

How To Fight Evil
Romans 12:9-21
September 3, 2023

If you are like me, when I watch the news I struggle, especially violence, prejudice, hate. I grieve and mourn. I feel helpless. What can I do? What can we do?

I believe Jesus transforms lives. When Jesus enters into the heart and soul of a person, that person becomes a new creation. As a person becomes a disciple and follower of Jesus, that person learns what it means to claim Jesus as Lord and Savior. We spend our whole life discovering what that means for our lives.

Proclaiming Jesus as our Lord and Savior is not just saying words, but living it out as well. Our scripture passage today is a very practical way to live it out. This is how a follower of Jesus acts, and in this action, we fight evil.

There is much here in this scripture passage. There are up to 30 imperatives or commands. I could speak on each command, enough material for a multitude of sermons. But instead, I want to look at the passage as a whole. To look at the flavor of it, so to speak.

The passage begins with evil and ends with evil. In between is how to fight it.

Many of you have read or heard of the book *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People* written by Stephen Covey. Covey had a radical idea. He believed every community of people – such as businesses, churches, charities, other institutions, even marriages and families - should have a mission statement. If a group or community or business had a mission statement, then every member of the group will know why they are together and what they've been collectively placed on this earth to do.

Last week, I mentioned our church mission statement. Here it is again: *To make Christ known through reconciliation while communicating respect and love to all people.* As I look at our church's mission statement, it sounds vaguely familiar. Doesn't this mission statement reflect our scripture passage?

To make Christ known through reconciliation while communicating respect and love to all people. This scripture passage gives us ways to follow our mission statement.

We are challenged to do the opposite of what people expect of us. I am going to share true-life stories of people who put this scripture passage into action, to show us what this scripture looks like in real life.

From the very first line in the passage: "Love from the center of who you are; don't fake it." Another translation says: Love must be sincere.

Beth Moore, a Bible teacher and author, shared what happened to her one day at the Knoxville airport. While waiting to board her flight, she saw a man humped over in a wheelchair. He was skin and bones with clothes much too large for him. His hands were tangled masses of veins and bones. What she noticed the most was his hair. It was grey and stringy, hanging down over his shoulders and down his back.

Beth Moore could feel it. God was going to ask her to do something she did not want to do. "I want you to brush his hair," God spoke. She said the words were so clear her heart leapt into her throat.

She did not want to do it, but she went over to the man and asked if she could brush his hair. She had to ask him several times, each time a bit louder, as he couldn't hear very well. By this time, people in the gate area were looking at them. I will let Beth Moore take it from here....

I watched him look up at me with absolute shock on his face, and say, "If you really want to." Are you kidding? Of course I didn't want to. But God didn't seem interested in my personal preference right about then. He pressed on my heart until I could utter the words, "Yes, sir, I would be pleased. But I have one little problem. I don't have a hairbrush."

"I have one in my bag," he responded.

I went around to the back of that wheelchair, and I got on my hands and knees and unzipped the stranger's old carry-on hardly believing what I was doing. I stood up and started brushing the old man's hair...

A miraculous thing happened to me as I started brushing that old man's hair.... Everybody else in the room disappeared. There was no one alive for those moments except that old man and me. I brushed and brushed and I brushed until every tangle was out of that hair. I know this sounds so strange but I've never felt that kind of love for another soul in my entire life. I believe with all my heart, I—for that few minutes—felt a portion of the very love of God...

His hair was finally as soft and smooth as an infant's. I slipped the brush back in the bag, went around the chair to face him. I got back down on my knees, put my hands on his knees, and said, "Sir, do you know my Jesus?"

He said, "Yes, I do..."

He explained, "I've known Him since I married my bride. She wouldn't marry me until I got to know the Savior." He said "You see, the problem is, I haven't seen my bride in months. I've had open-heart surgery, and she's been too ill to come see me. I was sitting here thinking to myself what a mess I must be for my bride."

Beth Moore recognized this as a God moment. "Love from the center of who you are; don't fake it."

Look at the second paragraph of our passage: "Don't burn out; keep yourselves fueled and aflame. Be alert servants of the Master cheerfully expectant. Don't quit in hard times; pray all the harder. Help needy Christians; be inventive in hospitality. "

It was 9/11, and American airspace was shut down. 238 planes were diverted to Canada. 38 of those were sent to Gander, Newfoundland, totaling 6,700 people displaced. The small town of 10,000 opened their homes and schools and hearts to the stranded passengers by providing food, clothing, shelter and even day trips.

Pharmacists worked around the clock providing medicines for people who had checked their medications in luggage they could not retrieve. The town all but shut down for the "plane people." Even bus drivers in the middle of a nasty strike laid down their picket signs to help.

One person wrote, “Kindness is woven into the very fabric of their nature – they don’t know any other way to live.” The mayor said, “We have to set more of an example and show the world we can all live in harmony regardless of what we are.” One of the passengers said, “That whole community is the poster child for how hospitality and just a sheer act of humanity should be... “

People were so taken with this story that books have been written, and a Broadway musical called “Come From Away” was produced. People thirst for stories like this.

