

# Overcoming Evil with Good, Part 2

by Jay Adams

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We're dealing with Romans 12:13-21. And we looked at verse 21, the climax, the point to where that whole passage is moving last night. That verse says, "Don't be conquered by evil, but conquer evil by good." And we're trying to see just exactly what God means by that by moving the rest of the week from verse 14 through verse 20 to reach verse 21. Now as we looked at the verse last night, we saw first of all that you are in a war. Whether you like it or not, you're in a war. God declared the war against Satan, and the war has been going on ever since the garden of Eden. Not only are you in a war, but God says you are not to lose your battles: you're not to be overcome by evil. But on the contrary, you're to win your battles with evil--conquer evil, it says. Finally, the verse tells us how: not using the weapons of carnal warfare, fleshly warfare, the world's way of winning, but to win by doing good. Conquering evil by good is the only means that is stronger than evil. Evil is very strong, and the only thing stronger than evil is good. The only thing stronger than darkness is light. The only thing stronger than hatred is love. And so what he is saying to us, then, is we've got to win.

Alright, that's where we were yesterday. Now we go back to verse 14, and we begin to move slowly all the way up to verse 21 to see how we could reach that conclusion. And I see some of you are still determined to become winners because you came back. Now this says you're going to become a winner if you do good, that is, if you love. And you can love somebody else whether you feel like it or not because love is not first a matter of feeling. And so we get into that question in a very concrete way tonight in verse 14 in which we're told to "bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse." Demonstrate love with your mouth towards those who persecute you.

Tonight Paul is directing you toward one of your biggest problems, the problem of your mouth. That's right. That's what James says. He says in his book that you can go down to Sea World, and you can find dolphins that are trained, and you can find killer whales that are trained (tamed by man so that you can ride on their backs). You can find even walruses and otters and seals that are trained. You can go to the wild animal park; James says there you will find birds flying free that are tamed by man. You'll find cats even--not only dogs but cats--that can be trained. I didn't know until I went there that you could train a cat to do anything except come for food. But they've got cats doing all kinds of things. You can find even elephants that can be trained. James says every manner of beast and bird and fish in the sea can be tamed and has been tamed by man. But the tongue is a member that man can't tame. Only God can tame the tongue. You and I can't do it. It's too tough for us. Your mouth is one of your biggest problems. It certainly is one of my biggest problems. And I'm sure every one of you, if you're honest, will agree.

Well, we're talking about the mouth tonight. "Bless those who persecute you; bless and don't curse." And the first thing you've got to see here is that you are going to be persecuted. You are going to be persecuted for Christ's sake. That's axiomatic in the Bible. It's not a matter of question. It's not a matter of if you are persecuted. He doesn't say anything like that. He says, "Bless those who persecute you." He presupposes you're going to be persecuted. It's a given. After all, the Bible says elsewhere that all who live Godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution. And Jesus in John 16:3 said, "In the world you shall have persecution." And here Paul says, "Bless those who persecute you." You are going to be persecuted if you haven't been already if you're a Christian. Now there's no reason for you to be persecuted if you're not a Christian. Obviously, there's no reason, if you are on the side of Jesus Christ, for those who are opposed to Him to persecute you. You are a part of the opposite army. But those who belong to Christ, who are a minority in this world and always shall be, are going to receive severe persecution at sometime or other in their lives. Now you may say, "I'm a Christian but I've never received persecution." Well, that means one of three things. It means a) that you are not really a Christian because Jesus said to His followers, "In the world you will have persecution," or b) you're not a very good Christian. Your Christianity is so minimal, it's so hard to detect that the world hasn't found you yet so that they can get at you, or c) look out for next Thursday because it's right around the corner; it's ready to pounce on you. Every Christian at some time or other is going to suffer persecution.

Thank the Lord, however, that He didn't just say that. In John 16:33, He said, "In the world you shall have persecution, but be of good cheer, I have conquered the world." The same word, the same idea, the same concept: "I have overcome, I have conquered evil in the world." And so too can you, even though you are suffering persecution.

