

Series: Restless
People Problems
Romans 12:17-21

Sermon by Lead Pastor Paul Joslin
Waterstone Community Church, Littleton, Colorado
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Today we are continuing our series called Restless, and today I want to talk about something that I think probably none of you will relate to. How is that for an opening line? None of you will care about this or agree with me, but here is the basic premise I want to start with. I think most of us would agree that life would be much more restful, we would have a lot less restlessness in our lives if it weren't for other people, all right? Do you feel that? Like if I could just get rid of all of the difficult people in my life, I would be so rested. I would feel so much better. Some of you might be looking at your spouse right now and be like, "Yeah, he is not wrong." Some of you, you are instantly thinking about that co-worker. You are thinking about that family member that just has this way of stealing your peace and your rest. You could be going about your day, having an amazing day, an amazing time, and then it is that random text message. It is the phone call. They just show up at your house for some sort of event or whatever it might be. You just interact with them in the hall at work, and suddenly all of your peace is gone, and you go to that place where you just start thinking about, "If I could just say what I really think, if I could just let them know," and it is that conversation that you have had a thousand times, like in the shower or in your car by yourself, and in your car, you were like the best arguer ever. It is like you are so calm, you are so perceptive. You just, like you know the job, and then you get into the situation, and you are like, "I do not know what to say or what to do. I do not know how to interact with this person. They are so difficult."

It is the people in our lives who are constantly critical. It is the people in our lives who are really controlling. Or maybe they play the victim in our lives, where you just talk to them, and it is like, "Man, everything in your life is somebody else's fault." It is the people in our lives who feel a little bit draining to us. They have that emotional energy where it just feels constantly heavy and like they are sucking your soul from your body. Then there are also those who, my personal favorite is like the passive aggressive Ninja. Do you know what I am talking about? Like they can just figure out how to Ninja-move a passive aggressive comment into any conversation, those people who steal our peace and our rest.

Now I would guess that many of you have thought of someone in your mind as I have been talking through that. There is a person or maybe many people, and I would posit that maybe if you haven't thought of anyone, you should do a little self-reflection. Someone else might be thinking of you right now, because we are difficult people, and sometimes we present challenges to other people. We can play those roles as well, and so then the question becomes like, "What do we do with the difficult people in our lives?"

I think most of us have a tendency to go in one of two directions. Sometimes we withdraw. We get a little more passive. We pull away. We try to avoid the person that we do not like or that we feel is difficult. Then others of us have this way of stepping onto the other side, and we're like, "Okay, you're going to do that to me? Well, I'm going to match that energy with you," and we escalate the situation. We are not good at defusing. We just like to, okay, "You threw a grenade at me. Here is a bomb coming back at you." That

is two references to bombs so far. I don't know what is going on today, but we will just keep moving through that.

Okay, so here is what I think often happens. It is we think, "If I could just get rid of those people in my life, then I would have rest. Then I would have peace," and here is the reality. It is that that does not actually work in our lives. Whether or not we could avoid people or de-escalate people or we could just magically get rid of them altogether, just getting rid of the difficult people in our lives does not produce peace in us. Because the reality is, once someone has stolen your peace in some sort of way, once they have gotten that hook in you, once you have had that interaction, your peace actually is really hard to find, even if they leave your life, or even if they are no longer a part of your story, because there is still that memory of the moment when they stole your peace. Which means that the problem we have with restlessness around difficult people is not really so much to do with how people are treating us, but what is happening inside of us. What I would suggest is that all of us, you probably know this, but all of us cannot control difficult people in our lives. That would be awesome if we could, right? We cannot control difficult people in our lives, but you can become someone who is not controlled by the difficult people in your life.

Most of us, I think, try to manage the difficult people in our lives. We want to fix them, or we want to change them, or sometimes we even want to defeat them, but Jesus offers us a very different kind of life, a life where your peace is not dictated by the people around you, your peace, your rest, is not fragile, your soul is not constantly reactive to the people around you, and your identity is not dependent on how people treat you. Not because they have stopped being difficult, but because you have learned the path of Jesus, where you do not have to be controlled by those kinds of people.

