

“The Upside Down,” Romans 12:14-21, 9/22/19 Steve Harden

“Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight. 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. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” To the contrary, “if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.” Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”

Amen. This is the word of God.

I’ve struggled a bit thinking about what I can say to you to perhaps comfort you or encourage you. What do you say to those you love who have lost their lead pastor? What words of encouragement or hope can I bring to you? There are so many things that come to mind, but at the end of the day I chose to continue in our series here in September about peacemaking. I had to think that there was a reason why God put this in our minds months ago to have it here in September, and so I’m going to trust Him. I’m going to trust Him that somehow, for at least some of us, this is what we need to hear today. This is the fourth sermon in this series, and this next Sunday will be the fifth and the last, and Lord willing we’ll move back to the gospel of John in October.

Many of us have watched the Netflix series, “Stranger Things.” It’s had a lot of popularity and I know for one family, we watched it the first day it was out, and the second day

we couldn't get on Netflix because everybody else in the family was watching it, right? But we watch Stranger Things. If you're not familiar with it, it's about some kids and some parents fighting a monster that comes from a parallel universe called the upside down. Both 11 and Will describe this place as being comparable to the world they know, but different somehow. This morning I suggest for we who are followers of Jesus, we live in the upside down. Somehow, we live in a parallel universe with the rest of the world. We are guided by the Holy Spirit to obey his word. We are in this world, but we're not of this world, if you will, the upside down.

These laws of God often go against our nature; they go against what we would ordinarily or naturally do and they seem totally nuts to anyone on the outside. Why would you do such a thing? It doesn't make sense! Today, we're going to look together at what to do when my brother refuses to reconcile with me. Following what we've talked about all month, I've gone to him. I couldn't overlook it, as we talked about last time. We see that for some reason I feel like I need to confront, I need to talk to my brother. And I go to him, and I'm rejected. "But Steve you said to do this, and it'd all work!" No, I didn't say that, I said it's what we are to do. Sometimes, people will refuse to be reconciled with you, and will reject your efforts. Now what do I do? Does the Scripture have anything to say to me when I try to obey, and yet nothing happens the way I think it should? Yes, it does, and Candace read it a moment ago. I think primarily, the Scriptures give us two directives when someone refuses to be reconciled with us. The first one is that we are to overcome evil with good and the second is get out of the way. Overcome evil with good and get out of the way.

First of all, overcome evil with good. When your efforts at reconciliation are rebuffed, you are in a sense to stand up straight and tall and throw your shoulders up and fight back. There is something within you that when someone does not respond well, that you need to say, alright,

game on. In our text this morning, we don't see a hint of resignation, a hint of self-pity. We do not see that at all. A believer never need play the role of a victim. Listen, verse 20: "To the contrary, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." Verse 20 there sums up everything that the apostle Paul has been saying in this paragraph. He says, do not be overcome with evil, do not let evil wash over you and play the victim. No! Paul says. You overcome evil with good. You take courage and heart and you overcome that evil with good, using the means and the methods that God alone has placed at your disposal. You do not retaliate evil with evil; you do not give back to the offender what he has given to you, no! You retaliate with good! I know this sounds so foreign to our thinking, because it's not how we're wired. But remember, we're Jesus followers. We're in the upside down, where it's kind of like this world, but it's not.

When we think in terms of retaliation, we normally think in terms of retaliation in kind. You say a bad word to me, I say it back to you, you snap at me, I snap back, you yell at me, I yell back and sometimes you punch me and look out, right? That's kind of what we think about in terms of retaliation. If somebody does evil to me, I'm going to give it back to him. Anything else is foreign to our thinking, but my friends, that is not God's way! Again, in our text, listen again. "Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Repay no one evil for evil but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. Do not be overcome by evil but overcome evil with good."

You see, God has placed two weapons in your arsenal to overcome evil. The first is good and kind words. Verse 14: "Bless those who persecute you. Bless and do not curse them." Boy, that has to be upside down, because that's not what comes naturally! The more heated a dispute

becomes, the harder it is to control your tongue. I know! But when you react with harsh or critical words, you're fighting evil with evil, you're not fighting with God's arsenal. You must not retaliate in kind. All your efforts at overcoming evil can be undone in a moment by a careless or unkind word, a word spoken loudly or sarcastically. And we don't have time to deal with it right now but understand when you communicate you communicate with more than the words of your mouth; you communicate with your body language and your facial countenance as well. You can say kind words and say "I hate you" with your face. You know that. So, we have to be very careful. "Bless and do not curse." Bless and curse are polar opposites. They are completely different. Listen to James 3, speaking of our tongue, James writes: "With it we bless our Lord and Father and with it we curse people who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing," and James says, "These things ought not to be." My friends, blessing and cursing from the same mouth should not be. My friends, we need to repent sometimes, right? Can we be honest enough to say: "Boy sometimes, these two things come out." Let's be real with one another. But we must not fight that way. The way we fight is to use the tools that God gives us, and the tool He gives us is to bless and do not curse. Luke 6:28: "Bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you." Man, if there's anything countercultural it's that. You pray for your opponent, for God to bless them! To bless them! Totally goes against our natural inclinations.

