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HAND OVER THE REMOTE

Romans 12:17-21

Pastor Kevin Miller told a story of something that happened when he and his wife, Karen, wanted to buy a used car for their daughter. They went to a dealership and settled on a used Toyota Camry. They were helped by a young salesman named Patrick. They agreed on the car and the price, then he got them started on the paper work to complete the deal. Once they were underway he told them that another guy, Todd, would help them finish the paperwork. The showroom was hopping with lots of customers, and he needed to help another customer. After explaining this, Patrick whispered, “Todd is the only person here I can trust.”

Miller said there were probably 12 other sales people working that busy day. He said it was startling that Patrick could not trust 11 of the 12 people there to not steal credit for his sale and take the commission that was due him. I know from talking to a friend in the car sales business that this kind of thing is not uncommon. There are dangerous people everywhere we go. People can be difficult in a variety of ways. And they have an amazing ability to justify almost any kind of selfish behavior and the harm it inflicts on others.

We are not going to get through this life without encountering people who are difficult, and that means we are going to be hurt. Everyone knows that. It is an inevitable and unavoidable part of life. A painful part. The natural human reaction to being hurt is to hit back. We long to get even. Sometimes we even fantasize and dream up scenarios in which we make those who have hurt us pay for their crimes. How should we respond when others hurt us? The Gospel has a radical answer to that question, and we’ll see it in Romans 12:17-21.

REFUSE TO HIT BACK

One of the top shows on Amazon Prime this summer has been *The Terminal List*. It was released at the beginning of July and in 2 weeks became the number 1 show on their Top 10 list. It is a series of 8 episodes that center on a Navy Seal played by Chris Pratt. In the first episode his entire team is wiped out on a mission. He is the only one to survive. In the aftermath he soon figures out it could only have happened if they had been betrayed by someone in his chain of command. It turns out that the betrayal is worse than he could have imagined. The plot is about him seeking revenge, to make sure that those who inflicted a terrible wrong on him and his men paid for their actions.

It is a very violent show. We are not supposed to like violence and vengeance. I am not a big fan of violence in shows. Yet, there is a reason that show has been so popular. It is because down at some visceral level we want terrible people who do terrible things to pay for their deeds. We want the harmed person to get revenge. It is not too hard to figure that out, because there are so many movies and television shows that are all about revenge. One of the earliest that I can remember being a movie that I liked was *The Sting*, starring Robert Redford and Paul Newman. It was not a festival of violence like so many revenge movies, but the theme of it was getting revenge in a super clever way.

Why is revenge such a common theme in our stories? It is because we all feel like we’ve been hurt, we haven’t been treated fairly, and those who have hurt us have not had to pay for what they’ve done. Sometimes it may not even be specific people. It may be just life in general has not been fair to us, and it feels like somehow the scales should be evened. We’ve been hurt, and the natural result of hurt is anger. That anger has to go somewhere. Our culture is unusual in the history of the human race because it is built on the rule of law and on the accused receiving due process. We are against vigilante justice. But the prevalence of revenge movies testifies to the fact that we feel too often true justice doesn’t happen.

How are we to deal with it when someone hurts us? The idea of an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, is deeply ingrained in the human psyche. When someone mistreats us or hurts us, we natural want to hit back, to get even, to make them pay. It feels like that would be satisfying. It is an almost irresistible knee jerk reaction. I see it in sports all the time. One person takes a shot at another person, that person retaliates, the original perpetrator does the same and the fight is on.

It’s not just in sports. Being married for almost 43 years I have learned that failing to listen to my wife is usually a mistake. That’s because Laurie seems to have a brilliant ability to anticipate what is going to follow from actions. She can see that I’m about to do something dumb that will have lamentable consequences. Every now and then I fail to remember that and, convinced that I know the best way to do something, proceed to do it my way despite her warning. Inevitably I regret that because it ends badly, just as she cautioned it would. There have been occasions when she has then said in an impatient and frustrated tone, “Rick, that’s why I told you not to do that.” That impatient tone can irk me. It is rare for her to use it, but it causes an immediate desire to reply to her in that same tone. This is very frustrating when you know she’s right and you have no defense. About all you can do is come back with a brilliant barb like, “Yeah, well you like to eat Fruit Loops, and they’ve been banned in 6 countries. So there.” Yeah, now we’re even.

