

# Overcoming Evil with Good, Part 6

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We come to the last two verses tonight, verses 19 and 20:

"Never avenge yourselves, dear friend, but rather make room for wrath, since it is written, 'Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,'" says the Lord. But if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him a drink, since by doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head."

Until now, I've spoken largely about your attitude and your action in relationship to others in the battle with evil. We focused on the other person rather than on yourself. We talked about your need for blessing those who curse you rather than returning the curse in response to the curse. We talked about planning ahead as to how we will respond to evil so that when we do respond, we can respond not in some slipshod half-baked manner, but with finesse. And we talked about doing all you can do, all God expects you to do to achieve peace with others--responding with soft answers, pursuing reconciliation and so on, so far as it depends upon you.

Now, there is one other side to this whole issue, and that's the matter of authority and ability. The question still is in some minds, "Why can't I right wrongs? I could do it so easily," says the business man who has a certain person in his employ. He says, "I could fix him good tomorrow just like that. I could right all the wrongs so easily." Well, the first thing I want you to see this evening--and it is most important to understand--is that God hasn't given you any authority to take revenge. He says, "Never avenge yourselves, dear friend." You must not do it. That's not your business as a private individual to avenge yourselves or take your own revenge. He won't let you do it.

Revenge or vengeance is more than snapping back. Revenge or vengeance is a cold, calculated thing. It's a planned, deliberate effort growing out of bitterness or resentment when it stems from a human being. For example, in Mark 6:19, we read that Herodias (literally in the Greek) had it in for John the Baptist. The Greeks used exactly the same expression we use when they talk about having it in for somebody. And in a deliberate, cold, calculated manner, she got him. She got her revenge on John the Baptist. But that's what you may never do, God says. You never, as a private person, as an individual citizen, as a Christian individual, have been given the rightful authority by God to ever do any such thing.

When God speaks of vengeance in a right way in the Bible, He talks about it as a judicial effort. The original word actually carries some notion of a judicial decision that is made. And the next chapter, chapter 13, shows us something very interesting in relationship to chapter 12. Here we're told, "Don't ever avenge yourselves, dear

friend." But now as we move down to the next chapter, we read about the governing authority.

"Every individual must subject himself to governing authority, since there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been ordered by God. So then, whoever opposes the authority opposes what God has ordered, and whoever does so will receive judgment. Rulers aren't a cause for fear to those who do good, but to those who do evil. Do you want to have no fear of the one in authority? Then do good, and you will have his approval."

Now, get this next verse: "He is God's servant to you for good. But if you do evil, fear, since he doesn't bear the sword in vain. He is God's servant, an avenger who brings his wrath upon those who practice evil." The very same word here is applied to the ruler, to the head of state, to the one who has the authority of the state in his power. And it says that he is God's avenger, and he does bring God's wrath upon people. The very two words that speak about what you cannot do here speak about what he is supposed to do. Now, it's very important to keep things clear when you come to the Scriptures. Sometimes people take chapter 12 and they apply it to the government. But it isn't talking about the government; it's talking about individual ethics; it's talking about the individual person. "You are not to avenge yourselves, dear friend." And then some people would like to come down to 13 and apply it to the individual. But that's not talking about the individual; that's talking about the state. And so God has given to the state an authority that He has not given to the individual. And it is most important when you're dealing with Scripture to notice to whom God is speaking and about whom God is speaking.

One of the problems we have in our modern society is that the authority far too often does all sorts of things that God has not given the ruling authority any power or right to do in His Word. And then when it comes to the task that God has given to him to keep law and order and avenge evil, he won't do the job God did give him. And we always run into those kinds of problems. But here, God, in chapter 12, is speaking about the individual--you. He's not speaking about you if you were a ruler, if you were a policeman or a police chief or a ruler of the state, declaring war on another state. But He's speaking about you as an individual citizen, an individual person. He says you must never avenge yourself. So that's the first thing we need to get clear--that God has given no authority to the individual to take vengeance on anyone else or to exercise wrath on anyone else. Wrath is not a prerogative of an individual. Vengeance is not a prerogative of an individual. You are not now a judge. James 4:11-12 makes it clear to every Christian that you are not a judge now. The day is coming, according to chapter 6 of 1 Corinthians, when you shall even judge angels. And of course, in the church, the church officers have a task of judging. But they have authority to judge just as a ruler has authority to judge. And they make judgments about excommunication and about various other matters in the church of Jesus Christ. But no individual has the right to exercise punishment, vengeance, or wrath as an individual upon another brother or sister in Christ. We are not to take judgment. This is personal ethics. When Christ went in the temple and cleansed it and drove out the money changers, He was not in some way incensed over what people were doing to Him as a private individual. He said, "The zeal for My Father's house has eaten Me up." It was because He had come in the official character of the Messiah who was prophet, priest, and king of God and whose temple it was that He came and exercised in the name of His Father that authority to take vengeance on those who were wrongly using that temple.