Now Jesus suffered persecution. And the more we are like Him, the more we will suffer the same persecution that He felt and He experienced in this world. That's the way it goes. And so you're going to have persecution from neighbors who don't like the way that you live, who don't like your witness and testimony in the community. You're going to have persecution from friends who will ostracize you, who will say things about you, who will call you a religious fanatic or a kook. You'll have friends or so-called friends who will do such things, even family members who will persecute you, family members who will laugh at you and sneer at you and say, "He's not really a part of our family. He's the queer one in our family. He's the peculiar one. He's the strange one." because you're a Christian. Business associates will go the other way, and you'll be boycotted because of your Christianity. Whatever it may be and whatever aspect of life that you are making your mark as a Christian, you will find that somebody will be after you. Somebody will begin to persecute you.

Now much of the persecution that you suffer will be verbal. And we're talking about the mouth here tonight: how your mouth responds to somebody else's mouth when somebody else's mouth is running you down in one way or another. When the persecution that you receive is verbal, how do you verbalize a response?

In many places in the world, of course, persecution is physical. Behind the iron curtain or the bamboo curtain in various sectors, people have lost their lives for being Christians. They've certainly lost their employment. They've lost any kind of credibility in their society that they might otherwise have known. They are completely ostracized

in a very physical way and sometimes beaten, sometimes tortured, sometimes put in jail, sometimes isolated from family for years and years. But here, largely the kind of persecution you're going to suffer is ostracism or verbal persecution, words spoken to you or about you. And it's that that we're thinking about here tonight when it says, "Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse."

You're going to have to learn how to handle verbal abuse God's way. Now that's just the problem. If you don't shrink back and you do want to resist the enemy; when the enemy comes and seeks to conquer you and seeks to win the battle and seeks to persecute you verbally, how do you respond? I want you to think about somebody who is either persecuting you right now verbally or somebody who is likely to or somebody who used to. Is there somebody that you can bring to mind? If you can't or never could, you may begin to question the kind of Christianity that you're living. But some of you tonight have somebody in mind. You have some particular person or group of persons in mind who have given you a really hard time for your faith. Now let me ask you also, how have you been handling that verbal abuse? What do you do when they spit out invectives or even perhaps curse you to your face? What do you do when they say nasty things to your friends or say nasty things to others so that you can hear or when they laugh at you or when they scorn your faith? How do you handle it? Do you handle it very well, or do you handle it rather poorly? Or you don't know how to handle it at all; you just kind of go to pieces when that sort of thing happens. Or do you shrink back and crawl into your shell and forget all about your Christianity after that, at least for a long period of time? Well, you've got to learn how to handle verbal abuse God's way.

The tendency that every last one of us has because we're born with it is to give back in kind what we receive. When we are spit at verbally, we want to spit back. When somebody curses us, we want to curse them. That's down inside of every human being when he's born. He's born with a sinful nature. He's born with a nature that wants to retaliate. He's born with a nature that says, "You won't do that to me. I'll do you one better, or at least I'll get even." And so what happens? Somebody says, "John, do you know what so and so said about you?" And what do you say in response? "Yeah, well let me tell you a thing or two about him." There it is, right smack back. The very thing that you got, now you're starting to give back in kind. Or "Really, Mary, don't you think that the purple table cloths are a bit too busy for the fellowship supper?" And Mary responds, "They're not half so busy as some people who poke their noses into other people's affairs but make no effort to help." You've found your mouth saying things like that, haven't you? You've found your mouth retaliating. You found your mouth, instead of blessing those who curse, cursing those who curse. These and a hundred responses like them are natural for sinners because that's the way that sinners act.

But now you've become a Christian. And you're a Christian who is still possessed by many of the old patterns and habits that you developed because of the sinful nature that was within you. You were born with a sinful nature, and therefore, it began to manifest itself. And patterns developed, responses developed, ways of handling situations with people and circumstances developed. And these patterns and these ways that you developed, you brought all along with you into your Christian life. And now Paul says in Ephesians 4:17 you can no longer walk as the pagans and Gentiles walk. And when he speaks about walking, he's talking about our patterns of our life, the way that we go, the things that we do regularly. And he's saying all those old

patterns that were wrong have to go. You can't do that anymore. And here, in the patterns that we have developed for the use of our mouths, again, Paul says they've got to go--all the old ways that you learned when you were without Christ.