I've got to tell you, I prescribe this maybe as much as anything else when I talk to people who are struggling, normally it's husbands and wives, right? Because we're closer there and it happens. But I prescribe this more often than not: whenever a thought comes up that makes you angry about them, at that moment discipline yourself to pray that God would bless them. Amazing things happen, because you see, you can't pray for God to bless them at the same time

cursing them in your mind. You can't do it. Bless and do not curse. See, when you're asking God to bless someone, your focus shifts from your heart to their good. It takes it off of me onto them, and you can bless them. When you've focused on them, you begin to recognize the awful price that sin makes us pay. You recognize that they are in pain and they experience pain because of their sin and so it brings out a heart of compassion in you. So, we are to have good words: speaking kindly to and about your offender. You praise them to other people. You speak well of them and compliment them when you can do so rightly, and if they do even a little bit of good, you thank them, and you bless them. Whether their attitude changes or not, your attitude changes. I promise you that it will. That is the power of God through the Holy Spirit working in you. Do not discount the work of the Holy Spirit in changing your heart, making you more like Jesus. That's what blessing and not cursing does for you. Good words.

The second weapon in our arsenal that God gives us to combat evil is honorable actions. Very similar to words, when someone refuses to be reconciled with you, do something nice to or for them. Again, doesn't come naturally, right? You've got to do what the text says, give thought to do what is honorable, because what is honorable doesn't just naturally come out, especially in the midst of this. You give thought, you think, how can I be honorable to that person? Again, the temptation is to retaliate in kind, but you see, we're not allowed to do that. That tool is not in our box. So, you bless them through your actions. Paul said: "if he's hungry," what? "Feed him. If he's thirsty, give him something to drink." Those are actions. Meet his need. Then he goes on and says: "For by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head," which sounds kind of strange doesn't it? Paul, are you saying that I'm going to hurt my brother because of this? It kind of doesn't fit in the context, right? But what I think he's doing, he's going back to an Ancient Egyptian custom where whenever somebody had a change of mind, when they repent of

something, they would walk through town with a bowl on their heads with burning coals in it, to symbolize their change of mind, in a manner. Now it seems kind of strange to me, but it was a public declaration that they'd changed their mind, that they didn't think the same way as they did before. So, what I think Paul is doing is saying, when you return good instead of evil to your offender, it may well change his mind, in a manner. The point is you are to observe the needs of your brother, and when you discover them, do your best to meet them and in so doing God may well change their mind. Again, we exist in the upside down. This is not natural. But by the Holy Spirit, by the power of the Holy Spirit working in us, it can happen. I've seen it time and time again. Bless those who persecute you. Bless and do not curse. So, the first thing we are told is to overcome evil with good.

But the second thing is to get out of the way. If we're honest, we want to return evil for evil. That's what our natural bent is; but if we're also honest, we have to admit to one another that we are tempted to execute justice on our offenders. I'm going to bring judgement upon you. We really want them to pay for hurting us. We want to punish them in some way. But my friends, we are not given that liberty. We are not given that freedom. Listen to Paul, verse 19: "Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.'" My friends, we have boundaries that we must not cross. We may never be judge, jury and executioner to our offender. We are not given that liberty. Notice, Paul in the text says: "Never." What does never mean? In the original Greek it means, never. There is not one circumstance, Paul says, not one extreme circumstance that you are allowed to be judge, jury and executioner over your offender. No exceptions. I can never avenge a wrong done. How do we do that? Well, sometimes I'm grouchy because somebody else has been grouchy to me, so I'm going to make them pay, or I'll be irritable because they upset me. You're

going to pay, buddy. Or maybe the cold shoulder, the silent treatment, nobody does that, I see that from the looks on your faces. What is that? What is the silent treatment? It's simply being the judge and punishing my offender because they messed up. They need to know they messed up, right? How about speaking poorly about somebody behind their back? I'm judge. You shouldn't have done that. I'm taking care of it. My friends, the authority to enact justice is God's alone. Let that resonate in your mind and heart that God is the judge of His universe. He says: "Vengeance is mine." He claims the right for justice and He does not share that right with anyone else. There are two reasons why we can't do that other than the fact that God says, don't.