So what we're saying here is that God will have no Christian vigilantes. Some of you have been Christian vigilantes at times. You've taken vengeance on others. You've taken it upon yourselves to exercise some kind of wrath on others, or you are planning to. "I'll fix him," you've said. God says, "As you bow your knee, you unbuckle that button buckle on those belts and drop those guns because you've been going out like a hunter for bounty." No vigilantism in His kingdom. You will operate according to the authority that God has given, where He has given it, under the various places that He has placed it. And you will not go out on your own and arrogate to yourself an authority that God never gave to you as an individual. That's what a vigilante is--he's somebody who is dissatisfied with what the government is doing, so he takes the law into his own hands. And you may be dissatisfied with what the church of Jesus Christ is doing, and there's usually a good reason to be. And you may be dissatisfied with what the state is doing, and there's probably even more reason to be. But you have no right to try to right wrongs by doing a wrong. You have no right to become a vigilante and go out and hang people on your own--take vengeance into your own hands, take God's law into your hands. "You dare not do that," says God. "Never avenge yourselves, dear friend."

Now, you don't have to. Do you realize that? In the final analysis it doesn't depend upon church officers; it doesn't depend upon the government. In the final analysis, God says, "Make room for wrath, since it is written, 'Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,' says the Lord." The government may fail as God's servants; officers in the church may fail as God's servants, but God isn't going to fail. And vengeance, in the final analysis, when it's all said and done, falls back into the hands of the only One who really ever can exercise it fully. Even when the state exercises vengeance, it only exercises it to a certain extent. It can only go to the outward actions and words of men. It cannot really look into the heart of man. When the church officer exercises judgment in the church of Christ, it is only authorized by God to deal with the words and the actions of men. And we dare not judge the hearts of men because God says in 1 Samuel 16, "Man looks on the outward appearance, but God looks upon the heart." And in the book of Acts, He is called the heart-knower. Only God knows the heart. And so only God can ultimately judge a man completely and entirely and thoroughly. All other judgment that He has committed to the state or to the church is only partial judgment, even when it is properly exercised. And so often it is not properly exercised. But that which it is not properly exercised and that which goes beyond the partial judgment, even when it is properly exercised, falls ultimately into the hands of God Himself. And some of it He brings about in this life, and some of it He waits for until the day of judgment and wrath.

Now, there's a solemn warning here. God says, "Vengeance is Mine." That's the reason why you have no right to take vengeance or avenge yourself--because it doesn't belong to you. He didn't give you that right; He didn't give you that authority. He kept it for Himself. "It's Mine," He said. And when you go out to exercise judgment on your own, what you're doing, in effect, is saying, "God, I don't want You to keep for Yourself what You have said is Yours. I want it for myself." And so you try to steal from God what belongs to Him. But He says avenging and judgment and wrath are Mine. And you're a thief or an attempted thief every time you go out to exercise vengeance on your own. You're attempting to steal from God what He has reserved for Himself. So that's pretty serious business trying to steal from God what He has reserved for Himself. Sometime look up all the things that God says are His. We steal a lot of things or attempt to steal a lot of things from God--we never really get them, but we try.

Remember Deuteronomy 29:29, it says, "The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but those which are revealed belong to us and to our children forever." There God says, "What I've given to you in Scripture is yours. But what I haven't talked about in Scripture, that's Mine. And don't you dare try to find it out. It belongs to Me." And we try to find out all kinds of things the Scripture doesn't tell us about, and speculate and come up with crazy ideas and all that sort of thing. We're really stealing from God what is His. He said, "The secret things belong to Me; the revealed things belong to you and your children forever."

It's funny, when you read the commentaries on the book of Revelation, for example, where it comes to the voice of the seven thunders and what they uttered, and it says it isn't lawful for any man to know, all the commentaries have an idea of what it is. They're going to tell you what they think it is. But it's unlawful for man to know. You can't know what it was because God said, "It isn't yours; it's Mine. It's one of the secret things." So we have here again God declaring, "This is My right and My prerogative; you have no part of it as a private individual." Now, He may exercise some of His judging, avenging power through the state; He may exercise some of it through the church and its officers. And you may be involved as a civil servant or as an officer in the church in exercising that partial judgment, but that's His. And He chooses how much and how far that will go, but only where He has given that authority. And to private individuals, He has given no such authority.