Paul says in verse 17, “Do not repay anyone evil for evil.” We are never living God’s way when we get even, when we give back the hurt another person has inflicted upon us, whatever kind of hurt that might be. Take note of the fact that what Paul wanted us to avoid is giving back evil. What is evil? The dictionary defines it as morally wrong, harmful or injurious. Any departure from God’s will, from the way he is and what he tells us to be and to do, is evil because it is a departure from perfect good. It is thus, morally wrong, even if only to a small extent. It is also harmful, injurious. Every variation from what God commands does damage to us and to others.

When someone is unkind to us, speaks harshly to us, is unfair to us, mistreats us, attacks us, it hurts us. It does some level of damage. It is, by definition, evil. Paul tells us it is never right to then turn around and do to them what they have done to us. You would not condone what they have done that has hurt you, so why would you then do the same in return? Never, never, never return evil for evil.

All that you are doing when you do that is increase the amount of evil in the world. The result of shooting back is more evil. The best you can hope for from that is that evil continues. But that’s usually not what happens. When you shoot back what normally happens is the evil escalates. All over the world there are wars and conflicts of all kinds. They start because one person does something wrong, something evil, the other pays that evil back with evil, then more evil is paid back to “even the score,” and the cycle is endless.

Paul says we need to do something radical. We need to refuse to give in to that powerful urge to shoot back. God says it is always right to love others. Love is the godly response to every person, every situation, every provocation. Love does not shoot back. It gives back, as we shall see, but it does not give back in kind.

I often find myself thinking about sermons when I’m in the shower. I guess that’s a hazard of my job. I was thinking about this sermon in the shower. When I got out of the shower I encountered some bathroom fixtures, and I realized they had something to say to me about this topic. One of those fixtures was the mirror. A mirror is very unoriginal. It doesn’t create images to display. All it does is reflect whatever is presented to it. I realized that we have a tendency to be mirrors. We reflect back whatever is presented to us. Give us kindness, we reflect kindness, give us impatience, and we give impatience right back, give us anger, and we reflect anger back. Now the contrast to that is the faucet. Turn on the faucet and it sends out water that I need. I can be impatient with the faucet. I can be frustrated with it, or unkind to it, or angry with it, but it doesn’t matter, because no matter what I do, it sends out water.

Which of those are we to be like, the mirror or the faucet? We are not just to mirror what comes our way, we are to be faucets of God’s love and grace. No matter what people send our way what will come out of us will be God’s love and grace. When you are a mirror, you are being controlled by someone else. You are letting their moods, their actions, their words, their treatment, decide what you will be. Ah, but if you are a faucet, you, controlled by God, are determining what will come out of you, and it will be God’s love and grace regardless of what other people might do.

CHOOSE PEACE

In verse 18 Paul says, “If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.” Paul says God wants us to choose peace with people. I’ve known some people who seem prone to choose conflict with others. This verse tells us that we ought to value peace. We should prioritize it and pursue it, do everything we can to have peace.

I have often heard people talk about how marriage is hard work and how married people need to learn how to fight. I know that there is some truth in that. But I’ve also noticed that Laurie and I don’t have a lot of conflicts. I wondered if that’s just because we’ve gotten old and don’t have the energy for conflicts. We’d rather give in than put out the energy required to fight over something.

That may be a factor, but this was kind of true of us even before we got old. Part of the reason is that we’re a lot alike. We know couples who are very different from each other, and they don’t see eye to eye on most things. The result is a lot of conflict. Laurie and I think alike on most things, so that reduces the level of conflict. However, there is another factor, and this one is much larger than those first two. It is that we treasure each other, we highly value unity and peace in our relationship. We love the unity and love we have with each other, and we want nothing to damage that. We don’t have big conflicts over things much, because there’s very little that we care about at the level that we care about each other. Generally we would rather give in to the other person’s ideas or wants than demand our own and hurt the other person. I would much prefer watching a Padre game to watching a Hallmark romance show. But I would prefer that Laurie knows how much I love her and how much I want to serve her to watching a Padre game. Fortunately she feels the same way about me, so I’m not subjected to a steady diet of Hallmark shows.

