

A Love That Doesn't Retaliate

14th Sun. after Pent. – 08/30/26 – Mt. Calvary Luth.

Text: Romans 12:9-21 Pastor Keith Besel

vv. 17-18, **“Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.”**

Introduction

✘ How do we respond to, think about, and handle evil and good in this world and in our own lives? This is the very real; very contemporary issue that St. Paul addresses with us today in our Epistle Reading.

✘ As we begin, consider first these few questions: Do you believe that there is no room for evil in good? Are good and evil really direct opposites as Paul says in verse nine? Must a faithful Christian completely reject the philosophies of yin and yang that say that good needs evil in order to help what is righteous be truly expressed? Do you agree with the Irish expressionist, Francis Bacon, who said, “In order for the light to shine so brightly, the darkness must be present”? Is that true? Must darkness and evil exist in order for us to fully grasp the full depth of God’s love?

➔ Many people defend the idea that a practical compromise of the good and the bad is not only inevitable, but actually necessary to get along in life. They insist, “We have to survive out there in the world. Not every business transaction is straight forward; cut and dried. There must be ‘wiggle room’ when it comes to ‘doing the right thing’?”

➔ Paul tells us in verse 21, “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” So, evil not only has no place in good, but good is what completely overcomes evil. In other words, anything that is truly good actively dispels evil because evil is its enemy. And anything that is truly good is grounded in only one thing: God’s love; God’s goodness and God’s truth.

✘ Only God’s goodness perfectly and always overcomes evil with love.

➔ But look out, my dear Christian, because God’s love may be more than you can, or even want to handle. It may mean that you have to come face-to-face with the selflessness; with a personal sacrifice that you are not willing to contemplate.

➔ You see, when Paul talks about God’s love, he is not speaking of romantic love, erotic love, the kind of love you might have for pizza, or the flower-child love of the sixties with flowers in your hair while you danced to a beat that made you “feel good.” No, He’s speaking of the divine love that his fellow apostle John said is defined by God himself. 1 John 4:8 says, “God is love” which means that the characteristics of God’s love go far beyond our ideas of fairness and security. His love involves our sinful flesh making a sacrifice that frankly, our self-centered flesh does not want to make.

I. God’s love dispels evil thru Christian fellowship

✘ Paul first wants us to understand what God’s love looks like within our Christian fellowship, that is, as we live and interact with each other as fellow believers in Christ.

➔ He wants us to understand that true, Christian love dispels evil, because in their purest states, the two cannot coexist together. Think about that. Since true “evil” is anything, and everything that is against God; against His truth; and against His ways, then when God’s perfect and all-encompassing love takes up residence within a person’s heart, mind, and soul, there is no longer any place for evil! And which of the two is more powerful? God’s love in Jesus, of course.

➔ So, when true, Christian love, is brought to bear upon a situation or in a relationship among Christians, Christ's love cannot be stopped from helping to prevent and even mend unhealthy and broken relationships between fellow believers in Christ. And when His love is nurtured and embraced by all of those involved, then a God-pleasing union among His people is solidified and enjoyed. Psalm 133:1 expresses this joyful result: "Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers (believers) dwell in unity!"

- ✘ Indeed my fellow Christians, when you and I are able to follow Paul in verse nine and "abhor what is evil" while we, at the same time, "hold fast to what is good", it's then that we are putting our selfish desires aside and we are living for God. And someone who is "living for God" will instinctively also live according to verse 10: "loving one another with brotherly affection."

➔ There are two closely related Greek words there in verse 10 - φιλαδελφία (philadelphia) and φιλόστοργοι (philostorgoi) which both emphasize the strong love and affection that should exist between those with whom we are closely related, like with a "brother" or "immediate family member". And the fact that Paul uses them both in the same sentence drives home God's intent that we truly view our fellow believers in Christ as family; even more closely bound together in love sometimes than those who are in our biological family. We really are "brothers and sisters" in Christ!

- ✘ But let's be honest with ourselves, we know that kind of love isn't often in us, is it. We must confess that we sometimes look sidelong at our fellow believer and wonder how he/she could possibly take *that* position at a voters' meeting. We must admit that we smile and say the pleasant "good morning" at 10:15 on the way out of worship and then say something quite different about that same child of God at the lunch table at noon.

➔ But Paul says in verse nine, "Let love be genuine." The Greek is ἀνυπόκριτος (anhypokritos) which literally means "without hypocrisy." Yet we all must confess that, even when we want to love our fellow Christian, too often we just don't muster the energy or love them "enough" to find room to do so in our busy, self-focused schedules. So what are we to do with Paul's charge in verse 11, "Do not be slothful (i.e. lazy) in zeal, be fervent in spirit."

➔ You see, in spite of our sin, this genuine Christian love does exist within Christ's family of believers, doesn't it. It's here right now; this love is between you and me. We are brothers and sisters in Christ who have been made aware of His love through the Gospel, because, yes, this is the love with which Christ has loved you and me personally – genuinely, fervently, honoring us above Himself.