Sometimes God judges now, sometimes He judges directly, sometimes He judges later, sometimes He judges indirectly. And we read about various kinds of judgments of God. Sometimes He brings sickness; sometimes He brings death. "Some men's sins don't appear now, but only appear later," Paul says in 1 Timothy 5:24--long after they're gone. In various ways, God is working His judgments. But in the final analysis, when it's all said and done, God will make a perfect judgment of every person. And He will bring all the wrath that ought to be brought and take all the vengeance that ought to be taken in His time and in His way and as He sees fit. The reason that vigilante Christians get going is because they're not willing to operate according to God's timetable. And it's time we said, "Lord, that's in Your hands. Though I'd like to see it sooner, I'll be like those souls under the altar to whom it was said when they cried for vengeance, 'Yet a little longer, and the day will come.' And it did."

Now, notice what else what Paul said, "Never avenge yourselves, dear friend, but rather make room for wrath." God wants you to step aside, get out of the way. Do you realize that maybe one of the reasons why vengeance is not being taken sooner in certain instances is because you're standing in the way? He says, "Make room for My wrath." If you work at a company where the boss parks his car, and you park your car on the same parking lot, and the president, who is your boss, has a certain spot that says "Reserved for the President", you better not park your car there, or you're going to be in trouble. Now, God says, "Don't park yourself here. I've reserved this space for Myself. Vengeance is Mine; I will repay. It's My business. It's My parking space." And He says, "You make room for Me. You make room for My wrath--don't get in My way." Now, the time will come, according to God's timetable, when God will park His car. And if you're in the way, He'll park right through you. You just better stay out of His way. He says, "Make room for wrath. I'm coming through with My wrath. Get out of My way." It's like a couple of kids fighting. There's a big bully and a little kid, and he's beating up on the little kid. And the little kid is trying to defend himself. And the father comes along and says, "Get out of my way, son, I'll handle it." That's what God's saying--"Get out of my way; make room for Me to bring wrath." "I will repay,"

He says. Step aside, let God handle it. There was an old saying on the ad for the Greyhound bus a number of years ago that really said it well: "And leave the driving to us." (Some of you are old enough to remember.) And God says, "And leave the wrath, leave the vengeance to Me." Why doesn't God do something sooner. Well, that's His business and not ours. He'll do it, and He'll do it when He pleases and in the right way. He's a sovereign God who is in no way dependant upon our timetable.

There's one other thing about this. God hasn't given you the authority to take vengeance, but He also hasn't given you the ability to exercise vengeance on others. "It's Mine," He says, "not yours." And you ought to be glad about that. You ought to be so glad that He didn't give you the job of taking vengeance on others because you haven't got that ability. You don't know men's hearts; you don't know how to judge people. You may be judging their outward actions in one way, and they may have entirely different motives behind those actions that you could never suspect. So you may judging them far too seriously. Or you may be judging them far too easily. You may not know the evil that lurks in the human heart. Only God can really judge and give proper vengeance--only He can really repay. You don't know what is going on in any other human being's life fully enough to bring vengeance. You hardly know what's going on in your own life. Your own inner life is often so confused; you're often so deceived by your own sin and prejudices and so on that you can't even know your own self. How on earth, then, could you possibly know someone else adequately enough to judge him in a proper and a correct fashion? You can't do it. You can only judge those things that you see and judge those things that you hear. But you can go any farther than that, and that's far enough. So God hasn't given you either the authority or the ability.

