

How Do We Respond to Evil?

Romans 12:9-21

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It's hard to avoid thinking about and talking about politics these days. As we enter into the heart of the presidential campaign season now, in between political conventions, both vice-presidential candidates named now, I do want to offer one word of caution about how we talk about these issues with each other that I hope will characterize the way we here at Second conduct ourselves during this campaign.

It's from theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, writing probably around fifty years ago. He said: *The Christian faith ought to persuade us that political controversies are always conflicts between sinners; and not between righteous men and sinners. It ought to mitigate the self-righteousness which is an inevitable part of all human conflicts.*

So let's promise to keep in mind that this presidential campaign is not a battle between good and evil, Christian and non-Christian. It is a conflict between sinners. Each of these two candidates professes to be

a Christian, and there are committed Christians who support each one.

I watched a couple of weeks ago the forum that Rick Warren hosted for Barack Obama and John McCain. Rick Warren is of course the pastor of Saddleback Church in California and is famous for all of his "purpose-driven" products.

I thought that Warren came across well in the forum and did a pretty good job. He brought out the candidates one at a time and asked each of them a series of questions—first Barack Obama and then John McCain.

The most unexpected or unusual question for me was the one that Rick Warren asked about evil. He said, *Does evil exist, and if it does, do we ignore it, do we negotiate with it, do we contain it or do we defeat it?* It turns out both candidates are opposed to evil, so that's good to know.

The two candidates' answers to the question were not all that interesting. What I thought was interesting were the options Warren gave for how we are to respond to evil. Assuming you believe evil exists, he was saying, then there are four possible ways of responding to it: Ignore it, negotiate with it, contain it, or defeat it. Which one do you choose?

Ignore evil, negotiate with evil, contain evil, or defeat evil?

Of course, with those options, the only answer a person running for President can really give is the last one, *Defeat it*. But I thought, *Wouldn't it be interesting if in his answer one of the candidates had brought up Romans 12*.

Romans 12 offers a some different options for how to respond to evil than the ones Obama and McCain were given. Romans 12 is where Paul says:

Let your love be genuine. Bless those who persecute you, and do not curse them. Live in harmony with one another. Do repay anyone evil for evil. If it is at all possible, live peaceably with everyone. Never avenge yourselves. Let God take care of that. If your enemies are hungry, feed them. If they are thirsty, give them something to drink.

And then Paul concludes with this summary statement: Overcome evil with good.

Ignore evil?

Negotiate with evil?

Contain evil?

Defeat evil?

Paul says, *Overcome evil with good*.

Responding to evil the way Paul described (and the way Jesus talked about and lived out)—being genuine in love for others, blessing those who persecute you, living in harmony with others, not repaying evil with evil, living peaceably, not looking for revenge, giving your enemies food and water if they are hungry and thirsty—responding to evil with good like that can break the cycle of evil. It can transform evil.

Most of us are familiar with the musical based on a novel by Victor Hugo, *Les Miserable*. In that musical, there is the story of a convict who was a hardened, mean man and had been in jail for ten years, doing hard labor in chains.

He was finally set free, but he had a convict card. He couldn't get a job; he couldn't even stay in a hotel room. He went to a bishop's house. The bishop let him stay overnight. In the middle of the night when everyone went to sleep, the convict got up, stole a silver candle stick and crept out of the bishop's house and took off through the woods.

He was caught. He was caught by the French policemen. They came in the middle of the night, woke up the bishop and said, *We've got him, this lying, conniving thief. We've got him. This time we are going to put him away for life*.

The bishop turned to this man cowering in chains and said, *That's no thief. That's my guest, Jean Valjean, but I gave him two candlesticks, not one. He forgot one.* He reached in a drawer and gave him another silver candlestick. The police had to let him go.

That experience of forgiveness for something he had done wrong, that extravagant act of forgiveness seeped down inside of Jean Valjean. He kept those candlesticks for the rest of his life as mementoes of what the bishop had done. That moment of mercy changed him immediately.

Part of what this scripture is telling us today is that if we show our enemies kindness and mercy out of love and in hopes of gently guiding them toward the truth, the shame they feel, will change them and eventually be replaced by gratitude and a desire to do better. And it might just change you and me, too.

How do we respond to evil? Paul tells us not to seek revenge or repayment of wrong. Because that is God's prerogative, and God's alone. That we offer forgiveness and love and peace. We do not repay evil for evil.

So what are we supposed to do, though, in practical terms when faced with evil? Paul does give us something practical to do. It's found in verse 20.

What if in the presidential faith forum, one of the candidates had answered Rick Warren like this when he asked, *How are we to respond to evil?* What if one of them had said, instead of giving the expected response, what if one of them had said, *Good question, Rick. Let me answer that by quoting Romans 12:20, where Paul says, "If your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink"?*

I wonder if the Christians who filled that church would have erupted with applause at that answer. Or would there have been an awkward silence. Do we really want to hear an authentically biblical answer to that question from our presidential candidates? Or do we just want to hear the answer we want to hear—and then call it “Christian.”

But this is what Paul says. Rather than seeking revenge on someone who has acted in evil ways toward us, Paul tells us to do good to the enemy and that the impact of doing good will be far more effective than mere repayment of evil for evil.

