

Sermon Text for April 22, 2018

By Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

Deuteronomy 19:15-21, Romans 12:17-21

“The power of goodness”

I had quite a bit of feedback this past week from my sermon last week. Thank you for giving me input and for speaking with me about what you felt were positives and negatives of my engagement with Scripture and with what is happening in the world today. In one discussion a person suggested, maybe if we followed your lead then instead of dropping bombs on Syria we could drop food and other items of benefit on them and that would be the natural progression of things according to Scripture. Yeah, that is not rational or reasonable, but that is absolutely the approach that Scripture would take. Overcome evil with good. The power of goodness.

But why not? What if we truly believed, I mean truly believed in God’s goodness so much that we know that it can win out in all situations. Mary and Martha were so practical when Jesus called Lazarus out of the tomb that they commented, but Jesus, he is going to smell. Jesus showed them and us that God’s goodness and power will always prevail even over death. Oh to have the faith in the power of goodness would do us all good.

Paul had that faith, and he writes about the importance that we have it as well. He truly believed that goodness always wins. Romans 8:28 reflects that, for we know that all things work for good for those who trust in the Lord. What this forces us to do as we saw last week is to believe the irrational. We do not see good winning around us, in fact, we see bad and evil winning and we want to strike back and take matters into our own hands because God sure is not helping. But when we force ourselves to believe that ultimately God will win, it makes us believe the irrational. If we believe and follow Jesus Christ then we will love those, even bless those who persecute us and that the power of goodness will always win, even in the face of overwhelming evil.

Today, Paul gives us 4 results of what will happen if we rely upon God’s promise of the invincibility and power of goodness. These are all found in Romans 12:17-21, this is one of those note taking sermons if you are so inclined to do that. 1) We are able to think before we act, 2) We can live peaceably with all, 3) We can allow God to do the dirty work, 4) We can believe that good will always win.

READ SCRIPTURE

This is really a no-nonsense sermon where we are going to systematically go through these verses. Okay, verse 17 do not repay or return anyone evil for evil. Where have you heard that before? The benediction. The very last words that you hear before you go out into the world to face all kinds of different people. These could be the most important words to keep in mind as you interact with your family, friends, workers, enemies. That is why I say them.

The Greek is fascinating in this verse. It is literally: do not return anyone evil for evil, but think before you act that what you do is in the best interest, or advised by all. Now this is to a culture that believes you can please some of the people all of the time, all of the people some of the time, but never all of the people all of the time, so you might as well do whatever you want.

No, Paul here states if someone mistreats you, says an unkind word, do not allow it to escalate. I am now going to speak to husbands and wives. You know exactly what Paul is talking about. Oh it has been building up and you're the one who always backs down so this time it is his or her turn and out comes that regrettable statement that a part of you wants to take back, but a larger part feels so relieved that you finally said it. Or up come those frozen walls. We have all been there and done that because we are hurt and angry.

This applies also outside the marriage. We are so prone to see God's enemies as those people that we dislike that we do not take thought of that which is noble, benefiting for all. Literally we do not stop and think, we react. Here Paul says literally, stop and think what other people's feelings are and how are they going to view what you are about to do and say.

I am grateful that I am a pastor of a church in a denomination that values thinking and values the gift of speaking truth in love, but even more, values doing the first before the second. The power of goodness is allowed to be revealed when you do not repay anyone evil for evil but when you stop and think about how your words and actions affect those around you.

Paul in verse 18 tells us to live peaceably with all. This is not an easy command and Paul knows it because he includes not one but two statements of condition. If it is possible, and so far as it depends on you. This is the same statement that Jesus makes when he is in the Garden of Gethsemany. Father, if it is possible, take this cup from me.

The truth of the matter of how we interact with people is that it is not always up to us. Paul and his community wanted to, strived to live peaceably with all people, but the society sought to take their lives. They did not return evil for evil, but allowed their persecution to serve as a lesson, something we would do good to learn and take heed.

In this verse Paul calls us to be peacemakers, not people of conflict. There are people in this world who seem to chase after conflict. Look over your life and ask if it has been one where for the most part peace has prevailed or are you embroiled in one conflict after another. If this is the case then you better ask why that is the situation and figure out what role you are playing in those conflicts. God calls us, as much as is possible, to be people of peace.

There is one single incident in the entire Gospel story where Jesus becomes angry and indignant and throws out the money changers, the rest of his life is filled with peace and reconciliation. I choose to focus upon that aspect of Jesus who lived in peace with those around him, at the same time challenging them and making them and us examine our lives and if we are truly living as people of peace.

Unity is that which keeps us together as Christians, peace keeps us together as the human race, both are instituted by God's grace. The power of goodness is seen in being able to live our lives as peacemakers and not as magnets for conflict.

Thirdly we hear that we need to allow God to do the dirty work. Never avenge yourself. That is such a hard notion to swallow because we really believe that if we don't nobody else will. Paul tells us something else, if we do try to avenge ourselves, then no one else will, including God.

This is such a different message from what we hear in Deuteronomy. Some of us prefer Deuteronomy and think that this somehow trumps the Scriptures of Paul and that we can disregard Jesus' message of you have heard it say an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth, but I say to: Do not resist an evil doer. If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other. If anyone takes your coat, give them your down jacket as well, if someone forces you to walk a mile, run a half-marathon for them.

Basically if someone does you wrong and you react to them in like fashion, God will not judge them for that deed. If you allow the power of goodness to prevail, then you open the door for God's justice to take part. Paul uses this image of heaping coals upon our enemies' heads will take place.

But that ought not be our reason for allowing God to do the dirty work, because his punishment is going to be far greater than ours. We must have absolute faith and confidence not only in God's goodness but also in God's justice that we do not try to play the role of God. I know, in human society you think that would translate to chaos, I say that if you do this in your personal life you will be knocked down, you will be insulted, you will not be promoted, but probably demoted. Sounds tempting doesn't it? But you have the assurance that God's powerful goodness will prevail.

Finally, the fourth point is do not overcome evil with evil, but overcome evil with good. This is probably the most subtle and yet the most powerful of all the statements. We live in our relationships with the understanding that only the strong will survive, only the strong are good. When we talk about overcoming and winning it is always the conquest of someone else. As someone who is fairly competitive, I stand accused.

This week I had a revelation. In Isaiah 42:2-3 we read that the Messiah was not one to raise his voice, or break a bruised reed, but rather he was gentle and kind. What kind of Jesus do you think of when you close your eyes. A handsome olive skinned, blond, muscular man with a smile that would open any door.

The Jesus that we read about in Scripture was probably a nerd, he was definitely not considered strong or appealing to the general population. He was probably geekie, overweight, asthmatic, acne ridden, a voice that was annoying to listen to, had BO and didn't know how to carry on a conversation.

You see Jesus' power was not in what he looked like, how dynamic he was, or how charismatic he was. That is not what is important, if he was any of those things, it just doesn't matter. His power resided in his goodness.

Brothers and sisters, become ingenuous with me for the rest of your life. Believe in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior. I mean truly believe as Paul states. Allow that belief to shape your life so that you can humbly and honestly think before you act, live peaceably with all, allow God to do the saving and the judging, and know that in the end God and goodness will always prevail. Amen.