But now we move to the next verse, which is a very interesting verse a lot of people have questions about or wonder about because it seems so contradictory. "If your enemy is hungry, fed him; if he's thirsty, give him a drink. By doing this you will heap burning coals on his head." People say that sounds contradictory. But that's only seemingly so, apparently so. There's no contradiction here whatsoever--none at all. It all fits so beautifully with verse 19. And the two parts of verse 20 fit so beautifully together. You say, "What's all this business of dumping coals on his head?" We'll get there. I'll hold that to the very end. First of all, I want you to notice that we're even dealing with the most extreme case of all, an enemy in this passage. Paul says, "If your enemy is hungry.... If your enemy is thirsty.... You will heap burning coals on your enemy's head." He's talking about an enemy. In Romans 5, where he talks about people for whom Christ died, he talks about those who are helpless. Then he talks about those who are sinners; then he talks about those who are enemies. And he shows the great extent to which Christ went to die for His own. He died not for just helpless people who couldn't do anything on their own. Of course, we were helpless, utterly helpless, absolutely unable to saves ourselves--"dead in trespasses and sins." A dead man can't do anything toward saving himself. If you've got somebody lying here in a coffin, you can bring the most beautiful music up here, and he doesn't even stir no matter what he hears. You can bring the most delicious meal and no response. You can bring anything you want up here and try to stir him up, but he's not going to respond to anything because he can't respond--he's dead. It's only as that body is given life that it can respond. And that's what regeneration is--when God puts life in a person to enable him to believe the Gospel. But he can't believe until God gives him life in order to believe. It's not believe and get life as some people today teach. It's get life so you can believe.

Well, helpless, that's part of it. But it's not just helpless people Christ died for. He died for sinners--people who were violating God's law, going their own way, moving away from all the things God told them to do and not to do, going into all sorts of wretched things. Yet Christ died for people like that. But to take it to the greatest extreme of all, Paul says Christ died for enemies. An enemy is more than just somebody who doesn't like you. An enemy is something more than somebody who ignores you. An enemy is something more than just somebody who is helpless. An enemy is somebody who makes it his business to get you. And so Paul is telling you here that this business of overcoming evil with good extends to the very greatest extreme just as Christ's death did when He died for enemies, people who hated God. They were out to get God and His people. Now, an enemy in the Bible as you look at it in the Psalms, for example, where David talks about his enemies, and just kind of flip through, you read about enemies rising against him, lying in wait for him, assaulting him, speaking evil against him, whispering against him, plotting against him, chasing and seizing him, seeking his hurt, laying traps for him. Under a hot Palestinian sun, the enemies are out there digging deep ditches so David would come along and fall into them. And an enemy is standing there all day long with his bow an arrow with his arm cocked ready to get David when he comes down the path. So he gets an ache and pain in his muscle. An enemy is somebody who works hard at getting somebody else. So it's not just somebody you don't like he's talking about here. It's somebody who is out to get you, who has made it his fulltime business to do you in. That's an enemy in the Bible.

Using that extreme situation, Paul says, "If your enemy [if somebody like that] is hungry, feed him." If [somebody like that] is thirsty, give him a drink." This is the same as saying elsewhere you must love your enemies. Love is giving. It's not a feeling first. Love is only a feeling only secondarily. But first and foremost, love is giving. "God so loved the world [that He got all emotional over it]." No,

"God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son."

"He loved me and gave Himself for me."

"Husbands love your wife as Christ loved the church and gave Himself for her."

"If your enemy hungers, give him something to eat. If your enemy thirsts, give him something to drink."

Love begins with giving. And whether you feel like it or not, you can always give. A lot of times you won't feel like it. You'll desire to please your Lord, so you'll obey Him. But you may not feel like doing this to your enemy after you've pulled yourself up out of the last pit he dug for you. You don't have to feel like it because love isn't first a feeling. Love is first giving. Love is commanded in the Bible, and you can obey a command. And feelings are not commanded. Feelings flow and change when you begin to obey the commands, even when you don't feel like it.

And so Paul says, "If your enemy is hungry, you feed him." Now, what's he saying? He's saying that love is concrete. And we've been talking all week about doing good for those who do evil to you. Now, I want to add one very essential element to all of that that comes out of this. Here's how you do it: you research your enemy. Remember, we're talking about war here. All through here we're talking about war. And what do you do in war? You do recognizance. You try to know what the enemy is

doing; you try to know where his weaknesses are, where his strengths are. You research everything you can about the enemy. Different words are used, but it's a research project. You discover everything you can. And what you're going to be researching for in that person we've been talking about all week long--that you're going to have to go deal with, you're going to have to do good toward, that person who is out to get you, that person who has done you wrong, that person who has cursed you, that person who has spit at you, that person who has persecuted you-- what you're going to have to do is research him. And what are you looking for? You're looking for his needs. If an enemy is hungry, if he's thirsty--that's a need. And I don't think it means just hunger and thirst. I think those are good examples of needs. Whatever his need may be, you find out what that need is. What's your enemy's need? And when you have researched him thoroughly enough and you know his need, then the second thing you do is start going through your own resources, and you say, "What have I got to meet that need?" If you've got a cup of cold water to meet the thirst, then that's great. If you've got some food to meet the need for hunger, great. If you've got the money to meet the need when a guy is broke, then that's another one. If you've got some direction when a person is puzzled, then that's another way to meet his need. But whatever his need is, you look at your resources and say, "What are my resources so that I can meet his need. I know what his need is, now, what have I got to meet it? And the third thing you do is look for or create an opportunity to bring your resources to his need so that you give to that enemy whatever it is he needs. If he needs something to eat, you give him something to eat. If he needs something to drink, you give him something to drink. You create that opportunity if it doesn't just naturally arise. So what you're interested in doing, then, is not simply any old good in response to evil. But you want to do something that is significant to him to meet his real need.