I realize that sounds like a recipe for conflict avoidance. But that’s not the point. The point ultimately is valuing a person and a relationship more than you value some lesser good. The unity and love at times will require dealing with conflict, because avoiding it is a good way to blow up a relationship over time. But this is kind of about knowing which hills are worth dying for.

The words, “If it is possible” are important. It is not always going to be possible. I know of people whose personal issues make it impossible to be at peace with them. You do the best you can, but peace is kind of like the tango. It takes two. A story came out two years ago in the news about a man who was arrested in Lee County, Florida. His name was Justin Anthony Garcia, and he was charged with aggravated battery. It seemed that he and his cousin got in an argument over whether almond milk is superior to whole milk. At one point Garcia became so enraged that his cousin was disagreeing with him that he punched him in the head. When his cousin fought back Garcia pulled out a pocket knife. At that point the cousin fled, but not before sustaining injuries from the knife. I’m thinking you’re not going to have much luck living in peace with a guy who punches you and pulls a knife in an argument over milk.

There is an important reality about reconciliation when there is a divide between two people. Think of reconciliation as being in the middle between two people. There is something that has to exist on each side of reconciliation to make it happen. Those two things are repentance and forgiveness. Suppose that on one side a person is repentant. That person admits to wrong and says, “I am sorry. Will you forgive me?” That is one necessary component to reconciliation. But there is another component, and that is forgiveness. The other person must grant the necessary forgiveness. If they do not, there will be no reconciliation.

Or imagine if one person offers forgiveness. That is a required component to peace. But the other person does not repent. That person refuses to admit wrong, to say, “I’m sorry.” In that case, again, there will be no reconciliation because they don’t accept that they even need forgiveness. In relationships we only control ourselves. If the other person refuses to contribute the component of reconciliation that is required from their side, then there will be no peace. If we find ourselves at that point we have to recognize we’ve done what we can, and the rest is out of our control. There is no more we can do.

We should remember what Jesus said in Matthew 5:9. “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the children of God.”

LEAVE ROOM

Paul reiterates that we should not take revenge, and then gives us a reminder of why we should do as he says. “Leave room for God’s wrath.” We’ve been taking care of our granddaughters this weekend as their parents are out of town celebrating their tenth anniversary. We have tried to go on some outings with them, but it has been arduous. The big complicating factor is we have a Nissan Rogue. It is a small SUV. The crucial word there is small. There are many SUV’s and family vans out there that are only slightly smaller than an aircraft carrier. This is necessary because these days kids have to ride in car seats. People our age are apparently anomalies, people who grew up sleeping in the back of station wagons and riding in the back seat of cars that didn’t even have seatbelts, and survived without damage. Apparently we are the lucky few that defied the odds and survived the carnage of the highways. Today things are so different. The car seats the kids must ride in seem to have been designed by NASA to enable the children to withstand the rigors and dangers of space travel. You need to be an engineer to be able to install a child in one, a patient engineer, because it will take several hours to get three children buckled in. But it will be a miracle if you can pull off that feat. Those car seats are designed for huge rockets. Exactly how are you going to get 3 of them in the back seat of a small SUV? Poor Ella has graduated to just being in a reasonably sized booster seat. Put the gigantic seats of the 2 younger girls in the car and there’s no room for her. She practically gets squeezed out. Paul says when we take matters into our hands and try to pay back the evil someone does to us, we squeeze out God’s wrath. We have left no room for him. So Paul tells us to let God handle it.

There are people who recoil at the idea of God having wrath. They do not like the idea of God being vindictive. In his book, *Free Of Charge*, Yale professor Miroslav Volf said that at one time he was appalled at the thought of a God of wrath and believed it was barbaric. But then he witnessed the horrors, the atrocities and the brutality of war in his native Yugoslavia, and it completely changed his perspective. He wrote, “Though I used to complain about the indecency of the idea of God’s wrath, I came to think that I would have to rebel against a God who wasn’t wrathful at the site of the world’s evil. God isn’t wrathful in spite of being love. God is wrathful because God is love.”