➔ And when your words and your actions actually reflect this Christ-like attitude, you become a witness and an encouragement to all of us, as we call one another a "family" in faith; as we bear one another's burdens and we share each other's joys!

II. God's love dispels evil through sacrifice

- ✘ But if you thought this was all there is to it, you would be wrong. Paul takes it one giant step further here in our text and he tells us how this Christian love must reach even those *outside* of the faith; meaning all those who do not know this love that you and I have from God.

➔ Honestly though, this poses a challenge, because their entire world view is not the same as ours. Most of the time, they don't see evil and good as polar opposites, which means that they may not choose to treat you the same way that we are called within the Church to treat each other in response to our faith. In fact, that's what you should expect!

- ✘ So, if they are not going to treat us with mutual love – maybe even with animosity or hatred, then what's your first response? Perhaps it is, "Well, then I'm off the hook. If they're not going to be loving toward me; if they're going to respond to me with hostility, then you know what, I've got

the right; I've got the justification to simply avoid them; maybe even to strike back and defend myself in some kind of revengeful way." I know that sounds reasonable to the world, and let's be honest, even to many of us.

➔ But Paul tells us clearly that those of us who are filled with God's love in Christ must not think like the world does. Ours is a Christian worldview! And so he says in verse 14, "Bless those who persecute you." And in verse 17, "Repay no one evil for evil." Instead, "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink" (v. 20).

➔ And yet we struggle with our inner, sin-filled instinct that wants to say, "But that's not fair!" And you're right. It is not fair. But, do you know what it is? It is love! True love is never concerned about what is fair, because true love is from God. And His is the love that saved you; the love that, if we didn't have it coursing through us right now in Jesus, means we would ourselves be the ones persecuting believers. Look at how Jesus was persecuted all the way to the cross and crucifixion, yet His love did not pursue fairness. It was never even considered.

✖ I know someone here has to be thinking, "Yeah Pastor, but that's Jesus, He doesn't really expect me to love my enemies; to love those who treat me with evil, the same as He did, does He? No human could ever do that." Well, not by ourselves, that is true.

➔ But, consider the true story of Rev. Richard Wurmbrand who was kidnapped by the Communist Romanian government in 1948 because he would not stop proclaiming the Gospel of Christ. Though they tried to force him to do it, he would not reject his faith in Jesus. And for that he spent 14 years being tortured in prison. And because of his influence among other Christians, whose names he refused to reveal, the Romanian leaders intended to set an example of Wurmbrand. So for his first three years he was placed in solitary confinement where he was told he could not even kneel on the concrete floor and pray. Yet he did. And each time he did, he was dragged out of his cell and he was beaten.

- They whipped the soles of his feet until the flesh was gone and then they beat the exposed tissue down to the bone, day after day, because every time they put him back in his cell they would see him kneeling and praying again. Finally in total frustration, the prison guard exclaimed, "What is wrong with you? You have nothing! What are praying for?" Pastor Wurmbrand responded, "I am praying for you."

- In fact, the guards would often ask him how he could ever love those who beat and tortured him, which then opened the door for Wurmbrand to share the Gospel of Jesus and His undeserved and unvengeful love for all of us as sinners. This persistent; this forgiving love actually led a number of Wurmbrand's guards to come to faith in Jesus over time.

✖ This love that can only be expressed by one who has first been loved this way by Jesus is what Paul describes in verse 20 today, when he says that loving someone who treats us with evil as Christ has loved us "will heap burning coals on his head." The point of Paul's metaphor is that repaying evil with good is so opposite to the normal human response to evil that it brings an extreme sense of burning self-shame upon the persecutor so that it often can lead that evildoer to change his/her mind and then reconsider Jesus who is behind the love that we are showing to them.

➔ As Paul says in verse 18, it's not about what the other person is thinking, saying or doing that matters, but only about our own response to Jesus and His love for us. Paul says, "If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all."

➔ Did you know that many Muslims who have converted to faith in Jesus report that this kind of shocking, undeserved love from Christians is what convinced them of the genuineness of the Christian faith; is what led them to receive repentance and bring them into the family of God?

They tell us they have never simply experienced this kind of love in their lives before receiving it first from a Christian.

Conclusion

✘ My dear believers, this is the love that Jesus has given to you as His free and undeserved gift! This is the love that forgives you when you fail to return good for evil. It's the same love that led Jesus to respond to the world's persecution by staying on the cross and allowing all that is evil to destroy Him.

➔ This is the love by which your sins and mine have been entirely washed and covered over by the blood of Jesus; the love by which God crushed evil once and for all. His alone is the "good" that resurrected Jesus; that entirely overcomes all evil (v.21) and assures us that we have a place in His family forevermore! Amen.