Now, there's one last thing. "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him a drink, since by doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head." The word is not just coals. As you think of coals, it probably is not what you're thinking of. You're thinking of some anthroicide or something like that. This is charcoal in the original, a smokeless fuel, one where, as you know in your charcoal burners, after you get the thing going for a while and you've got it blown to the place where it's white heat, and all the flame is gone out on all those coals, and the flames have become white or orange or yellow, you don't see any smoke. Charcoal fuel does not produce smoke. And that's word used here in the original. Burning coals of charcoal is what it's talking about. What are we talking about here? We're talking about this: we're still talking about an enemy whom you are to defeat with good. And you defeat him by doing good to him, and you defeat him by meeting his needs. And in that way you heap burning coals on his head.

Now, what does all that mean? It means that in those days when they had no flamethrowers and they had no napalm, they nevertheless knew the value of fire as a weapon. Picture your army, if you will, holding a pipe over a pan. Here's a narrow path through which the enemy must move, and your army is up on the heights overlooking that path. And the enemy doesn't know you're up there. And you're waiting for him. And all along that path, you have charcoal, that white, red, orange, whatever color you like, hot heat. You've been fanning it, and there's no smoke, so the enemy can't see it. But it's all up there, and all these hot coals are ready. You've got men everywhere along the line with shovels. And here comes the enemy through the path. And when he's contained in the path, underneath all of your charcoal that's lined up all down the path, the signal is given: "Now!" And everybody shovels his coal

and heaps it on his head. What an effective way of putting an enemy out of business. Now, that's what Paul is talking about. He says if you meet the enemy's need by heaping upon him good (don't just do some little token of good to him--heap it on him; overkill if necessary), you will effectively put him out of business as an enemy. Paul's not saying he'll become a Christian--he may--but he is saying you'll put him out of business as an enemy with good. You see, there's no contradiction here. Paul is saying you've used your most powerful weapon possible. You have put this man out of business by heaping good on him to meet his need. And he has nothing to do in response. He cannot respond to that. You get enough red hot charcoal on the head of an enemy and he's out of business. And that's what God says. He's to be subdued by love.

That's what our Lord did. He saw our greatest need, and He died to meet it. There's not a single person here tonight who knows Him as Savior who would ever be saved if He hadn't looked at you as an enemy who needed to be put out of business as an enemy and who needed to be turned into a friend. And He determined He was going to do that. And He used the most powerful thing He could use. He heaped coals of fire to put you out of business as an enemy. The coals of fire that He heaped on you on that cross did the job. There are a lot of people who think that Christ's death really didn't do the job. They say Christ died for every last man, woman, child that was to be born on the face of this earth. That's nonsense. The Bible doesn't teach that. If that's so, then all those people are going to hell whose sins were not really dealt with, and God was not satisfied by what Christ did. He did not do the job. No, Jesus Christ died for certain individuals, certain people whom He loved and whom He was going to save. And every last one of those for whom He died has effectively been put out of business as an enemy and has been won to His cause and has become one of His children and one of His soldiers in His army, or will be. I'm glad that we have a personal Savior, not an abstract Savior. Jesus didn't die for mankind in general; He died for particular people whom He loved. That's a warm, wonderful truth. Everybody limits Christ's atonement, but you either limit its effectiveness, or you limit its design. And this says not one of those for whom He died will ever perish. That's what the Scripture teaches all through the book of John as well as elsewhere.

So my friend, He put you out of business as an enemy, and He won you to Himself. And He loved you with that personal love, and He wants you to do the same. Not all of those to whom you show such love are going to come because your work is not necessarily going to be efficacious as His was. But some will, and that's one of the ways He's going to win some of those for who He died to Himself through you and your love and your goodness and your care.

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