Theologian N. T. Wright says, “If God does not hate racial prejudice, he is neither good nor loving. If God is not wrathful at child abuse, he is neither good nor loving. If God is not utterly determined to root out from his creation…the arrogance that allows people to exploit, bomb, bully and enslave one another, he is neither loving, nor good, nor wise.”

One of the things that I have found humorous is how quickly children figure out that a TV remote is an important and seemingly magical device. Wesley, our 2 year old grandson, has observed that adults point the remote at the TV and suddenly the television comes on, much to his delight. He loves to watch TV, although he doesn’t sit down and watch it for long. He just likes to have it on as he moves around the room playing with his trucks and cars. The problem for him is he isn’t able to actually make the remote work. He will pick it up and point it at the TV, but nothing happens. So I will ask him, “Wesley, do you want to watch TV?” “Yeah sure, watch Mickey House.” He wants to watch the Mickey Mouse Clubhouse. So I will say, “Why don’t you hand me the remote?” At that point he is faced with a choice. He has to give up control of this magical device. But it's not that hard of a choice for him because he can’t make it work. So he gives me the device, and in very short order we’re watching Mickey House. What does that have to do with vengeance?

Think of vengeance as being like that remote. We know what it’s for, but we’re not really able to wield it properly. In this verse God is saying to us, “Why don’t you let me handle that. I’ll take care of it.” The call is for us to let go of revenge and let God handle it. We should do that because he’s perfectly just and all powerful. That means he can bring about true justice, and we can’t always do that. We don’t always see justice for what it really is because we are blinded by our obsession with self. We are all like kids who say, “That’s not fair,” when what they’re really saying is, “I’m not getting what I want.” The other part of that is that because he is all powerful, God’s justice will be far more effective than anything we could ever do. God will set all things right and there will be no argument with him. We need to grasp that justice is an eternal, intrinsic aspect of God’s character.

This is actually the remedy to the violence in the world. Our hearts cry out for justice, for revenge when we are hurt. God knows that. There are many times in life when that desire is totally justified. But what God wants us to do with it is not to act on it, but to hand him the remote.

There are some Psalms that cause many people heartburn. One of them is Psalm 109. David wrote this Psalm. We don’t know when he wrote it, but we know it was a time when he was in a lot of pain. He was being badly mistreated and abused. He wrote about that in the first 5 verses of the Psalm. Then he poured out his heart and asked God to deal with the person causing him such difficulty.

In verses 9-12 he prays about this person, “May his children be fatherless and his wife a widow. May his children be wandering beggars; may they be driven from their ruined homes. May a creditor seize all he has; may strangers plunder the fruits of his labor. May no one extend kindness to him or take pity on his fatherless children.” Yikes. Those are some lovely devotional thoughts, aren’t they? Makes you feel all warm and fuzzy and spiritual, right? Hardly. He’s asking that his enemy die and that his children become homeless wandering beggars and that no one would take pity on them. That’s harsh. Sure doesn’t sound like a religion of love, does it?

One of the things that is great about the Psalms is their gritty reality. David was pouring out what he really felt in his heart. He was badly hurt, and he was angry. He wanted the person that had done him so much harm to pay. But what did he do with that? He handed the remote to God. He was honest with God. The Psalms call on us not to be pious pretenders who act like we don’t feel the pain of injustice and mistreatment when it’s actually killing us inside. God wants us to admit the truth, but then to ask him to deal with the person rather than vent our hurt and anger on them.

Psalm 98:9 says the Lord, “comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world in righteousness and the peoples with equity.” Psalm 9:7 says, “The Lord reigns forever; he has established his throne for judgment.” God will judge all people. He will right all wrongs. We need to hand the remote to the Lord and let him deal with people for two reasons.