You might be looking at that statement there and thinking, "Yeah, but Paul, you do not know my person. You don't know the difficult person I am thinking about. Like, you have not seen how my spouse argues. You don't know what it is like to be with that co-worker who is constantly passive-aggressive and undermining people. Paul, do you know how many bad drivers there are on Interstate 25? Like, they are everywhere, and you are saying that I should just not be reactive to them?" It is like, "What is going on with me? What are you talking about?"

Here is the tension that we have to hold today. I don't think God is interested in you changing the people around you. I think God is very interested in forming something within you and helping you become the kind of person who has a deeper peace and a steadier soul, a life that is not thrown off course every single time someone makes that jab or that comment or acts in a way that makes your life go wrong.

The question then is, "How do we do that?" How do we become people who are not controlled by others and the difficult situations that they may present in our lives? That is where I think Romans 12 is really helpful. We are going to dive all the way back to the end of the book of Romans, where the apostle Paul starts talking about this idea of how we respond to people who are difficult in our lives, and so if you have your Bibles and want to follow along in your own Bible, we are going to be in Romans 12 all of our time together today, and we are going to be in verses 17 through 21. We are just going to walk through, verse by verse, what Paul is talking about, because there is a ton to unpack. In these four or five verses, there is so much wisdom for how we can engage with the difficult people in our lives, and so he begins by saying, "Do not repay anyone evil for evil."

There are a couple of things that are really important there, right off the bat. Whom are we not supposed to repay evil for evil? Anyone, right? Anyone. So that includes your coworker, that includes your spouse, that includes your person in your life, the family member who drives you crazy. It does not matter who. Anyone that is in your life that is causing difficulty in your life, you are not supposed to repay evil for evil, but there is even more to unpack there, because you notice the subtle switch. We started by talking about difficult people, and then suddenly Paul is talking about evil people, and I think we have this categorization where we do not quite understand, “Evil people, those are like people who are incredibly abusive, or maybe it is like on an apocalyptic scale, like abuse or evil where it is like a country bombing a school, or where people have committed all sorts of atrocities. That is evil, but our personal interactions with people are not necessarily evil.” That is what we might believe, but Paul is trying to do something very important here. He is not trying to talk about evil on a grand scale, although that is a reality. He is trying to make us understand the Biblical definition of evil. He is not just talking here about primarily trying to help us manage difficult personalities in our life. He is going deeper to the problem and trying to help us discern what is really happening when we experience difficult people in our lives.

Biblically, the definition of evil is not like the bad things that we do. It is not just moral wrong. It is not the things that we say or do that are wrong. It actually goes much deeper than that. Evil is a distortion of what God has made good, and if God has made the world good, and He has filled it with His shalom, His peace, His goodness, then breaking trust, bending of truth, diminishing the image of God in another person, those are not just morally bad. According to scripture, they are evil, because they go against the grain of how God has designed the world to flourish. What we tend to do is we tend to minimize a lot of our actions. “Oh, that passive aggressive comment or that defensiveness, that control mechanism that I go to, that dishonesty that lives within me, the indifference I have towards others, that’s not really evil. That is just not great,” but Paul would say, “No, that is actually pushing against the grain of God’s intended order for the universe,” and he would call it evil, not saying that you are like Hitler, but that you are participating in something that is going against the moral fiber of how God has created things to be.

What you might be saying is, “Paul, when I make that passive aggressive comment, or if I belittle someone, or if I am indifferent to someone else’s suffering, that is not evil,” but what Paul would say is, “Think about what happens to you when those actions take place.” Right? Think about when that passive aggressive comes to you in the work room. Your chest tightens. You suddenly are trying to figure out, “What did they mean by that? How did I, is that just my interpretation? Is that something that they, like, do I need to do something about that? Should I report that?” Like, it takes you to a place where immediately trust begins to fray, relationship begins to fracture, and it does something to erode what is in you. It is not a neutral thing that just happened to you. It is destructive, and that is what the Bible means by evil. It is something that is destructive to your soul, not just in the extreme, but anything that slowly unravels God’s goodness in creation. So, when Paul says, and he names evil here, he says, “Do not repay evil for evil.” The word Paul assumes there about repaying is this moral accounting system. He’s saying, “Do not return it. Do not repay it. Do not try to settle the score.”

