

# Overcoming Evil with Good, Part 5

by Jay Adams

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Romans 12:18: "If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with everybody." You're in a war, and God put you in that war. And He told you not to lose, and He told you to win. And He told you how to win by overcoming evil with good. However, if that's all you do, then you've lost one of the major purposes of this war because one of the major purposes beyond the victory in the battle and in the war is to win the peace that's on the other side, to take men and women captive for Jesus Christ so that they really find peace with God and live for Him, and peace with God's people and become a part of them. And so Paul is talking tonight about peace, becoming a peacemaker. Now, what I like about this verse is the stark realism in it. Last night we had an absolute: never return evil to evil to anyone. Tonight we have a condition. We have an if kind of thing. "If possible"--that's Biblical realism in a world of sin. Paul knows that it's not always possible. And so he begins to say what he has to say by saying "if possible". He's talking about you in relationship to unbelievers. And he's telling you that if it's possible, you are to be at peace with everybody, not just your brothers and sisters, but even with unbelievers. You're to reach that point where the war is over and the two of you have come to terms, God's terms of peace.

But he knows that is not always possible. He knows that many situations will exist where the unbeliever simply will not have peace. Even though you may win a battle here and there, he's going to fight. He's going to dig in, he's going to entrench himself, he's going to go into hills, he's going to start gorilla warfare. Something's going to happen, but the unbeliever will not have peace. So tonight we're dealing with that situation where the unbeliever may or may not come to terms with God and with God's people.

And the interesting thing is, that even when you can't get the unbeliever to be at peace with you, there is a battle which you can win even in that situation. It's the battle with yourself. That's where the battle really rages when you're dealing with an unbeliever because the middle phrase in this sentence is, "so far as it depends on you". And that's the battle you're going to have to fight and win when the unbeliever refuses to come to terms and refuses to find peace with God and with God's people. You've got to bring peace in your own heart. You've got to win the battle with yourself that says, "I will do everything God requires no matter how hard or difficult it may be to bring about peace so far as that depends upon me. From my side of the relationship, it will all be done." And that means a battle inside of you.

Love always pursues peace. God wants you to be a peacemaker. "Blessed are the peacemakers because they are going to be called the sons of God [that is, they are going to be like God]." God is out to bring peace. And when we're called sons of God, it means we're like God in some respects. God wants us to be like Him in that

respect--to be seeking peace. Now, you'll notice that Paul speaks so realistically that he divides responsibility. And that's one of the hardest things we can ever get people to do in this world. In counseling, constantly we see people confusing responsibility. The husband and the wife come in, and the husband says, "I want you to know that if my wife were to do so and so, then I would do so and so." And she says, "O yeah, well, if he were to do so and so, then I would do what he wants me to do." But the situation is that each one is saying, "I am not responsible for what I do; I am dependant on what the other person does." But that's not true. That started back in the Garden of Eden, where when the sin occurred, God came to Adam, and He said, "What's going on here?" And Adam said, "Now, look, Lord, the woman that You gave me, she did it. Don't blame me." He didn't point any finger at himself, but he said, "You gave me something like that, so it's Your fault, and it's her fault, but it's not my fault." And then God moved over to the woman and said, "How about it, Eve?" She said, "Now, look, the serpent, he...." So everybody starts passing the buck, and the responsibility is shifted--not really but the attempt to shift it occurred. Well, that's what Paul is saying here. He says if the unbeliever will not have peace (and you can't say, "It doesn't matter what I do then."), you have a side in this relationship. And your side is, so far as it depends upon you (so far as peace depends upon your bringing it about), you must do everything that you are responsible to do to see that peace occurs. You can't be responsible for the unbeliever, but you are responsible for yourself. And if there's no peace between you and the unbeliever, you had better be sure, 100 percent sure that that isn't your fault at all. If peace does not occur between you and that unbeliever, it has to be because he won't have it, not because you're doing something wrong.

When that husband and wife come, or whoever it may be, they all want to blame somebody else for the way they're acting. And one of the first things you do in counseling is to sort out the responsibilities and say,

"Woe [the greatest word in counseling is woe], hold everything. You tell me you can't do so and so until your wife does so and so. And you tell me you can do so and so until your husband does so and so. You're all wrong. You are to do what you're supposed to do regardless of what your husband does or doesn't do. You're supposed to do what you're supposed to do, mam, because God tells you to do it, not because you get certain results or don't get certain results from your husband. And on the other hand, sir, you're to do what God requires of you regardless of how your wife responds, regardless of what she does or doesn't do. You're to do it not because you get certain results, but because God says do it. That's the only basis for doing it. Now, it's nice if she does so and so. That encourages you and helps you. And it's nice if he does so and so. It encourages you and helps you, but it's not necessary."