His justice is true justice. It is fair. Ours cannot be trusted to be fair. Watch a baseball game on TV some time. These days broadcasts have added something that is helpful. They are able to put a graphic of the strike zone on the screen. You can instantly tell whether a pitch is a strike or not. This has demonstrated two things. First, umpires are very human, and miss a lot of pitches. Second, no batter ever thinks a borderline pitch is a strike. I’ve seen batters get very upset over being called out on a pitch they are absolutely sure is not in the strike zone, but they are wrong. I’ve seen hitters as good as Manny Machado be certain the umpire had it wrong, when he was right. My point here is that our judgment is not impartial. We don’t always see things quite right. But God is the perfect umpire who is never wrong. So we should leave judgment to him.

The second reason we should let God judge is that he is way more effective than we will ever be. There is just so much that is out of our control, and even what seems to be in our control is not as subject to us as it is to God. Nothing and no one is out of God’s control. His justice means that no one ever gets away with anything. They may seem to get away with it in this world, but God guarantees they will be brought to justice. I will repeat something that we should tell ourselves over and over. ***No one gets away with anything***. God will deal with everyone and everything. Any “justice” we might try to mete out will be pitiful compared to God’s justice. Renowned Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggeman wrote, “The raw speech of rage can be submitted to Yahweh because there is reason for confidence that Yahweh takes it seriously and will act.”

Okay, if we are going to stand back and let God handle the remote, what are we supposed to do in response to being hurt?

WIN THE BATTLE

The last verse tells us what the plan is. “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” We need to define what winning means for us. Getting even isn’t winning. Winning isn’t making the other person pay. It isn’t making sure that someone who hurt us ends up being hurt at least as badly as the hurt they’ve inflicted. It is having good win out. When good wins, God’s kingdom wins. That’s the goal. Let’s make good win. There is a fairly obvious truth in this verse that we don’t often think about. It is impossible to overcome evil with evil. All you do by doing evil to someone who has done evil to you is add to the sum total of evil. Doing evil can never amount to good. I repeat, doing more evil will never create good. Trying to overcome evil with evil is like being upset at the dark and trying to fix it by turning off lights. That’s only going to make it darker.

How do we make good win? That’s not rocket science. You make good win by doing good. That’s what Paul tells us to do in these verses. He actually started that idea in verse 14 where he told us to bless those who persecute us. If someone is mean to you, if they say unkind things to you or about you, how do you respond? Paul tells us to bless them. What does it mean to bless someone? It means to bring good to them, to make life better for them. The dictionary has several possible definitions for the word “bless,” but the one that applies here is “to bestow good of any kind on a person.”

Paul gives some examples of that in verse 20. If your enemy is hungry, feed him, if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. Try to meet his needs, whatever they may be. Maybe this person has done evil to you. The way to respond is to do some good for them. Yahoo News a few years back carried a story about 4 police officers, two white, two African American, who were having dinner together in a local diner. The hostess brought a couple to sit at a table next to theirs, but the man told the hostess he didn’t want to sit there. One of the officers, Chuck Thomas, looked at the man. They made eye contact, and Thomas said his body language radiated that he wanted nothing to do with police officers. Chuck and his fellow officers had a very wise response to the situation. Without saying a thing to the couple they picked up the $28 bill for their dinner and left a kind note for them. That is returning good for evil.

Peter Miller was a pastor in the town of Ephrata, Pennsylvania around the time of the American Revolution. He was a good friend of General George Washington. There was a man in Ephrata who was a spiteful man who did everything he could to oppose and even humiliate Pastor Miller. Wittman was generally a hard case who caused trouble for people. He was at one point arrested, tried and convicted of treason. He was sentenced to death. When he heard about that, Miller walked 70 miles to meet with General Washington and asked him to spare Wittman’s life. Washington said to him, “No, Peter, I’m sorry. I cannot grant you the life of your friend.” Miller said, “My friend? He’s not my friend. In fact, he’s the most bitter enemy I have.” Surprised, Washington said, “What? You walked 70 miles to save of the life of an enemy? That puts things in a very different light. I will grant your pardon.” That day Wittman and Miller walked back to their town, no longer enemies.

