

1.26.2025 Epiphany 3 (Romans 12:16-21)

*“Recompense to no man evil for evil... Avenge not yourselves... If thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink... Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good.”*

These inspired words found in our Epistle this morning demonstrate the great divide that exists between the faithful Christian life and fallen human nature. These words are a clear indication that every Christian is in the midst of a great battle. On one side of this battle are all those things that seem to come so naturally to our flesh, like repaying evil for evil or avenging ourselves, and on the other side is that which God instructs His people to do, telling us that if your enemy hungers, feed him, if he thirsts, give him drink, to be not overcome by evil, but to overcome evil with good. In this world we are in the midst of a great battle, with the sinful, selfish desires of the flesh on one side, and the gracious, God-given gifts of the Spirit on the other.

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When we consider the words we read this morning, we find they not only describe our daily struggle to live the life to which God has called us, but we also recognize that these words were written for our benefit and instruction. They were written, you might say, to help us, in the midst of this great conflict, to wage war against fallen human nature and those forces which stand in opposition to God. These words benefit and instruct us in a battle that is *“not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places”* (Ephesians 6:12).

The words of our epistle were written to help us war against fallen human nature, and they tell us the method of our warfare is twofold. First, we are told, be not overcome by evil. In this great battle, do not be defeated by any injury you suffer at the hand of another, and do not lower your defenses by reaching down to pick up a stone that you may repay evil for evil. Don't abandon your position on the battlefield by stepping out to avenge yourself, but instead, in the words of St. Paul, *“Put on the whole armor of God, that*

*you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil... Stand therefore, having girded your waist with truth, having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and having shod your feet with the preparation of the gospel of peace; above all, taking the shield of faith with which you will be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked one. And take helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God” (Ephesians 6:11; 14-17).*

Be not overcome by evil, and be not overcome by the evil one. Put on the whole armor of God, not that you may avenge yourself, but by the grace of God that you may stand, in His power and under His protection, and defend yourself against the wiles of the devil. The people of God repay no one evil for evil, and avenge not ourselves, because we know that those who are tricked by the Enemy into doing so are not the conquerors, but the conquered.

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To stand boldly against the wiles of the devil, to faithfully resist his schemes, is the first method of our warfare in the great battle against fallen human nature, but it is not enough to *be not overcome by evil*, we must also *overcome evil with good*. We must not only stop the hand that is reaching down to pick up a stone to throw at our enemy, we must also find some good that hand may do for our enemy. St. James gives us this pattern to follow as we combat the forces of evil. He writes, *“Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and He will draw near to you” (James 4:7-8).*

The pattern is: *Resist the devil... Draw near to God...* We resist the devil by turning away from the temptation he places before us to avenge ourselves, and we draw near to God by turning toward the opportunity He gives us to overcome evil with good. This pattern of resisting the devil and his schemes, and drawing near to God through some positive act is exactly what our Lord calls His people to do in the Sermon on the Mount. In that sermon, Jesus didn't talk about inaction, He didn't say avoid, ignore, or just forget you have enemies. Instead, He said, *“Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you” (Matthew 5:44).* And Why? *“That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven...” (Matthew 5:45).*

The children of God are not overcome by evil, the children of God overcome evil with good, and the only-begotten Son of God is the perfect example of that eternal truth. When our Lord, on the Cross at Calvary, confronted the problem of evil and the terrible effects of our sin, He didn't call down twelve legions of angels, He didn't use His Omnipotent power to repay evil for evil. Instead, He overcame evil with good by loving, forgiving, praying, and dying for His enemies. As St. Paul declared, "*While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us*" (Romans 5:8). The Son of God was mocked and beaten, spit on and scourged, crowned with thorns and nailed to a cross, and on that Cross He overcame the most horrific evil with the greatest good, crying out, "*Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do*" (Luke 23:34), as He gave His life to take away the sin of the world.

God, in the Person of Jesus Christ, lived a life of perfect holiness, obedience, and active benevolence unlike the world has ever seen. He answered hate with love. He confronted sin with righteousness. He overcame evil with good. Now He calls you, and I, and all who call themselves Christians, to follow His perfect example, to confront and overcome evil as He did, with holiness, righteousness and compassion; in patience, humility, and love. Such a high call, and living in His way doesn't come easily to our fallen human nature. We are in the midst of a great battle, a battle that we cannot win in our own strength, but only in the presence and power of God. Therefore, by the grace of God, may we remain in His presence, and rely on His power, as we strive to lay down our lives - to love and forgive and pray for those who hurt us, to the end that we may truly be Christians, not only in word, but in deed. Christians, who like our Savior Christ, overcome evil with good.