There's a lot more cursing that goes on among Christians than we would like to let out. I was talking to a Christian referee who has refereed literally thousands of games between Christian colleges and schools of various sorts, Christian Bible college teams. In the crunch, he told me, the curse comes out. When the pressure gets tough, when the game gets difficult, when somebody's upset over a call, out he hears that curse comes audibly from Christian teams and Christian players time and time and time again. And if you had a way of discovering it, you'd find it under the tongue quietly uttered far more often perhaps than it's ever spoken.

This tendency is born in us as children, and very early we develop it. One of my boys, before he had any vocabulary for cursing when he was just a little tiny tot, had the capacity for cursing but had no vocabulary. And I remember so vividly one time when he was really murderously upset with somebody else. And he said to that person, "You, you, you," and he couldn't think of any curse words because he didn't know any yet. And then he came out with this: "You truck with a wheel off." The thing he loved more than anything else was a dump truck. And I guess he actually said, "You dump truck with a wheel off." That was the worse thing he could think of. And though he didn't have the vocabulary, he had the will to curse. And that was a curse, a real honest to goodness curse just as much as if he had said, "Damn you." It was a curse. We're born with that capacity., and we will manifest it.

Now what is a curse? A curse, strictly speaking, is the invoking of God's wrath and judgment upon another person. It's saying, "God, send someone to damnation. Send him to hell forever." And often we say it in one way or another whether we utter those exact words or not. We say it in one way or another in the presence of the person in order to hurt him because we want to hurt him. That's why we spit out such things as that when we're interested in hurting that other person and jabbing him back after he said something to us that we don't like. So we say it for that reason.

But it's serious business when we curse a person whether we use those very words, "go to hell" or "damn you" or whatever words we use or whether we say, "You dump truck with a wheel off." Whatever way we say it, it is serious business to curse another person. Christians ought to know that because what's in our heart is a murderous desire to see that person forever damned in the flames of hell. And a Christian ought to think about hell, even though we don't hear much about it these days in our churches anymore--and that's a tragedy. We ought to hear a lot more preaching about hell; we ought to hear a lot more preaching about judgment; we ought to hear a lot more preaching about eternal punishment than we do. All we hear about today are candy-wrapped kind of platitudes that are basically not true about how good and how wonderful and how sweet and how lovely Christians are and how great we can have it, and how many cars we can have if we just go on in our Christian life and be faithful, and all the good things we're told about by some of the hucksters that go under the name "Christian" today. But we don't hear much about hell and about damnation, and so we have gotten to the place where we don't even realize what a curse means. It's a tragic and terrible thing to curse another because it's saying, "I would like to see you burn in the flames of hell for all eternity." A Christian ought to know that. And even if we don't say it in those words, that's what's

in our hearts--that same spirit, that same attitude when we utter some kind of a negative, nasty, terrible, murderous statement toward another person or about him. Sometimes we utter it under our breath or behind his back because we haven't got the courage to say it to his face.

