



## Teach Us to Pray: Overcoming Evil

September 29, 2019

Genesis 4.1-10

Romans 12.9-21

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Now the man knew his wife Eve, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, "I have produced a man with the help of the Lord." Next she bore his brother Abel. Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a tiller of the ground. In the course of time Cain brought to the Lord an offering of the fruit of the ground, and Abel for his part brought of the firstlings of his flock, their fat portions. And the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell. The Lord said to Cain, "Why are you angry, and why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it."

Cain said to his brother Abel, "Let us go out to the field." And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel, and killed him. Then the Lord said to Cain, "Where is your brother Abel?" He said, "I do not know; am I my brother's keeper?" And the Lord said, "What have you done? Listen; your brother's blood is crying out to me from the ground!"

What a sad and tragic story!

As we reflect on "lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil" we see temptation and evil played out in the first family of the Bible, as Cain murders his brother Abel.

After all the original goodness of creation, this is how the first family responds. What is really fascinating about this reading is how the idea of sin is portrayed.

We don't like to talk about sin very much, but we don't have to look for long at the world to see it. We see sin at work in warfare and poverty and politics, and if we look honestly, we see it in our own hearts and homes as well.

Look at what the text says: Sin is “lurking at the door” like an enemy ready to pounce. Sin is essentially personified, with agency, with initiative.

And personified sin makes sense, when you realize how we describe our foolish behavior, as if another entity took control of us:

“Something came over me.”

“I don’t know what got into me.”

Or we joke: “The devil made me do it.”

Listen again: “Sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it.” In other words: You must overcome it.

This leads us to our second reading, from Romans 12, a beloved chapter in the Bible. Before reading it, I want highlight a few things:

The chapter begins with the word “therefore” as sort of a conclusion to Romans 1-11, where Paul has been describing what it means to be saved by grace through faith, which is a pillar of Reformed theology. So chapter 12 tells readers the practical implications of being saved by grace through faith, what this new life is all about.

Secondly, in verse two of Romans 12, Paul writes: “Be transformed by the renewing of your mind” reminding readers that the Christian life is about repentance, which can be understood as a change of direction or a change of mind. Note that it doesn’t say: Transform yourself. With the passive voice, we assume that God is the one doing the transformation; we just have to be open to it.

And thirdly, in verses 3-8, Paul reminds readers that Christian faith is lived in community, that we are one body with many parts. We’ve seen that in the Lord’s Prayer, as we pray for and with each other: Our Father, give us our daily bread, forgive us, deliver us.

So in verse 9-21, we read what are often called the Marks of a true Christian. While it might sounds like a long list of things to do, I think it’s better to hear it as an invitation to be transformed by God and to live in a new way as a Christian.

One note: the reference to burning coals sounds harsh and out of context, but it probably was referring to an ancient practice where a guilty person would carry a bin of burning coals over their head as a sign of repentance.

One more note on the reading: as you'll hear, while love is at the top of the list, the reality of evil runs throughout, being mentioned several times. Listen for God's word.

<sup>9</sup> Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; <sup>10</sup> love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. <sup>11</sup> Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. <sup>12</sup> Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. <sup>13</sup> Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers.

<sup>14</sup> Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. <sup>15</sup> Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. <sup>16</sup> Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. <sup>17</sup> Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. <sup>18</sup> If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. <sup>19</sup> Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." <sup>20</sup> No, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads." <sup>21</sup> Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

We have been learning about and praying the Lord's Prayer together this month. The disciples asked Jesus: Teach us to pray. My hope is that we've become more prayerful this month.

As we come to the end of our series, let's review. The original form of the prayer is in Luke 11 and Matthew 6, with some variations.

Over the past four Sundays, we've looked at different parts of the prayer.

1. In week one, we learned how God is both a loving Parent, very close to us, and hallowed, holy, sacred, and beyond us.

2. In week two, we learned how the kingdom is at the core of Christian faith, this new reality that Jesus proclaimed, where we seek and live God's will
3. In week three, we learned how daily bread means nourishment for both the body and the soul, and how we are praying for one another, not just ourselves
4. Last week, Jeff preached a fine sermon about forgiveness, about how forgiving God is and how we have the choice to be forgiving or not.

If you missed any of those sermons, hardcopies are outside on the main bulletin board, and podcasts and text versions are available on our website.