We all know what a deep human impulse that is, right? When we are wronged, when something happens to us, something rises up within us and says, “I need to make this right. I need justice. I need to get back,” and you can see the progression there. Someone makes a comment to us, and we think, “Okay,

if this was like a five, then I am going to respond at a seven, and I am going to escalate the situation,” or “I am just going to avoid that person,” right? We go to one of those two extremes, and Paul is saying, “Do not repay evil for evil. Do not return evil in kind.” That impulse to try to set things right, that is actually a God-given thing. That is a good thing. The reality is, how many times does that show up in our lives in really ridiculous ways?

I mean, it is the person who you texted, and they did not text back for three hours, and so you are like, “I am going to wait three days to answer you.” Like it is that moment. It is the space where someone is short with you in a meeting, and you do not respond to it, but then you just strategically distance yourself for the next week, and you are like, “I am just not going to talk to that person anymore. I am going to pretend like I do not know them.” It is where we have those conversations where we argue with ourselves, and we try to destroy the other person in our minds, and then we do not know quite what to say in person. Maybe we can laugh at some of those or chuckle at some of those, but underneath it is something very real, and that is the impulse, the desire, the instinct that this needs to be made right. When something happens to us that is wrong, we want to make it right, and that is not wrong, but what Paul is saying is how we do that matters, that absolutely justice matters, but that evil is not neutral, and so we have to know how to address it.

The problem is not that we want justice, but the problem is how we go about trying to obtain justice. We match people’s tone, we match people’s anger, we withdraw emotionally, we keep score, we carry quiet resentment, and we become colder, sharper, and more guarded, and sometimes it is subtle, and sometimes it is extreme. It is where we do not have subtlety at all. We say the words that we know will wound someone else, or we carry out the actions that will harm them. We go public with something that should have been dealt with privately. We try to undermine people, so we all have this impulse to try to figure out how we can get back at others, and what Paul is saying is that that is the tragedy of retaliation. It is that it promises justice, but it actually multiplies evil or injustice, because evil, when it is repaid for evil, it does not minimize. It actually expands, so Paul is essentially saying, and I think this is deeply theological, evil is not just something that we do. It is something that can take hold of our hearts and our souls, that when you experience evil against your soul, when you experience those comments or those kinds of actions or those kinds of difficult situations, that it actually has the power not just to harm you, but to take control of your soul to where you want to repay that kind of action. Scripture doesn’t speak just of evil as just acts that we do. It talks about a power that is a force that can move through us.

There is actually a really interesting scientific discovery that talks about that idea, that we can at times have this impulse where someone else’s anger becomes our anger, where their dishonesty shapes our response, where someone else’s lack of love begins to diminish our capacity for love. When Paul says, “Don’t repay evil for evil,” what he is actually saying is, “Don’t allow it to harm your soul.” He is guarding your soul against engaging in evil in that way, and we know that feeling. Have you ever walked into a room where suddenly you could just like immediately tell the energy was off? Like you do not know what you walked into, but it was maybe an argument that was happening beforehand, or there is just tension, like a palpable tension, where people are upset or frustrated with one another, and you walk into that, and suddenly that whole, it is just like you took a bath in that. Like the rest of your day, you were carrying around that energy, and you were experiencing that kind of tension or that kind of anger, resentment,

whatever was going on in that room, and there is actually this biological response we have. It is called mirror neurons, where there is a part of us that is actually programmed to perceive what is happening in the world outside of us emotionally, and then we begin to reflect that and mirror that. That is why when someone makes that comment to you, it does not just pass through you. It sticks with you like glue, and you think about it for the rest of your week. You are like, “What did they mean? What were they saying? What is happening there?” It is actually this biological response where our brain is programmed to, whatever is happening outside of us begins to recreate within us. What happens is we do not just observe emotions that are happening outside of us. It is that we actually begin to absorb them. It is like that moment where you walk through a spider web. You did not see it, you did not know it was there, and suddenly it is just like all over you and entangles you. That is what the emotions of others can do to us. It spreads through us, and what Paul’s invitation to us is when that happens, this is profound, I think, is to not actually pass it on. Do not repay evil for evil.