Christ on the cross, however, when people were crucifying Him, prayed for them that they might be forgiven. Ah, you say that's Christ. Alright, Stephen prayed the same prayer. A sinful human being redeemed can do so. And were those prayers ever answered? Have you ever asked the question? When Stephen was being stoned and he prayed for forgiveness for those who were stoning him, and when Jesus was being crucified and the nails were being driven through His hands for poor sinners, guilty sinners who deserved to have themselves crucified on that cross, did God answer Christ's prayer? Did God answer Stephen's prayer? O yes, He did. On the day of Pentecost and several of those days following, the Apostle Peter got up and he said such things as this: "You with wicked hands have slain the Lord of glory. You delivered Him over to Pontius Pilate. You are the people who had cried, "Crucify Him! Crucify Him! Crucify Him. Give us Barabbas." They were that crowd out there. And now Peter was talking to them and he said, "You...." What do we read? Thousands came to Christ on Pentecost and through those sermons following. They were pricked in their hearts. They were cut through in their hearts as the Greek says. And they said, "What must we do?" Peter told them how to be saved. Ah yeah, that prayer was answered ("Father, forgive them") not apart from the means but through the means of the Gospel. No man was ever saved any other way than through that Gospel which Peter preached on that day and which was preached in prophetic ways before the cross and has been reached ever since the cross by true servants of God, that Jesus Christ came into the world to shed His blood in the place of guilty sinners, bearing the punishment and the wrath of God, that they deserved for their sins that all who believe in Him might have forgiveness of sins and the assurance of everlasting life. That's what Peter preached on that day, and that's what those people believed. That's how they were saved in answer to Christ's prayer. And how about Stephen's prayer? And the greatest missionary of all time, the greatest preacher of all time, the Apostle Paul, was saved, the one who was standing right there, about whom Stephen was praying, a man who was holding the coats of those who were throwing the stones. Yes, God answers those prayers. God blessed because blessings were asked for by those who were being persecuted in those situations.

Can we be like that? Can you be like that? Can you learn to bless a persecutor? Can you learn to bless and not curse. You say, "Bless? I'll look like a fool if I bless people who persecute me. What do you mean? You want me to look like a fool?" Let me tell you, you probably will look like a fool if you bless those who persecute you. Let's get it real clear. No doubt about it, people are going to think you're an utter fool, you're an idiot, you're stupid, you're dumb, you're a first-class fool. But do you want to look like a fool or do you want to be one? That's the issue. It's one thing to be called a fool by people who are fools and don't know that they're really the fools. In 1 Corinthians 14:10, we read about being fools for Christ's sake. And everybody knows that passage, but nobody ever quotes the context. You know what it was that made Paul a fool for Christ's sake. Look at what he says in verse 10: "We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are smart in Christ. [That was ironical.] We are weak, but you are strong. You are famous; we are infamous. Right up to this moment we go hungry and thirsty. We're naked and slapped around and wonder about homeless. And we labor with our own hands. [Get this.] When we are insulted, we bless." Paul says this very

thing makes us a fool for Christ's sake. When we are insulted, when others spit out insulting words about our Gospel and about our Lord and about us, we bless. Sure they're going to call you a fool if they called Paul a fool for Christ's sake. But Scripture says if we bless instead of cursing, that we'll really be following Proverbs 26:4 when it says, "Don't answer a fool according to his folly lest you become like him." And that's what really makes a person a fool when he responds in kind, when he gives back the very same kind of nasty talk that was given to him.

But what does it mean to bless another? What is he talking about when he says, "Bless." People even take that and destroy it and say, "Yeah, I'll bless him alright." They sarcastically use even these very words in that way, and you've heard it. What does it mean? Sometimes, of course, the blessing is spoken directly to the person like the curse is. Sometimes it's spoken only to God. But to bless literally means to speak well of a person and to say something good for or about him. And that's how it's used in these passages. Indeed, in the Gospels in Luke 6:28 and in Matthew 5:44, prayer is substituted or paralleled with bless. And so when we bless another, the most fundamental thing we can do for him is the opposite of cursing him. Cursing him means asking God to damn him, and blessing means asking God to save him and give him what he needs to be a different and better person. That's what blessing him really means--to pray for him the way the Lord Jesus did when they persecuted Him, to pray for him the way that Stephen did when they persecuted him. That's what we do. We pray for our persecutors.

In Matthew 5:44-48, we have an interesting discussion. It says,

"I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in the heavens. He makes His sun shine on the evil and the good and pours out rain on the just and the unjust. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Isn't that something even the tax collectors do? And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Isn't that something that even the Gentiles do? So then, you must become perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect."