Paul says by blessing, doing good, to those who hurt us we will heap burning coals on their heads. There’s some debate about what that means. British scholar, C. E. B. Cranfield, wrote in his commentary on Romans that it likely means what Augustine and other early scholars believed, which is the coals signify “burning pangs of shame and contrition.” He wrote, “by thus ministering to one’s enemy’s need one will inflict upon him such an inward sense of shame as will either lead him to real contrition and to being no more an enemy, but a friend, or else, if he refuses to be reconciled, will remain with him as the pain of a bad conscience.”

CONCLUSION

These verses call us to a radical way of living that is completely contrary to the impulses of our human nature. Human nature is dedicated to protecting self and looking out for self. It will always go to “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.” It will naturally be a mirror, reflecting whatever others send toward it. This passage tells us there is a completely different way to live in God’s kingdom. So what can we do to help us carry this out.

LIVE FOR GOD’S KINGDOM, NOT YOURS

We always need to think about why we are here. Are we on the planet to just make ourselves as comfortably as possible? Are we just here to take care of ourselves? Or are we here to live for something greater, much more eternal? We are here to live for God’s kingdom, for his glory. That’s going to mean taking our eyes off ourselves and looking to what God wants, letting his kingdom, his rule, live in us.

God is good. He is good in every way. He is pure, unadulterated good. Where he rules, there is only good. To live for his kingdom is to have his goodness rule in our lives. Even when others do evil, hurt us, mistreat us, annoy us, living for God’s kingdom means having good win.

REMEMBER HOW TO WIN

I often hear professional athletes talk about how teams need to learn how to win. Does that seem like rocket science to you? Are professional athletes unusually dense? They’ve been playing their sport all their lives and they don’t even know the basic rules like how to win a game? Here’s how you win: Score more than the other team. Duh. While that is clearly true, they mean that there is something that goes into winning championships that has to be learned. It has to do with how to prepare, how to do the little things, the hard things that go into winning, with how to be mentally tough when the pressure is on, how to come through in clutch moments.

We need to do the same thing. We need to learn how to win. That begins with defining what winning is. God says the way we win is by overcoming evil with good. Remember, you can’t create good by doing evil. So in all situations we must seek to do good. When another person has hurt you, don’t add to the amount of evil in the world by trying to hurt them back. Defeat evil by doing good when it is least expected.

LOOK AT JESUS

The best example of winning in all of history is Jesus. Hebrews 12:2 tells us to fix our eyes on Jesus. No one has ever been given more evil than he was, and his response was to give back the greatest, most sacrificial blessing in the entire history of the human race. Consider the enormous good that has come from Jesus winning that fight. Let’s keep looking at him.

When we first move into our home we had some interesting neighbors in the house on one side. I’ve suspected that the older couple who first lived there were either Russian sleeper agents or maybe in witness protection. It was kind of weird because they gave different names on a couple of occasions. So I always wondered what the deal was with Herb-Bill and Shirley-Louise. I was never sure what their names really were. But they didn’t live there long before the witness protection program moved them to a different location. In their place came a young couple that proved to be a challenge. The wife was fine, but the husband was a different story. He was a man very much about himself and he had an explosive temper. It led to a couple of confrontations with other neighbors. He caused considerable friction with us. The pinnacle of the friction came the day he kicked our dog, and Laurie almost came to blows with him. Laurie decided she had to do something about him. She decided she needed to win. So she baked an apple pie for him. She took it over to their house to give it to him. He wouldn’t even come to the door, so Laurie gave it to his wife and asked her to tell him she was sorry, and that she really wanted to have peace between us. That began the thaw. We made concerted efforts to bend over backwards for him. Then came the time when our neighborhood was threatened by a brush fire. We were all ordered to evacuate. We talked to this couple and asked if they had a place to go. We offered to have them come with us to my parents’ place. They were touched by our concern for them. We never had any problems with them after that. They later moved away, to be replaced by yet another troublesome neighbor. But we saw lived out the principle of heaping coals on someone’s head by giving good for evil. Let’s become winners, winners for God’s kingdom by always doing good, no matter what other people may do.