Be inventive in hospitality.

Third paragraph: “Bless your enemies; no cursing under your breath.” Another version says, “Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse.”

In South Africa, during the height of apartheid, Nelson Mandela was imprisoned for high treason, and spent 27 years in prison. When he was finally released, he wrote, “As I walked out the door toward the gate that would lead to my freedom, I knew if I didn’t leave my bitterness and hatred behind, I’d still be in prison.”

Mandela understood that when choosing between revenge and forgiveness, it is only forgiveness that leads to peace. He led a movement to end apartheid and helped remake South Africa into a strong democracy.

He taught us that forgiveness is not only possible – it is powerful.
Bless your enemies.

End of the third paragraph: “Get along with each other; don’t be stuck-up. Make friends with nobodies; don’t be the great somebody.”

Betty Meadows was the general presbyter of Mid-Kentucky Presbytery, a high position in the Presbyterian denomination. One summer she decided to take sabbatical. She left her churchy world behind and went “under cover” for three months, working as a Waffle House hostess. To her surprise, as she put it, “the risen Christ showed up every day.”

A van broke down in the parking lot, on the Fourth of July, carrying a family from Alabama. No garage or mechanic could be found. A waitress heard of their plight and called her boyfriend. He arrived 15 minutes later and fixed their van, for the price of a cup of coffee.

“The risen Christ in the mechanic and the waitress,” writes Betty.

A lawyer set up shop in the Waffle House, offering legal help to the needy of the community, for what they could pay — or for no payment at all, if they couldn’t afford it.

“Day after day,” writes Betty, “this lawyer sat at a table, smoking his cigar, meeting client after client, turning down no one. The risen Christ in the lawyer.”

A woman hobbled into the restaurant, a cast on one leg, but displaying signs of other medical difficulties. The police had just arrested her boyfriend for drunken driving and had impounded his truck. She was turned out on the street, with nowhere to go. The restaurant was so busy, none of the staff could give her a ride to the bus station, but she called her landlord, who lived an hour and a half away. He dropped everything, and drove right over to pick her up.

“When the landlord arrived,” writes Betty, “I said to him, ‘How kind of you to drive so far for one of your tenants, for this woman.’

“The man looked puzzled. And then he said, ‘Why wouldn’t I?’

“The risen Christ in the landlord,” she wrote.

Get along with each other; don’t be stuck-up. Make friends with nobodies; don’t be the great somebody.”

Fourth paragraph: “Don’t hit back; discover beauty in everyone. If you’ve got it in you, get along with everybody. Don’t insist on getting even; that’s not for you to do. ‘I’ll do the judging,’ says God. ‘I’ll take care of it.’”

There was a woman named Martha, who had a terribly difficult childhood. “Mom regularly beat me with a strap,” she recalls. “She was mean even when I did nothing wrong. My dad was cruel for reasons I don’t understand. He’d pack my lunch for school and often put a rock in it instead of a sandwich. As hungry as I was after school, I dreaded coming home.”

Martha eventually married and raised a beautiful child. So often, abused children become abusers, and the cycle of violence continues. When asked how she broke the cycle, Martha said, “I was determined to do the complete opposite of what my parents did for me.”

“Don’t hit back; discover beauty in everyone. If you’ve got it in you, get along with everybody. Don’t insist on getting even; that’s not for you to do. ‘I’ll do the judging,’ says God. ‘I’ll take care of it.’”

The last sentence of our scripture passage: “Don’t let evil get the best of you; get the best of evil by doing good.”

One man wrote: It began as a peaceful march to protest the brutal killing of George Floyd. But as the darkness deepened, it became a dark night of riotous behavior. Images of angry people smashing store fronts, of police cars ablaze, and of businesses going up in flames brought me to my knees in earnest prayer and disturbed my anxious sleep. What I saw was bad, frightening, evil.

In the morning I checked the news. The rioters were gone, but they had left a disturbing mess: smashed windows, burned cars, vile graffiti, sad ruins in the heart of the city.

A reporter surveying the damage approached a young mother with two children. He asked, “Why are you here this morning?” She said, “We saw the news; we decided that this city needs someone to show the love of God.”

Others were there too—sweeping up the glass shards, trying to restore order to chaos. The mom and her children, who were about 5 and 7 years old, were there with brushes and soap, trying to erase stubborn graffiti. They brought some light into the darkness, some of God’s love into a broken place where the evidence of evil was very real.

In that mother and her little ones, I saw the presence of Jesus. She and her children were being the church, Christ’s body—overcoming evil by doing good.

“Don’t let evil get the best of you; get the best of evil by doing good.”

Alice Walker said, “Anybody can observe the Sabbath, but making it holy surely takes the rest of the week.”

Gracious Lord, as we prepare to receive the bread and juice from this table, we open our heart to your love and extend it to all we meet. Amen.

