

Sermon Draft

Text: Romans 12:9–21

Sermon: “God Is Love”

There is a lot of talk about good versus evil in the world we live in and in Scripture. Are good and evil really direct opposites? For all practical purposes, does it make sense to reject completely those philosophies of yin and yang that suggest good needs evil in order to help what is righteous express itself? I saw a post on social media sharing a quote attributed to Francis Bacon: **“In order for the light to shine so brightly, the darkness must be present.”** Does God’s love really need to depend on its dark counterpart in order to be expressed? Interesting questions!

Some will defend the notion that a practical compromise of the good and the bad is inescapable and even necessary to get along in life. They insistently conclude, “We have to survive out there in the world. Not every business transaction is that cut and dried, is it? Isn’t there wiggle room when it comes to ‘doing the right thing’?”

The apostle Paul tells us, ***“Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good”*** (Romans 12:21). So evil not only has no place in good but good is what completely overcomes evil.

Paul says that that which is truly virtuous actively dispels evil, its opposition and this is grounded in love, God’s love and God’s goodness. God’s goodness most certainly overcomes evil with love.

Look out, though! This love may be more than we can handle. It may cause us to come face-to-face with the selflessness and personal sacrifice we are not willing to contemplate. Paul is not speaking of a romantic love, an erotic love, the love we might have for pizza, nor the flower-child love of the sixties when we wore flowers in our hair and danced to the beat of a good feeling. He speaks of the divine love that his fellow apostle John wrote of as being God himself. For ***“God is love”*** (1 John 4:8). God’s love has characteristics that go beyond our ideas of fairness and security. It involves a sacrifice our sinful flesh never wants to make in its pursuit of self-preservation.

Paul first speaks about what this love looks like within Christian fellowship. The love that dispels evil. That which prevents broken relationships between brothers and sisters in Christ and, in their place, solidifies and promotes the union we share in Christ. When one can **“abhor what is evil”** and **“hold fast to what is good”** (v 9), a selfless humility is in play. And this causes one to see it as a privilege to **“honor one another above yourselves”** (v 10, NIV), knowing that this is precisely what Christ has done for us, bringing about our salvation. This love is God.

We know that love often isn't us. We know how we look sidelong at our fellow believer and wonder how he could possibly take *that* position at a voters meeting. We know how often we smile and say the pleasant “good morning” at 10:00 and then say something quite different about that same child of God at the lunch table at noon. **“Let love be genuine”** (v 9).

We also know how even when we want to love our fellow member, we don't quite muster the energy or find room on our busy schedules. ***“Be fervent in spirit”*** (v 11).

But this love does exist within the family. This love is between you and me, brothers and sisters in Christ who have been made aware of this love through the Gospel. This love is how Christ has loved us genuinely, fervently, honoring us above himself. And then our words and actions reflecting this attitude do become a witness and encouragement as we call one another a family in faith, bearing one another's burdens.

But if you thought this was the end of it, you would be wrong. Paul takes this a giant step further and tells us what this Christian love does with those outside the faith. Outside of the fellowship of Christ are those who do not know this love of God. They do not see evil and good as polar opposites. Therefore, they might not choose to treat us the same way as we are called within the Church to treat one another in response to our faith. In fact, we should expect it!

What is our first response? Maybe it's "Then I'm off the hook. If they're not in tune with this kind of love, then it's likely they'll be blind to it and pursue hostility. And if push comes to shove, I have the right and justification to avoid them or strike back and claim a revenge when this love isn't returned to me." That sounds reasonable. But Paul tells us ***"Bless those who persecute you"*** (v 14). ***"Repay no one evil for evil"*** (v 17). Instead, ***"If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink"*** (v 20). And our immediate response, "What? That's not fair!" and we're right. It's not fair. But do we know what it is? It's love! Love does not seek fairness. This is the love that is God. It is the love that saved you who would also be the persecutor without it. The persecutor of Christ himself! Christ's love did not seek after fairness. That wasn't even considered. In the world around today especially it seems that hate and anger are rampant. This is a good time for love.

The love demonstrated in the person of Christ. The action of responding to evil with good is what ***“will heap burning coals on his head”*** (v 20). This metaphor explains the thrust of everything Paul is saying. Repaying evil with good is so opposite a human retaliation and is instead a divine response that brings a sense of shame and a change of mind that renders impotent the evil of the persecutor.

Did you know that many Muslims who have come to faith in Christ report that this response from Christians is what demonstrated the genuineness of Christian faith and led them to repentance and to be received into the family of God? They say they have never experienced this kind of love in their lives before receiving it from a Christian.

Dear friends, this is the love Christ bestows on us. This love forgives us of our failure to return good for evil. It is the same love that is Jesus' very character and why he responded to the persecution of the world by staying on the cross and allowing evil to destroy him, resulting in our atonement, providing forgiveness.

This is how God crushed evil with virtue. The good that is love. The good that resurrects the Christ. The good that is God. There is no room for evil in good. The Christ has settled this once and for all.

In 1948, Rev. Richard Wurmbrand was kidnapped by the Communist government in Romania because of his proclamation of the Gospel of Christ. He would not reject his faith. As a result, he spent the next fourteen years being tortured in prison. Yet it was during these years that Richard's faith, though tested, grew stronger by God's grace. What happened there was amazing. He came to pity his prison guard's dark world. His first three years were spent in solitary confinement. Kneeling on the concrete prison floor, Pastor Wurmbrand prayed to his heavenly Father. The prison guard was all too eager to remind him that praying was against the rules. Richard was dragged out of his cell and beaten, particularly on the bottom of his feet. After he was put back in his cell, the prison guard checked on him through the small peephole in the door. To his amazement, Wurmbrand was back on his knees in prayer.

Dragged out of his cell once more, he was beaten severely. This happened a third time and yet a fourth. In total frustration, the prison guard exclaimed, "What is wrong with you? You have nothing! What are you praying for?" Wurmbrand responded, "I am praying for you." While Communism had stripped the prison guard of all humanity, it was God's love through a child of God that could restore him.

Amen