

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
Seventh Sunday after Epiphany
February 23, 2025
Sermon by Pastor Gary A. Pufahl
Overcome evil with good

Do not pay anyone back evil for evil. Focus on those things that everyone considers noble. ¹⁸ If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, maintain peace with everyone. ¹⁹ Do not take revenge, dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath. For it is written, "Vengeance is mine; I will repay," says the Lord. ²⁰ But:

If your enemy is hungry, feed him;
if he is thirsty, give him a drink.
For by doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head. ^[b]

²¹ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

—Romans 12:17-21 EHV

What is your natural reaction when someone hurts you? If someone says something nasty to you, what is your first impulse? We see it so often, don't we? Revenge. If someone says something mean to you, your first impulse is to say something mean back. We want the upper hand. We want to take revenge in our own hands.

But do you know what? Revenge never works. It doesn't. All it does is perpetuate a cycle. One person hurts another person. So that person needs to get even. And it becomes a perpetual spiral of anger and hatred, and it just never stops. Somebody always feels a need to get the upper hand.

So, how do you stop this? How do you break out of the attitude of wanting to get even, of wanting to get revenge? I'd like to direct your attention to Paul's letter to the Romans today. He says, "**Do not pay anyone back evil for evil.**" Here's how you can show that you are a Christian. Here's how you can live God's love. Go against your natural instinct for revenge. Now, that's hard. We don't always like to get rid of our grudges, do we?

Why not? Why do we daydream about ways to get back at someone who hurt us? When someone says something bad against us, why is our natural tendency to go and tell someone else and run their reputation through the mud? Why do we do these things?

Well, I think there are two main reasons. For one, we despair that there is ever going to be justice, so we think we need to take matters into our own hands. And two, we don't always trust God.

You see, deep down inside we want justice. We do. We want what is right. We don't like the possibility that someone may just get off the hook for something they have done.

Children know how this is. It irritates them when their brother or sister gets away with something. Mom or dad didn't see it, so you tell mom or dad about it because you want justice. And when you tell mom what happened, she may respond, "But I didn't see it." Ooh. We don't like that. I've been hurt. And my sister got away with it? So, we think we need to take matters into our own hands. And we scheme how we are going to get even because then justice will be served.

But do you know what we become when we have that attitude? We take the place of God. Oh, we all would love to be God. We are so sure that we are the correct and proper judges of the universe. We could straighten things out if only we had the power.

But here's the sad reality about that. Our eyes are often blurry. Our minds are often fuzzy. Our memories are often faulty. And our judgment is often distorted. If it were up to us to bring justice in every situation, we would be horrible at it. We would end up causing more harm.

So, God gives us a different outlook. He says, "**Do not pay anyone back evil for evil.**" You don't have to be the administrator of justice. God is. And he says, "Trust me. You can trust. I'll make sure justice happens. Don't take matters into your own hands because you will only make a mess of it."

And I wonder if that doesn't bring us to the second reason why we take revenge on people. Do we really trust God? Do we really trust that God's way of doing things is going to be best?

You see, Paul writes in these words, "**Do not take revenge, dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath. For it is written, "Vengeance is mine; I will repay," says the Lord.**" Do I trust that he will really make things right? That he will really bring justice.

Here is one of those places in life where we need to be clear about what is *God's* business and what is *our* business. You see, Jesus is the ultimate judge. And he is going to get it right every single time. All evil will be called to account.

Jesus is going to break all evil. He'll do it in one of two ways. He'll bring punishment in ways that are far worse than anything you or I could ever inflict. His judgment will be absolutely perfect.

Or he will break the evil by leading someone to repentance, which is better by far. He will lead them to see in shame what fools they have been. Either way, God will handle it. You don't have to.... You don't have to. Vengeance is *God's* business, not ours. We need to trust him on this.

So, what is *our* business? What are *we* to do? We don't take revenge. So, what does God want us to do? Look at what he says, **"If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, maintain peace with everyone."** That's our business. Not to take revenge. But to live at peace with people. We need to be peacemakers. And we do that by saying, "It starts with me."

When I was growing up with my siblings, my dad used to say, "You may not have started the argument or the fight, but you can finish it." My dad was wise. He understood Paul's words. He understood the human tendency to keep on getting back at someone else. How do you end it? You stop. You see that. You stop. When our children were little, they liked to argue with my wife and me. We had this saying that stopped the arguing. We would say to them, "I love you too much to argue with you."

"If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, maintain peace with everyone." You can be a peacemaker, starting with your own small world, with the people around you, the people that live with and around you. As much as our natural impulse is to bad mouth someone who has hurt us, Paul says, "No. Get rid of that." You go first. Don't wait for someone else to be nice to you. No. You first be nice to them. Be peacemakers. You make peace first.

That's our business. But then Paul continues, **"If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him a drink. For by doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."**

My friends, I admit that this is hard. It goes against every fiber of our being to not take revenge. And even if we never sought revenge against someone in action, I'm certain we have done it in attitude.

But Jesus didn't. He never had a vengeful thought in his mind or an act of vengeance in his life. In fact, when people turned away from him, when soldiers were literally putting the Son of God to death, what did he do? He cried out, **"Father, forgive them."** I mean, if anybody has a right to get revenge, it would be God. But look at how he responds to our sins against him. He forgives. He gives mercy again and again and again. And it's in view of *that* mercy that Jesus actually sets you free from your anger.

Paul quotes from Proverbs 25 when he writes, **"If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him a drink. For by doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head."** Do you see how this works?

When you show kindness to someone who doesn't deserve it, you walk away free. You've let go of that anger. You've let go of that burning. And that person can no longer harm you.

Think about it like this. When you let your mind go over that hurt and those wounds again and again and again, what happens? You become that person's victim again and again and again. You give them power. They bring harm to you even though they aren't with you. You are re-experiencing that pain over and over and over.

But by being kind to the person who hurt you, you walk away with a smile. And that person's thinking, "Oh, I'm the jerk." Yeah. That person needs to know that. You're smiling. That anger isn't building in your heart and mind anymore. It's kind of like pouring burning coals over his head.

And if you've ever had burning coals poured over your head, you know how much of a wake-up call that is. It's a big wake-up call. Your kindness wakes that person up to the harm he's bringing. Let God take care of the avenging. You respond with love and kindness. In doing this, you heap burning coals on his head. It's constructive burning. The kind that might lead to healing. The kind that might get your friend back. The kind that ends family arguments. The kind that might actually save someone from a greater burning than coals.

Is this easy? Oh, every fiber of our being wants to gain the upper-hand with revenge. But it's not the upper-hand. In fact, it's worse. We take the position of God, and we feel worse than before. No, this is hard. So, if there is one thing that I would like you to take with you today, it would be this: Remember Jesus. As the soldiers pin his hands to a cross, he could have instantly struck them down with his fury and vengeance. Revenge, right? But he didn't. Instead, he prayed, **"Father, forgive them."** He went to his Father, who is the perfect judge, and the one who does everything right. Trust in him. Follow what he says. Let vengeance be God's business. Let peacemaking be your business. And **you will overcome evil with good.** Amen.