I want you to think for a moment about the last time something like that happened to you at work, or maybe it was a family member, or wherever it might have been, and then at the end of the day, you come home to your roommates or to your spouse or to your kids, and whatever that energy was in that situation begins to be transferred to them. That situation made you grumpy, and so then I’m going to take it out on the people who are closest to me. I am guessing I am not the only one who has had that sort of experience before, and Paul’s invitation is that that does not have to be your reality, so he says, “Do not repay evil for evil,” and then he goes on, and he says this, “Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone.” Now that can sound a little bit like moral relativism, can’t it? Like whatever people out there think is right, just do what everybody agrees and makes consensus about what is right, but that becomes like whose moral standard do we follow then? That is not what Paul is saying. It is this idea, this word he uses, “kalos,” and it does not mean whatever people happen to approve of in the moment. It means something more like beautiful and noble and whole. Paul, I think sometimes what we end up doing is we go to this place where we experience difficult people, and we try to be people-pleasers. Does anybody else have that impulse? What he is saying here is not to just please whoever is around you, but think of what is good and noble and true and beautiful. Let your life be grounded in the goodness of God in such a way that even those who do not share your faith, do not share your morality, will experience you in a way where they will look at you and say, “Okay, there is something different there.”

Then Paul goes on in verse 18, and he says this, “If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.” Now I think there are so many fascinating things here. First, he begins, “If it is possible,” which means sometimes peace with other people is inherently impossible. Sometimes we will be in relationship with people where we are longing for wholeness and right relationship and for everything to be as it should be, and it will not be possible because of who they are and how they are interacting with you. Some of you know those types of difficult people, and what Paul is saying is that you do not have to force this result. It can’t be manufactured by one person alone.

I think it is so clear that Paul knows something very deep about the world we live in, that it is not yet fully healed. Sin has fractured our relationship, it has distorted our desires, and it has made peace something that cannot always be achieved on our own. So, what Paul is essentially saying here is you do not have to fix every difficult person in your life. You do not have to fix every difficult relationship. You

do not have to fix every difficult circumstance. You do not have to live at peace with everyone. If it is possible, do your best to live at peace with people, but sometimes peace may look like boundaries. Sometimes peace is maybe going to look like clarity to say, “You know what? I think this is a person who is just not safe,” and it might look like distance. I think sometimes we have this idea that God just calls us to stay in really bad situations with really bad people. That is not God’s heart at all. God is not calling us to just remain in an abusive situation. He says, as far as it depends on you. There are two qualifiers, “If it is possible,” and, “As far as it depends on you,” try to live at peace, which is really good news, because it means you are not responsible for everything in your life, for every relationship.

I had Lane, our graphic design artist, make this list of what is not your responsibility and then what is your responsibility, and if you look at this chart, a lot of these things are pulled from this passage, but what I see in myself and others is that we tend to, in situations with difficult people, we flip this idea and invert it. Like what I really want to be in charge of or responsible for is their ability to change, their anger or bitterness or resentment. I want to be responsible for their actions, their thoughts, their choices, their relationship with God, how they respond to me. That is what I want to control. That is what I want to take care of. I want to be in charge of them, but what Paul is essentially saying here is as far as it depends on you, if it is possible, live at peace, which means you are only responsible for your actions. You can’t control someone else. You are responsible for how you treat others, even your enemies. That is what Paul is getting at. You are responsible for not repaying evil for evil. You are responsible, as we will see in a moment, for leaving room for God to handle it, but man, that is way harder. We want to be responsible for them and not for ourselves, and what Paul is saying is that when we invert this idea, when we try to take responsibility for others, it does not lead to peace, because you are trying to control and carry what you could never control or carry. You are not responsible for fixing what is broken in someone else. If there is someone who is difficult in your life, and you have felt the responsibility to fix them or to change them or to change outcomes, I think part of the invitation for you today is to just release that. You do not have to control, you cannot control what comes at you, but you can absolutely control what comes out of you towards others,

This is why this idea is so hard, because some of us in this kind of paradigm have experienced some really profound evil in our lives. It is not just passive-aggressive comments. It is the situation of abuse or something like that, and you think to yourself, “I need to set things right. This was wrong. This was an injustice done against me,” and what Paul would say is, absolutely that is true. It was wrong. It should never have happened, and it was evil, but you notice where he encourages us to go next with this paradigm of responsibility. He invites us to let God into that space and to let go of payback and revenge culture.