A lot of times we quote that verse out of context, becoming mature or perfect as our heavenly Father is and becoming sons of our Father, that is, becoming like Him. How do we become perfect as God is perfect or become sons like our Father when we do good to those who do evil to us? God sends good rain, and He sends His sun upon the fields of the unjust as well as upon the just. When it rains, you don't see the rain just come up to the edge of a Christian's farm and then stop, or see a cloud over top of the unbeliever's farm and no sun ever gets through. No, God sends it on all men. There's a common good and a goodness of God that He shares even with those who hate Him. And if we want to be like our heavenly Father and we want to grow into that kind of a person who reflects His love, we must do good even to those who persecute us. And so we pray for them; we say good things to God for them, and we say good things to them.

Words are probably the most powerful, the most potent force that we possess as human beings. If you ever read James again, think about the mouth. He speaks of the tongue. He says it's like a little rudder that guides a huge ship. He says it's like a bit in a horse's mouth that takes that horse with all his power and guides him in the direction. He says it's like a little spark that can set a whole forest afire. A little thing

that has powerful effect is what he's saying. That's what our tongues are like. Our mouths have powerful effects upon people. And so our Lord says you've got to get control of your mouth. You've got to learn to manage your mouth. Now can you manage your mouth? Have you learned to manage your mouth? Have you learned to handle persecution that's verbal, abuse that's heaped on you? Have you learned to handle situations without cursing, without necessarily using the words, but maybe without those sharp statements or that innuendo that you spit out with a tongue dipped in acid? Have you learned how to control that tendency to systematically dice and cube people with your tongue? Well, you're going to have to. God says here that you're to bless and not curse. And if you're going to win this war, if you're going to overcome the enemy, if you're going to win in those battles you fight with evil day by day, the first thing you've got to learn to do is to bless those who persecute you. Bless and don't curse.

You say, "How do I stop cursing?" By learning to bless. Never does the Bible tell us to get rid of something period. It always says get rid of by replacing. And what you've got to learn to do if you want to get rid of the curses, if you want to get rid of the statements that are wrong, if you want to get rid of the response that is erroneous, you've got to learn to replace it by a Biblical response. And the Biblical response is to bless, to speak good to God and to speak good to the person. Now that's simple, straightforward, clear, plain language that Paul gives us: bless instead of cursing.

That's how it is all over the New Testament. It's a simple fact, but many Christians don't know it, that the way to change is to replace, not to quit the wrong thing. That's not enough. That's the world's way. The world says if you have a bad habit, break it. But that's not right. The Bible says if you have a bad habit, you have to replace it with a good one. You have to replace it with a Biblical way of going. The Bible speaks of it as a two-factor thing: put off and put on. It's always saying put off and on. Sanctification is from sin but to righteousness. It's always the positive side that must replace the negative thing that has to go. There's no vacuum, but you must bring in the Biblical way in place of the sinful way.

I want to get this clear to you. There's a little children's joke which all of you know, which I'm not going to tell for its humor value because it has no humor value. If anybody laughs, please escort them out of the room tonight because this has no humor value, okay. Now you're going to tell the joke with me because it's such a poor joke. And I'm telling it not for its value as a humorous thing but for its structure. We're going to use the structure for a different purpose. And all of you know the joke. When is a door not a door? Answer: when it is a jar. Alright, now let's just take that. When is a blank not a blank? Answer: when it is a blank. Now we can fill in the blanks with anything. When is a liar not a liar? When is a thief not a thief? When is a cursing person no longer a cursing person? You see, we can fill anything in there and get the answer, and we've got a framework for working at it.

Now, Paul deals with a liar, and he deals with a thief in Ephesians 4. A lot of people answer the question, "When is a liar not a liar?" by saying when he stops lying. But that's wrong. He's just a liar who isn't lying. Anybody can quit lying for a while. In fact, a liar doesn't lie most of the time. You tell him, "You want something to eat?" And probably does, and he says, "Sure." He tells you the truth. He only lies under certain circumstances. But he's still a liar who's programmed to lie under those circumstances until he has been reprogrammed at that point and has developed a

Biblical way of handling that situation. So when is a liar not a liar? Paul says, not when he puts off lying (that's the first half only), but when he becomes a truth teller: "Be true each one to his neighbor." Alright, so when is a liar not a liar? Answer: when he becomes a truth teller, when he puts on the new pattern, not just when he stops temporarily the old one. When is a thief not a thief? Most people answer, "When he stops stealing." Wrong, he's just thief between jobs. When is a thief not a thief? Paul says that a man must stop stealing. Yeah, he has to quit. But instead, what does he do? Instead, he must labor with his own hands and give to those who are truly in need out of those earnings. So when is a thief not a thief? Answer: when he has become a hardworking person who ministers out of what he earns to those who are truly in need. Do you see the picture? How the positive side must be put on before the person changes.

