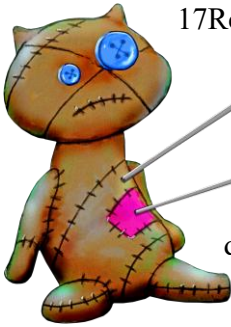


Revenge: sweet or bitter?

Romans 12:17 – 21



17Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. 18If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. 19Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” 20To the contrary, “if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.” 21Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Even the youngest children in our society know that revenge is sweet. Seven-year-old Tim was angry with his brother Paul; he was seething inside. Yet he couldn't do anything, because his parents were watching. So, he waited for just a single moment—until they looked away—and gave his brother a good, hard kick in the backside. The revenge was sweet. It seemed to be a just punishment for Paul's annoying nagging. However, that sweet moment of revenge lasted only an instant, because that was when things really kicked off.

His brother struck back. Tim then fought back again and landed an even harder blow. A vicious cycle began. The victim became the aggressor, the aggressor in turn became the victim, and the victim became the aggressor again. His brother screamed even louder. His parents came running. His father started scolding them. And the parents put a stop to the cycle of violence.

This very human scenario isn't limited to squabbles between siblings. Every day, we read in the newspapers about escalating wars happening all over the world. It often starts with a war of words. And honestly, when you follow some of the arguments between politicians—for instance, over who is supposed to appear in a photo with whom—and then watch the shrill debates in the media that follow, you have to admit: it's exactly like the situation with Tim and Paul in the story I just told. Unfortunately, with adults, it doesn't stop at minor blows and nagging. When words no longer suffice, bombs soon start falling. And the situation just keeps getting worse and worse. There is untold suffering, and no end to the conflict seems to be in sight. That is how it is in politics. Evil has a way of multiplying like a virus, spawning ever more evil. We can experience this kind of thing in our own lives, too. Let me give you an example: while you are here in Germany, your father dies. Your brothers back home no longer expect you to return and are dividing the entire inheritance among themselves. Nothing is left for you. They haven't even left behind a small keepsake. You are deeply angry and hurt by this injustice, and these feelings take root in your mind. You think about this injustice all day long. At night, you are so furious that you cannot sleep. Eventually, your anger becomes so consuming that you can no longer laugh. You even grow angry with people who have nothing to do with the matter. The evil that occurred far away has taken hold of your life and your heart, leaving you unable to break free from it.

The words Paul speaks to us today—"Repay no one evil for evil"—sound so good and so right. We are simply meant to break the cycle! Under no circumstances should the evil present in the world find fertile ground in our hearts and lives. Instead of evil, we are called to do good! But is it really that easy? Can we simply isolate ourselves from the outside world and pretend that these evil things never happened? No, we cannot. We cannot, because all of us—just like Adam and Eve—have eaten from the tree of knowledge. Whether we believe in God or not, we know the difference between justice and injustice. And when injustice befalls us, it strikes us to the very soul; we cannot simply distance ourselves from it. In such a situation, we might tell ourselves a hundred times to "do good," yet we remain unable to do so. We cannot, because God is not present in our lives. And that is the fundamental question: Do we not need—like children—a higher power to intervene? A higher power to put an end to the cycle of violence? Many peoples and religions sense that God is ultimately the guarantor of justice in this world. Paul, too, admonishes us in our sermon text: "Do not avenge yourselves, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God," quoting from the Old Testament (Deuteronomy 32:35): "Vengeance is mine; I will repay, says the Lord." Punishing injustice is an important work of God. Yet it creates another problem for us. If God were to consistently exact vengeance for all injustice on earth, no one could stand before Him. We, too, would have to perish under His burning wrath. Along with us, the entire world would also have to perish under His wrath, for we all sin and deserve punishment. We read of such an instance of world destruction by God in the Book of Genesis (chapters 6–9), in the story of the Flood. People were so wicked that God decided to destroy them all. God spared only one man—Noah—along with his family and the animals, by having Noah build an ark.

Later, God would once again radically change the fate of all humanity and all creation through a single human being. That man's name was Jesus. God made Him suffer the full force of divine punishment. He gave Him the bitter cup of suffering to drink. He led Him all the way to death on the cross. The story of Jesus' earthly life is the story of how Jesus took retribution upon Himself. Yet Jesus is not merely human but also the Son of God; indeed, He is God Himself. In Christ, God steps into the human role and makes atonement for our guilt Himself—something we could never have done. He establishes a new kind of justice, one He pays for Himself, one for which He gives Himself up. In doing so, He breaks the vicious cycle of violence and counter-violence. Jesus conquers death, hatred, and the Evil One—for you. Even on the cross, He asks that His tormentors be forgiven. This kind of retribution, this kind of self-giving, this kind of justice... this is the true work of God. In it, God's love for you and for all creation finds expression. Though it sounds paradoxical, God's suffering in Christ is the sweetest form of retribution we will ever taste. And the sweetness remains. It does not turn into bitterness. The longer we ruminate on the Gospel, the sweeter it becomes. Christ Himself endured the bitterness so that we might have joy and freedom.

The goodness, justice, love, and freedom that Christ secured on the cross are the very things with which Christians and the Church act. We all live by this love of God. God met us—evil people—with goodness. He softened our hearts of stone so that we might love Him with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love our neighbor as ourselves. In our lives, we encounter many evil people. These are all people whom we can forgive, just as God has

forgiven us. When this love of God gains ground in our lives, the consequences are boundless. Goodness multiplies. But goodness multiplies exponentially. We can see this in the life of the Apostle Paul. He—whose heart was filled with hatred and vengeance, and who had people executed across the world of his name—became a messenger of peace. Such things can happen when God gains space within us.

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