We live in a culture that is obsessed with payback. I just want you to think for a moment about some of the most popular stories in our world, where it is “You wronged me, and so I get to return whatever you have done like tenfold,” so it is the whole John Wick franchise: “You killed my dog, I get to kill you,” which feels a little bit like escalation. Like we are taking it, or you think of the movie Taken with Liam Neeson. “You take my daughter, and I kill your entire country.” Like it escalates and it gets bigger and bigger. Or you think of, oh, one of the best movies ever, the movie Gladiator with Maximus, and he gives that whole speech where he says, “I am a father to a murdered son, and I am a husband to a murdered

wife, and I will have my vengeance in this life or the next,” and we just cheer, and we are like, “Yeah, get your vengeance. That is awesome!” It is Mean Girls, that amazing movie, right? It is that one where it is like, “Hey, you ruined my reputation, I am going to make a whole barn book about your life and destroy everything about you,” and we love those, and if you are judging me for any of those or cheering for any of those people, I would guarantee you that when you watched *The Princess Bride*, and you saw Indigo Montoya say, “You killed my father, prepare to die,” every single one of you was rooting for him to kill that guy. Yeah, you are cheering. We love those stories. It is like so much of what is in our world is like, “You wronged me. I am going to get you back,” and that is justice, and they make some amazing movies. I love *The Princess Bride*. I probably shouldn’t say I like the other ones either, but I do. They are great, and here is the reality, that we have this mentality and we call that justice if we can just enact revenge on someone, but what scripture is saying is that those might make great movies or good stories to follow, but they make terrible lives to live. It is because revenge does not restore. Revenge does not heal. Revenge does not make things right. It makes a terrible life story. It just multiplies damage, and it reshapes the person who is seeking revenge. It just transfers the pain, which I think is why Paul says in verse 19, “Do not take revenge, my dear friends.” Don’t be John Wick, “But leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written, “It is mine to avenge, and I will repay,” says the Lord.”

I think there are a couple of fascinating things about this idea. One is this little phrase here where he says, “My dear friends.” This is Paul being so compassionate to the reality that so many of us face. The truer word there is him saying, “Hey, my beloved,” like the people I deeply care about, “I know that you have experienced evil in your life.” He is not diminishing it, and he is not passing over it. He is not glossing over it and pretending it did not happen. He is saying absolutely what happened to you was wrong and evil, but if you try to repay evil for evil, you will just continue down that same path, so do not take revenge, but leave room for God’s wrath. The problem is not the longing for justice or for things to be set right. The problem is with how we tend to carry it out. Paul says, don’t take revenge. Do not take that burden upon yourself, not because the evil doesn’t matter, but because it is too much for you to handle, and so he says, make room, leave room for God’s wrath.

I think sometimes that language is a little frightening to us. God’s wrath seems like when dad gets really grumpy and angry about the milk that got spilled, and he is going to overreact, and I think it is really important for us to understand that there are so many misconceptions about scripturally what God’s wrath is, so here is a little idea of what God’s wrath is not. God’s wrath is not his emotional volatility. It is not a divine mood swing where he is just reacting to something, and it is not God losing his temper with his children. That is not God’s wrath. God’s wrath actually is this idea. It is his settled, consistent opposition to evil in this world, and it is the expression of his love when it confronts evil.

I think we all understand what that would look like, love expressing itself to stop evil. Sometimes what happens is God’s wrath steps into human history, and it stops evil in the moment, and at other times it allows people to experience the consequences of their actions. It is a more passive restoration. It is a more passive wrath, but no matter what happens, whether God intervenes, or God just allows people to experience the natural consequences of the actions they have done, no matter which way He chooses, He is never indifferent to evil. He is always going to set things right, and so the deeper logic that Paul is inviting this into is that God has a way of dealing with evil, sometimes by allowing people to experience

the consequences of the lives that they have chosen, and sometimes intervening in their lives to stop it, but ultimately He will always set things right, because that is what the wrath of God does, but here is the key difference. His justice is not reactive like yours and mine. It is righteous, and it is never fueled by a wounded ego, as yours and mine often are. When God acts in this way, it is grounded in truth and in love, which is very unlike you and like me. So, the invitation, when Paul says, “Leave room for God’s wrath,” he essentially saying to us to make space for God to handle the situation that is stealing your peace. When you have to carry the burden of that situation, and you think it is your responsibility to make it right, you will always live in a space where you are restless and unfulfilled, because it is not yours to carry. It is too much weight for you. So, he is saying, step out of the role of judge, and trust that God has not abdicated his throne, that He will set things right.