Overcome evil with good. Now this is not the same as being a doormat. To overcome evil with good is not to lie down before evil so that it simply has its

way. Paul does use the word “overcome.” Overcome evil by the use of good.

Paul is actually being kind of crafty here. He’s saying that we don’t have to just accept whatever evil comes our way. We can overcome evil when we understand the capacity of good to humiliate and expose evil for what it truly is. We can use good as a tool to humiliate and expose evil.

A scene in the old movie “Stars in My Crown” illustrates this point beautifully. There was an old black man in this little town who had helped to raise three generations of boys from one white family. He had told them stories, taught them to hunt and to fish and to trap. He was beloved by all. However, as he got to be quite old, a rich vein of ore was discovered on his little farm, and several of these men he had helped to raise wanted to buy the farm and go into the mining business.

The old man was not interested in money; he only wanted to live out his life in his familiar home place. When he refused to sell, these men began to terrorize him in an effort to run him off. One night they tore up his garden; another night they burned down his barn; and finally they left a crudely lettered note on his door, saying they would lynch him the next night if he

was not gone by sundown. When the old man got this, he called the village minister to have him make out his last will and testament. The next night when the hooded lynchers rode up, these two men came out to face them. The minister explained what the old black man had done, and proceeded to read the will aloud. And what this was was an incredible demonstration of this thing of returning good for evil.

The old man willed his farm to the very men by name who were at that moment ready to kill him for it. He willed his gun and fishing tackle and hunting traps to others in the attacking group whom he had taught to use them years before.

This act of good in the face of their evil intentions had an electrifying effect, and one by one the hooded cowards turned away and disappeared into the night unable to carry through with their evil in the face of such good.

After they had all left, the grandson of the minister, who had witnessed the reading of the will and this whole event from a distance, came up wonderingly and asked, *What kind of will was that, Grandpa?*

And the answer was classic: *The will of God, son, the will of God.*

[story told by John Claypool in Mending the Heart]

This is the will of God.

Love your enemies as well as your neighbors.

Bless those who persecute you, and do not curse them.

Live in harmony with one another.

Do not repay anyone evil for evil.

If it is at all possible, live peaceably with everyone.

Never avenge yourselves. Let God take care of that.

If your enemies are hungry, feed them.

If they are thirsty, give them something to drink.

Overcome evil with good.

How do we respond to evil? If we take the Bible seriously, we have the answer, whether or not it's popular or what we want to hear, whether or not it's reflected in the Republican or Democratic platforms.

We have the answer. It may not be practical for a presidential candidate to give this answer. But it's the message promoted by Paul in our text and the very idea declared by Jesus himself and then demonstrated on the cross. It's an idea that is all over the New Testament.

We are to overcome evil with good.

I know what you may be thinking. *This idealistic, weak approach isn't going to work today. Doing good to those who do evil to us, refusing to get in there and fight against evil; it's not going to work.*

We need to take the tough position. We need to get out there and fight. We need to take our stand.

Let me give you two responses.

[Thanks to my friend Dr. Brian Harbour, former pastor of First Baptist Church, Richardson, Texas, for the idea for these two responses]

The first is this: What is at stake here is not what works but what is right, what is Christian. We are not told to stamp out evil. We are never told to stamp out evil. We are not commanded to win the battle. We are not told to come up with a strategy that will *work*.

We are told to be the light of the world, to love as Christ loved us. Whether or not this strategy will *work* is not the point. We respond to evil this way because that is the Christian thing to do, whether it works or not.

And the second response is this: the more I think about it, the more I'm convinced that overcoming evil with good is actually the only thing that will work. The only power that can transform evil into good is the power of redeeming love.

You can see it in Jesus. When you see Jesus, you know this is true.

Do you see Jesus? He's in the garden. He is praying. His disciples are sleeping. Then Judas arrives. With him is a crowd armed with swords and clubs. They are there to arrest him, to take him away, to put him to death. It is the classic confrontation between good and evil.

Defend yourself, Jesus. Use your omnipotent power. Call on the twelve legions of angels at your disposal. Attack evil and destroy it. That's what we want to shout at Jesus.

But instead he does nothing. To Judas, the betrayer, Jesus says, *Friend, do what you came for.* The ultimate good confronted by the epitome of evil, and Jesus does nothing.

Do you see Jesus? He's on the cross now hanging between two criminals. One of them rails at him. The people standing at the foot of the cross hurl insults at him, ridicule him. *This is the man who saved others!?* *He can't even save himself.*

Do something Jesus! Come down from the cross and show them who you are. Defeat this evil. Zap them with your divine power.

But he does nothing. To one of the criminals he says, *Today you will be with me in paradise.* About the

crowd, Jesus prays, *Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.*

The ultimate good confronted by the epitome of evil, and Jesus does nothing.

Or does he?

There is another word from the cross. Do you remember? Jesus said, *It is finished.*

The ultimate good confronted by the epitome of evil, and evil was overcome with good. It is finished. Jesus overcame evil once and for all. That's why he said, *It is finished.* And when Jesus rose again a few days later, he showed that evil really had been somehow transformed into good.

But we can't ever forget he won the battle against evil by losing—by dying on a cross.

How do we respond to evil? I think we know the answer to the question, How *should* we respond to evil? Now we have to take the question from the theoretical and political to the personal and practical: How *do* we respond to evil?