And it's nice if the unbeliever wants peace, and he encourages peace and all that sort of thing. That's really fine; that's helpful, but it's not necessary. You are to do what you're suppose to do because God tells you to do it regardless of what anybody else ever does or doesn't do. That's the clear cut message of this passage. "If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with everybody." Now, you can't make the other person be at peace with you. And that's not your responsibility. It's your responsibility to do everything you can to invite peace short of compromising the truth, of course. It's your responsibility to do everything on your side of the relationship with that person to be sure that peace will occur if he is willing to have it. In other words, if there's no peace between you and him, it better be 100 percent his fault, not yours. That's what Paul says. So that's your responsibility.

Now, we have some very interesting statements about peace in the Bible. There's a generalization given, for example, in Proverbs 16:7 that makes it clear that peace and even what your enemy does to some extent is dependant upon you. "When a man's ways are pleasing to the Lord, he makes even his enemies to be at peace with him." I think that's a general rule. I don't think it's an absolute rule because of what Peter says when he qualifies that very kind of thing in his letter. In 1 Peter 3:13, he says, "Who will harm you if you become enthusiasts for good." Now, I think that rule holds just about 95 percent of the time--that if you are right with God and you are an enthusiast (a zealot is what the Greek says there) for what is good, there are going to be very, very few people who won't be appeased and very, very few people who will harm you. And yet in the very next verse, Peter says this (he does allow for a possibility): "Yet even if you should suffer because of righteousness, you must be happy. In fact, you must not even fear their threat nor be upset." So in most of the cases when you're doing what you want to do, you're going to get the good results. But there are cases where you won't. And that's exactly what Paul is saying here too when he says, "If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with everybody." And he realizes in stark realism, Biblical realism, that it's not always possible.

Now, there are some people who, instead of being peacemakers, are troublemakers. They provoke trouble. And that's so different from what God requires of Christians. He tells us in 2 Thessalonians 3:12 to live our lives and do our work in a quiet fashion. Some people are always trying to stir up something. They're troublemakers instead of peacemakers. They're always out to provoke some kind of a fight, to provoke some kind of a battle. Some people enjoy a fight. Now, that's not Christian. So far as it depends upon you, you ought to be at peace with everybody, it says. And then there others who never start the trouble. O no, they could never be accused of starting trouble. "Of course not, I wouldn't start anything," they say. But they protract trouble wherever it does occur. They extend it, they widen it, they deepen it. Somebody else has a little spark going, and they see that spark, and as soon as they see that spark, they bring out a fan and they start fanning the spark. They keep it going, and they're going to get it going as far and as wide and as bright as they can make it burn. They enjoy that. They enjoy causing trouble. But the Bible says, "A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger."

We really ought to be giving the soft answer in order to keep from widening the wrath of another. You know the old stage skit that used to come on in the old minstrel shows, where one fellow comes on and he starts saying, "Hey Joe, I want to tell you something." Joe says, "What is it Bill?" He says, "Well, such and such a thing happened yesterday." Joe says, "O, it did?" They go on that way for a while, and one of them says to other, "Why are we whispering?" The other says, "I don't know why you're whispering, but I've got laryngitis." Well, one fellow starts whispering, the other one starts whispering. And a soft answer usually elicits a soft answer. It's kind of like ping pong. You get somebody to play, and he's playing pretty mean ping pong. And he gets way back and he starts smashing. He whams that ball over that net, and it goes way back into the back of the room, and you've got to back off for it. But when he's got you way back here and he's smashing them at you, and the two of you are widening the gap between you, if you just hold your ping pong paddle out there and let the ball hit it the right way, it goes just over the net right down there. And what happens? That pulls him in. A soft answer pulls him in to you, brings him together. But if you smash it back, he goes way back and gets farther away from you. And the same thing is true in verbal ping pong. How you respond makes a difference.

And then there are some who like to prolong trouble. They hold it down inside; they get bitter and resentful over it. And they start spreading something around about it instead of dealing with an issue and getting over with it--Love covering a multitude of sins. Or if it gets between you and another, then dealing with it quickly and being reconciled, not letting the sun go down on your anger. This says, "So far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men." That includes unbelievers in particular. Now, when it says "all men", it certainly does include believers. And there's a quick way of getting things settled if they can't be settled any other way. If they're not covered in love and reconciliation doesn't occur, then church discipline is there. And you can always get a matter settled with another believer through church discipline if through nothing else. But the problem occurs (and I think it's got the unbeliever in focus when it talks about all men or with everybody) when you've got an unbeliever who is not subject to church discipline. He's outside the church; he's not under the care, not under discipline of the church. And so you can't be sure that you can bring the two together in the way that Matthew 18:15 and following requires and enables believers to get their problems solved one with another.

And when it talks about being at peace with all men, it means even with all women. And it means even with all relatives. And it means even with all classes of people. It means that you as a believer ought to work toward peace, not at any price, never at the price of truth, never at the price of God's Word, never at the wrong price. That's too costly a price; God never requires that. Paul was constantly in trouble. He was thrown into jail, he was beaten, he was stoned, he was dragged from one place to another. He didn't have much peace. He's the man who wrote these words, though, reflecting the words of our Lord in the Sermon on the Mount. But Paul never provoked any of those arguments. He never protracted any of them; he never prolonged any of them. He just went and preached the Gospel, and somebody else always created the problem. It was not Paul's job to go around stirring up trouble. He had enough of it without stirring it up. And you're going to have enough of it without stirring it up on your own. It's your job to put it to rest wherever you can. And Paul knew that he could put trouble to rest, but he could never put it to rest when it had to do with the Gospel and the Word of God. He knew that there was absolutely no way that he could compromise the truth of God in order to put trouble to rest, so he's not talking about that. But he is talking about personal problems with one another. And personal problems can be put to rest if we will only be peacemakers rather than troublemakers.