That leaves us with one final really important question, because if we are not supposed to repay evil for evil, and we are not supposed to participate in that economy of evil producing more evil, we are supposed to trust God and allow Him to take care of the evil things that happen to us, what do we do then? Like do we just sit back and let the world like stomp all over us and take advantage of us? He gives us a few more instructions. In Romans 12:20, he says this: “On the contrary,” so in contrast to trying to take revenge for yourself, in contrast to that, “If your enemy is hungry, feed him, and if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head,” which sounds a little passive aggressive, doesn’t it? Like, “Okay, Paul, I’m not supposed to repay evil for evil, but this feels so petty. Like you’re essentially saying to me, be nice, but do it in a way that makes them miserable.” That doesn’t quite land the same, and it feels like it is this more sophisticated version of revenge, but way less fun. Could you imagine if this were John Wick, like they killed his dog, and he was like, “Here’s some bread. Like, I am just going to feed you and take care of you,” there is no story there. There is nothing to root for. What is Paul talking about?

What this cannot mean is that you just need to be nice because God is going to punish them harder, or that you just be nice to them, because when you do that, it will make their life worse. What Paul is doing here is quoting Proverbs 25:21, which is wisdom literature. He is not being sarcastic, although it feels like that a little bit, and in the ancient world, this idea of burning coals, essentially burning coals were the heart or soul of a person, the inner experience of someone and how they engaged with the world, this intense, unavoidable awareness that comes when something is exposed, and so when he says “heap burning coals on them,” it is not some sort of weird external punishment for other people. It is actually this internal realization that he is saying could happen, so here is the picture. Someone does something that is hostile to you. They expect hostility in return, because that is what all of us do, but instead, they experience grace. They experience kindness. They experience something undeserved. They are not met with retaliation, but with dignity, not with coldness, but generosity. What Paul is saying is that when that happens, the gap between what they expected to happen to them and what they experienced is the burning coals, and it causes them to pause and think, “What? Why are you different? I did not deserve that. The way I was treating you, that is not how I am supposed to be treated back. How I have been acting did not deserve that response.” He is saying, break the cycle of abuse.

You might be thinking, “Yeah, Paul, I have tried that sometimes. I have tried to be nice to my bully or to the person who is taking advantage of me, and that did not change anything. They continued to do

it. They did not have any sort of heart change. They did not have any sort of realization. There was nothing that switched in them to think like they should not treat me that way,” and that absolutely is true, and that happens. Paul is not guaranteeing that if you treat a bully with kindness, they will change in regards to you, but what he is saying is that regardless of what their response is, remember you cannot control their response, you can only control what you do, is that regardless of what they do, you have broken the cycle of evil. You have not continued to perpetuate evil in the world. You did not let it hit you and then come through you and extend to others. Paul is not being petty here. He is being incredibly profound. He is saying, instead of matching the evil that you see in the world, you are exposing it without becoming it. You are doing something entirely different than the world expects or ever sees. He says, when you repay evil, you stay tied to it, but when you trust God with justice, you are releasing it, and when you respond to evil with good, you are rising above it. You are no longer trapped in the cycle. You do not have to let it dictate your peace or your wholeness, and his invitation is to simply lay down the burden of revenge and payback or whatever else you might be thinking about that difficult person.

That is why he finishes this whole section with these words that have launched so many movements that have changed the world. He says, “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good, and you can feel the tension in that, can’t you? I know I do, because everything within me wants to respond in kind to the people who have hurt me or those that I love. I know what it is to watch someone I love, suffering and think, “Man, I just wish I could get that person back.” I want to get revenge, to fight back, to get even, to figure out how to make it right, and yet there is one life that stands in complete contrast to that impulse and that story, and that is Jesus.

If you look at Jesus’ life, He was surrounded by people who were difficult. His disciples, very difficult, as much as He loved them. Sinners, sex workers, tax collectors, we tend to romanticize them, but I am sure they were incredibly difficult people, the Pharisees, his enemies, who ultimately killed Him. He was surrounded by people who misunderstood Him, opposed Him, betrayed Him, abandoned Him, and ultimately nailed Him to a cross, and in that moment, when evil had done its absolute worst, and when injustice was at its absolute peak, when the full weight of humanity’s evil came crashing down on Jesus, He did not repay it. He did not return it. He overcame it, and it was in that space where He was experiencing the fullness of human evil that He said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.” On the cross, Jesus lived out what Paul spoke about in this passage. Jesus broke the cycle of evil. He refused to allow evil to continue through Him. He entrusted Himself to the Father fully, and He did not respond in violence, but with mercy. He responded to hatred with love, and with injustice He gave grace. He forgave us.