Alright, well what about this matter of persecution and cursing? How do we change from people who spit back curses to those who curse us? The answer is, when we learn to bless. When is a cursing man or woman no longer a cursing man or woman? Answer: when he has learned to bless those who persecute him. You're going to have to learn to do that. It doesn't come naturally. It doesn't come easy. It doesn't come by sitting and hoping for it. It doesn't come simply by praying. Praying is essential because we must ask the Spirit to give us the power to do it. But then we must obey, and we must work at it. We must practice blessing instead of cursing.

Now I asked you to think of somebody who has been cursing you, somebody who has been speaking negatively of you, somebody who has been verbally persecuting you. And you thought of someone earlier tonight. Now I ask you also, how do you respond to that person? Many or most of you would have to say, "Very poorly." Let's think what you could do instead. First of all, if you curse back at anyone, you need to go to God and seek His forgiveness. And then you need to turn to that person, whoever that person may be, and as much as whether you like it or not, you need to go that person and say, "I sinned against you, and I've asked God's forgiveness, and I know He's forgiven me. But I'm asking you now, will you forgive me?" You've got to go to that person and straighten that matter out and say,

"That was sin. I was wrong; I shouldn't have done that. My Lord says I must bless those who persecute. Bless and not curse. But my whole attitude was one of cursing. Even though I may not have used curse words so called, I cursed you when I spoke nastily, or I responded in kind, or I said something under my breath or to others, or I slandered you, or whatever I did. And I want your forgiveness."

That's the first thing you may have to do. And then secondly, you're to think about his needs. You're to think about him, not yourself. One of the biggest problems in this whole picture is that the person who curses back is looking upon the way that he has been hurt rather than looking at the other person who did the cursing, toward him who said the wrong thing and saying, "That person is in trouble. That person needs help. That person needs the Lord. I've got to pray for his forgiveness. I've got to pray for his salvation. I've got to say good things to him. I've got to tell him Gospel. I've got to help him out. I've got to do something for this man. He's in trouble, or he wouldn't be talking like that about me or to me."

Our focus is on ourselves when we curse back. And in an unloving way, we say, "He can't do that to me. I'll get him; I'll get even." All the focus is on us and what has

happened to us. Once you begin to get your eyes off of yourself and you begin to look at him, you say,

"That man's in trouble or he wouldn't have talked that way about me. He wouldn't have talked that way to others. He wouldn't have said that to me. He needs help. Lord, help him. Save him if he's not saved, or help him if he is. What can I do to help him, and what can I say that might really be good and useful in his life?"

And thirdly, I would suggest that you start working on a practical project. You're going to start becoming a blessing person rather than a cursing person. Make a list. I urge you while you're here, make a list of the nasty statements that especially get to you, the ones that rouse your ire because you've developed that kind of a pattern. You've allowed yourself to get all upset and really angry and really nasty when you hear somebody say that either to you or about you. You write down all those little nasty statements that get to you, that you've allowed to get to you. And then you work on ways to pray for those who might make those statements in the future, just what you're going to say when you hear those statements made in the future, how you're going to pray to God, as it says, "Pray for those who persecute you," and what you're going to say to that person in response when he says those things to you, what good thing you can say, what blessing you can speak, what words that would build him up rather than tear him down. How can you respond? If you don't start working on it ahead of time in the cool of a Bible conference situation; if you're having problems with your mouth, the chances are, you'll never work on it the way you should. I urge you, I challenge you tonight, if you don't know how to manage your mouth, to start on that project right here and now.

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