There are lots of excuses people give. "Our temperaments clash. Our temperaments just aren't the same." Well, so what. This says be at peace with everybody. That means people who have likeable temperaments, people who have less likeable temperaments, and people who have horrendous temperaments. It doesn't matter. "All" is what it says, so that excuse won't work. And then there are people who say, "But I tried to be at peace with him or with her a number of times, and it always fails. I've given up on him. There's no hope there." You can't do that because God is in the business of changing people. "Yeah, I know all that, but listen, I've tried 1000 times and I've never gotten any results. So there's no sense trying anymore." O, is that right? Are you a prophet? Did God make you a prophet? "Well, no, not exactly, but I know that person." What do you mean you know that person? You know how that person was up till this moment, but suppose you pray about that person; suppose you go on an attitude of hope rather than an attitude of despair, and suppose you ask God to really make a difference this time. Don't you believe God is in the business of changing people? Suppose it's been 2000 times that you've tried. Maybe the 2001th

time will make the difference. God can change people who have done something 3000 times so that the 3001th time can be different. That's no excuse. Well, this says "all men", even the people who have failed so often. You are to make the effort, and you're to do everything you can to bring peace.

There are many people who love the battle but who don't like that peace that follows. They're good at the battle, but they're not so good at the peace that follows the war. During the Civil War, there were a lot of men who fought very courageously and very vigorously. But after that Civil War was over, one of the terrible things that happened in this country was that some of those men who were so great in the armies wanted to go on fighting. They had gotten such a taste of it they didn't want to quit. They weren't interested in fighting for the peace that followed. They were interested in the fighting. And so a lot of them banded together and became outlaw bands all over this country because they wanted to go on fighting. They were good at fighting; they loved the battle, but they were really pretty poor at peace. There are some Christians like that. You give them a good fight and they're in there in the thick of it, and they can really cross swords with anybody. But when it comes to the peace, they're not so good. They really don't like peace. They like a good fight. And there's a spirit of that in everybody, I guess, to some extent. Some show it more outwardly. But a lot of people have it inwardly, and they go around knifing others behind their backs in dark alleys, verbally at least. The question is, are you a peacemaker, or are you a troublemaker?

There are some people right now with whom you don't have peace. They're some people back there at work with whom you don't have peace. They're some people back there in the family with whom you don't have peace. Maybe there are some children, parents, brothers, sisters, in-laws with whom there is nothing but war. It may be a cold war, but war--no peace. Maybe some of those are unbelievers. There are people with whom you do not have peace.

The question tonight is only one. The question is, are you really interested in battling that gets into the battle as thickly as you can with yourself? Get into a war with that troublemaking attitude that you may have that may be the cause of that lack of peace between you and somebody else. You fight that battle inside of yourself until that one wins, and you know that you can say before God and before any other human being alive that if there isn't peace between me and that person, it's not my fault. That's where Paul says you ought to be. And you ought to be able to say that honestly under the strictest kind of criticism that you can bring to your own life and your own motive. Nobody else can look at those motives; nobody else can judge you. Only God and you can look at them. "Like a city that is broken", says Proverbs, "and without walls is a man who has no control over his spirit." And then another Proverb says, "He who is slow to anger is better than the mighty [the warrior], and he who rules his spirit than he who captures a city." The toughest battle, where you need to be the most ferocious warrior is the one inside. To rule your own spirit, to capture and lick all the enemies down inside--our Lord gives you the grace to do that. Our Lord Jesus Christ is the only One who can. You don't have that power in your own strength; you don't have the wisdom in your own mind. That's why He gave you the Word and His Spirit. And with the Word telling you what God requires of you and with the Spirit in answer to genuine prayer, giving you the strength to obey that Word, there isn't a single one of you down here tonight who knows Jesus Christ as your Savior, who has been regenerated by the Spirit of God and enabled to believe in Him and who has put his trust upon Jesus Christ, not a single one of you down here

tonight who cannot rule your spirit. You can be a peacemaker no matter what your attitude has been like, no matter whether you're a fiery Irishman, as people tell me they are, and they can't control themselves, or whatever you may be, it doesn't matter. The Spirit of God knows about Irishman. And I want to tell you, you can obey this commandment by God's grace if only you will and if only you love our Lord enough that you're concerned about His name before others. Be at peace with all men if it's possible. And if it's not possible, be sure you're not the one who is making it impossible. So far as it depends upon you, you make sure you have done and are doing everything that the Word of God allows and requires to be at peace with all men.

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