The reality is we all have difficult people in our lives, but the other reality is we have all been a difficult person in someone else’s story. I don’t care how good you think you are. I don’t care how much you think that you have it all together, and you are an emotionally stable, regulated person. You have been a difficult person in someone else’s story. I have been difficult. To be honest with you, I am probably the least qualified person to talk about this passage, and yet, Jesus still looks at me with the same mercy that He gives to you: “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing,”

So, today we thought it would be appropriate to conclude this message by coming to the table together and to communion, because the table is the reminder that Christ took evil upon Himself and did

not return it, and that is the hope of the world, because the world loves the stories of vengeance and retribution, but what the world needs is a story of grace and mercy and forgiveness, so a simple invitation today as you come forward to the table. We have different stations around the room, and these two center aisles here are the gluten-free elements. I would encourage you to pause for a moment and to think about that person in your life, that difficult person, the person who has harmed you, who has hurt you, and that situation is still not set right. What would it look like to bring that to the table of Jesus Christ and to let it go, to even possibly forgive them? It doesn't mean there are no boundaries. It doesn't mean you have to go to them and be best friends, but as far as it is possible for you, as much as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Jesus has made that possible for each and every one of us. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, God, as we come before you now to the table of communion, and Lord, as we come and remember that your body was broken for us, that even the smallest evil we have committed deserved a response, and yet you chose a different way. You did not choose to repay evil with evil. You did not choose retribution. You did not choose vengeance. You chose mercy, and one day your love will set all things right, but it will be through the power of the cross, and so God, I pray that you would give us the courage to live out that story, to believe that truth, to know the depths of your grace and your mercy for ourselves, that we would in turn go to those around us and live with that same grace and mercy, even with the most difficult person in our lives. It is in the name of Jesus Christ that we pray these things, amen.

For some of us, I think today's message from Romans is a message of compassion for the ways that you have maybe been mistreated or experienced hardship from other people in your life, but I think for others of us, it is probably a little bit of conviction. It is the idea that maybe we have not handled those situations the way Christ has called us to, and so there we need to repent. In a moment, I want to read a psalm, Psalm 37, to you and over you, but before that, I want to let you know about a couple of things that are coming up for our church. Next weekend our youth ministry is going to be doing a flower sale for Mother's Day. It is a fundraiser for their trips this summer. You can be praying for Hannah, our student pastor. Last night she did an all-night lock-in with the girls, and she is here leading worship, and then on Friday night we had a guys' night. Tonight there is the senior night, and they have got a missions trip meeting after church today. So, youth stuff is just like, it is going crazy right now. It is awesome, but we would love for you to come back next week. Don't buy flowers at Trader Joe's or King Soopers for your wife or your significant other, whatever it might be, your mom. Buy them here and help send kids to go to camp. Does that sound good?

All right. Let me now say this psalm over us for the benediction, and I just want to encourage you, if anyone wants to stay today, let's pray a little longer about this topic we talked about. Feel free. We'll create some space, and I will just pray. I ask those of you who are leaving to make space for those and respect those who choose to linger a little longer. Psalm 37: "Do not fret because of those who are evil or be envious of those who do wrong, for like the grass they will soon wither, and like green plants they will soon die away, but trust in the Lord and do good. Dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture. Take delight in the Lord, and He will give you the desires of your heart. Commit your way to the Lord and trust in Him and He will do this. He will make your righteous reward shine like the dawn, your vindication like the noonday sun. Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for Him. Do not fret when people succeed in their ways, when they carry out their wicked schemes. Refrain from anger and turn from wrath. Do not fret. It

leads only to more evil. For those who are evil will be destroyed, and those who hope in the Lord will inherit the land. For in a little while, the wicked will be no more, and though you look for them, they will not be found, but the meek will inherit the land and enjoy peace and prosperity.” May you go this week in the truth of the Lord Jesus Christ, amen.

45:07 minutes

Edited by Tom Kenaston

Message #943