But perhaps the reasons why He says don't is number one, revenge is forbidden because I don't have the authority. You see, taking vengeance, or avenging ourselves, disregards God's right to rule over His creation. He is the judge of the universe. He chooses to exercise that right, and how foolish is it to try to take the gavel out of His hands and say: "I can do this one better." How ridiculous is that? And yet, that is what we do when we try to avenge ourselves. Paul says, leave room for the wrath of God. Get out of the way and let God do what only God can do. Step aside for the judgement of God, Himself. Allow God to take up your cause. The word vengeance means to mete out justice, to give justice. The holy righteous and just God of the universe has declared that He will punish those who sin against Him and harm His people. My friends, it's not your job. Don't take up something that God says is His alone. Now, God enacts His justice in two ways: either He does it directly, or He uses His authorities in the situation to enact justice.

Vengeance is a judicial act and is limited to those who have authority in a situation. In Scripture, we see that God gives authority to government officials in Romans 13. Our government officials are given the right to mete out justice. Church officials in Matthew 18, parents in Ephesians 6 are the authorities in their family and they enact justice. But we never find

God giving the right to take vengeance or justice to the individual. We just don't see it in Scripture. It's never in the hands of the private individual.

But secondly, not only do we not have the authority, we don't have the ability to be a good judge. You're not a righteous judge, sorry! You're just not. No matter how hard you try, no matter how objective you try to be, you will never have all the facts necessary to bring judgment on anyone. You just don't have the ability. Listen to 1 Corinthians 4:5, he says: "Therefore, do not pronounce judgment before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation from God."

Now remember, last week we talked about the fact that we cannot assume motives from another person. If they don't tell you by their words or by their actions, you just don't know what they're thinking, you don't know. Even when they tell you with their words and actions, you may misinterpret them. We just don't have the ability to know. God forbids us to try. But let me encourage you, God does. God knows. God judges men not only by their actions, but by their thoughts and motives as well. You see, God knows everything. He knows everything about the situation. He knows what led up to it; He knows their background their make-up. He knows the results stemming from the situation. He knows it all. You see, in God's court there is never a prosecuting attorney, there is never a defense attorney. Witnesses are never called. Because He knows it all. It is foolish to think that I can do a better job than He can in punishing my offender. If I judge my offender, I can promise you I will either be too lenient or too harsh. I'll never get it right. Because I just don't have the ability. Delight, my friends, delight in the fact that God has removed this incredible burden from you. You're not responsible for justice. I know that this is harder for some than others.



I know for a fact that many of you have been hurt deeply in your past. I know that. Or those who you love have been hurt deeply in the past, so have I. I know what it means to desire with all of my being to punish my offender, and I'm not very proud of the feelings that I had. I know, okay? But to you who have been wronged and hurt, to see your offender seemingly walk away untouched is almost too much to bear. I know. But my friend, please, trust Him to do what He says He will do. There has never been, nor will there ever be a sin committed that will not be fully punished to the degree that it needs to be punished. Now wrap your head around that. Every sin that has ever been committed will be meted out the justice it deserves, not one ounce more or less.

Every sin that has ever been committed will be punished in one of two ways. One, it will rest on the shoulders of the one who has committed the crime, or it will rest upon our dear Savior's shoulders. There are only two places for it. Please, do not for one moment consider that God will not bring about the justice that He has sworn to do. He cares about justice. He is just. He cares enough that for the purpose of saving for Himself a people of His own possession, He sent His Son to bear the justice that should have been meted out upon my shoulders and yours. Our God is just. Yes, He is merciful; yes, He is gracious and I praise God for that, but I also praise God for the fact that He is just. See, Jesus died to show just how much justice means to God, His Father. There is no greater evidence of His commitment to justice than when He took His Son and put Him on the tree. Our God is just, do not take justice for yourself and think that you can do it better than God can do it. Your enemy has not gotten away with anything, my friend. You are relieved of the responsibility.

And let me just close with pointing you to the first word of verse 19, Paul says: "Beloved." Paul says: "My dear ones." He says: "You are loved." Your Father cares for you; He

knows you're hurting. He is not unmoved by your pain. He has not forgotten you. Every wrong will be made right, and He knows exactly what to do. We have His word. So, what must we do? When we've been offended, we fight back using only the tools that God has given us: kind, good words and kind actions; bless and do not curse. But also, we just get out of the way and we don't take upon ourselves the need to enact our own vengeance. "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." Let's pray.

Oh Father, the things that we talk about today are not easy. It's so counter to the way that we tend to think. But you have given us direction. I pray that through your Holy Spirit you would move in our hearts to truly bless and not curse, to overcome evil with good. Take away our desire for vengeance. May we be faithful followers of Jesus Christ. I pray in Jesus' name, Amen.