applause and our participation. However, when we enter into the realm of politics, we must ask the Spirit to make us wise as serpents and innocent as doves, for evil is lurking around every corner, and power is intoxicating.

Paul goes so far to say that government is a "minister of God" for the promotion of good behavior and the discouragement of evil behavior. It bears "the sword," symbolic of the power it wields, for God's purposes: to channel his wrath through the punishment of evildoers. Such punishment promotes good behavior. In the Roman world, the sword included capital punishment.

Punishment and praise are not the only reasons to live in subjection to governing authorities, nor are they the most important reasons. If government derives its authority from God and is in fact his servant, then subjection to it is also important for "conscience's sake." For to oppose governing authorities is to oppose what God has revealed to be his will. To go against what you know is right is to violate one's conscience.

In verses 1-5, Paul lays the groundwork for a particular way in which he wants his readers to be in subjection to governing authorities. He wants them to pay their taxes. In verse 6 he calls rulers "servants" of God, a word with religious connotations. Priests, who received the tithes and offerings of Israel, were called God's servants. Now even pagan rulers qualify as God's servants in that they collect not tithes but taxes for the sake of justice.

Paul doesn't say how being in subjection to governing authorities applies beyond the paying of taxes. It cannot mean that subjection involves obedience to rulers in any and all circumstances. For example, if Caesar commanded Paul not to preach the gospel, Paul would preach the gospel. Other biblical writers, in fact, have endorsed disobedience in particular cases. Paul, a Jew who was trained in the scriptures, would be well aware of these stories. Two midwives feared God and disobeyed the Egyptian king's orders to kill the Hebrew male babies. When interrogated, they lied about what they did. God rewarded them for their actions (Exodus 1:15-21). Four Jews during the exile disobeyed the orders of Babylonian rulers concerning worship. Though they were each condemned to death, God miraculously saved them (Daniel 3:17-18, 6:10). Jewish rulers commanded Peter and John not to speak publicly about Jesus. They refused, saying, "Whether it is right in

the sight of God to give heed to you rather than to God, you be the judge; for we cannot stop speaking what we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:19-20). Peter further commented, “We must obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29).

God designs government to promote justice by rewarding good behavior and punishing evil behavior. Even Caesar, a pagan ruler, was fulfilling this design, to some degree. All governments, even those led by tyrannical rulers, fulfill this design to some degree, even if their definitions of good and evil are seriously flawed. To live in subjection to governing authorities may mean disobedience to them in some cases. However, we should disobey rulers only after consulting the scriptures and seeking the Lord through prayer. The stories in Exodus, Daniel and Acts all concern governmental commands that contradict God’s commands. If a government orders us to do something that clearly contradicts God’s commands in the scriptures, we should disobey those commands. If rulers order me to kill my neighbor, I will disobey that order. If they punish me for my disobedience, so be it. In any event, we can be thankful that our government is more favorably disposed toward justice than Caesar’s. Furthermore, the checks and balances in place in our system deal somewhat effectively with corruption, which permeates many of the world’s governments.

In Romans 12:17, Paul said, “Never pay back evil for evil to anyone.” Now, he says in Romans 13:7, literally, “Pay back to all what is due them.” In just seven years, Roman justice would come down in an unjust—and brutal—way when Nero would blame followers of Jesus for the fire that swept through the city. Moreover, Rome had crucified their Lord. Still, Paul says don’t pay pack the Roman rulers with revenge for their brutality. Instead, pay them back with, yes, your taxes, even if they will use your taxes to administer justice in a less than perfect way—even if they will use them to oppress you.

Jesus, when asked a question about taxes, responded, “Then render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s; and to God the things that are God’s.” (Matthew 22:15-22). Jesus would render to Caesar more than taxes for announcing a rival kingdom. He would render to Caesar his very life. If Caesar wants our taxes, we’ll give him our taxes. If he demands our blood for worshiping another Lord, we’ll give him our blood.

### **Between the times**

God has defeated evil with the first advent of Christ, and he will destroy it with the second advent of Christ. Living between the times, our task is to implement God’s victory over evil through the power of the Holy Spirit until our Lord comes to finish the work. How do we do it? The same way he did it. Preach the gospel and live the gospel. Bless your enemies, do what is good and watch Satan fall like lightning.

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<sup>1</sup> Verses 14-16a likely constitute one sentence. The principal command in verse 14 (“Bless those who persecute you”) is supported by clauses that take the form of commands in verses 15-16a. What it means to bless persecutors is defined in verses 15-16a.

<sup>2</sup> The principal command in verse 16b (“Do not be wise in your own estimation”) is supported by two other clauses that take the form of commands in verse 17. What it means to be obedient to the command prohibiting wisdom in our own estimation is defined in verse 17.

<sup>3</sup> The quote, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay,” is from Deuteronomy 32:35, 41. The context there is the establishment of kingdom God and the vindication of his people (Deuteronomy 32:36, 49). The Lord will establish his kingdom and vindicate his people. We can trust him to do it, and we can trust him to do it with justice.

<sup>4</sup> Peter Cotterell and Max Turner, *Linguistics and Biblical Interpretation*, © 1989 by InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, Ill. Pp. 302-05.

<sup>5</sup> The structure and grammatical connections of verses 17-21 are useful for interpretive purposes:

A (17) Respond to evil by caring for the reputation of good

B (18-19) Give God a place for vengeance

Explanation: For it is God’s prerogative

B’ (20) Give an enemy sustenance

Explanation: For you help him repent

A’ (21) Overcoming evil with good

<sup>6</sup> Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, © 1960 by Harper Lee, Warner Books, New York. Pp. 217-18.

<sup>7</sup> Likewise, the Lord told the exiles in Babylon, “Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf; for in its welfare you will have welfare” (Jeremiah 29:7).