[www.covenantmadison.org](http://www.covenantmadison.org)

Today, we look at the final petition: Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.

Earlier this year, Pope Francis used his authority to tweak the wording of the prayer, to “do not let us fall into temptation” to move away from any hint that God would lead us into temptation. A good move.

We all struggle with temptation. When we think about temptation, our first thought is about things like chocolate or French fries, or maybe alcohol or what we watch on our screens.

While those daily issues of temptation are important, I think we need to be aware of a bigger and greater temptation.

I worry that those of us who live rather comfortable lives are tempted on a regular basis to be indifferent to the evils around us.

Indifference allows evil to flourish.

As the quote goes:

The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good [people] to do nothing.

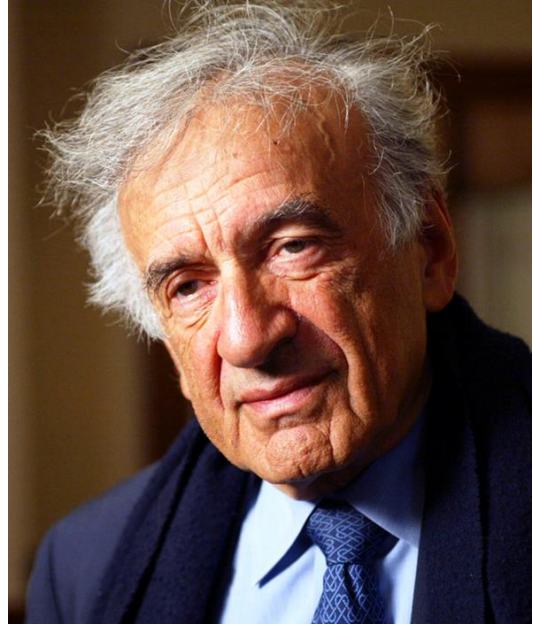
This quote, attributed to politician Edmund Burke, reflects what we read in Scripture, that evil is real and that it should be opposed, not ignored.

Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel was even more blunt about the danger of ignoring evil and suffering:

Indifference, to me, is the epitome of evil.

So in the face of evil, if we ignore it, we become evil.

As God's people, as Christians, we are called to confront evil and to work to make this world a better place, to make it more like God's Kingdom. Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done.



The calling to confront evil runs through Scripture, in the form of the message to care for each other.

- Cain poignantly asks, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” The implication is clear, that yes we are our siblings’ keepers.
- Romans has love at the top of the list: Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good.
- And we hear it in the core teaching of Jesus: Love one another.

So if we’re going to be authentic about our faith, we need to engage with the issues around us, we need to do what we can to overcome evil with good.

Just yesterday I read about a great example of overcoming evil with good. The New York City Fire Department Academy graduated over 300 new members last week, and among them were 13 people whose fathers had died on 9/11. Think about that. Included among the 13 were a brother and sister. Overcoming evil with good.

<https://www.cnn.com/2019/09/25/us/children-firefighters-9-11-fdny-trnd/index.html>

Another evil we face today is gun violence, and providentially this week, I got a packet of info this week from the Presbyterian Church USA. Included is a booklet called “Gun Violence and Gospel Values.” And in the cover letter from our Stated Clerk it says that the packet is meant to help us overcome evil with good, and to help us put our thoughts and prayers into obedient action.

And then it says:

That action is always accompanied, in our tradition, by reflection, discernment, and tolerance of different viewpoints, as we are held together by the Spirit of Christ. Our calling is to be faithful, not neutral, but to speak the truth in love.

As Presbyterians, as Christians, we are called to engage with the issues of the world.

If we ignore the issues and evils in the world, we become, as the saying goes “too heavenly minded to be any earthly good.” Sadly some churches do that.

There’s a story about Germany in the time of the Nazis. And the story goes that there was a church right by the railroad tracks. And every Sunday as people gathered for worship, they heard trains going by. Sometimes they heard people crying and screaming from the trains. Word was getting around about the concentration camps, so the people in the church knew where those trains were going and they knew the fate of the people on those trains.

As the story goes, as the trains would go by the people just sang louder to avoid hearing the cries from the people on the trains.

We cannot ignore evil. We called to engage it, to challenge it, to overcome it. And we called to do this together.

So I’m glad to be part of a church where we wrestle with complex evils like racism and hunger, and complex issues like climate change and human sexuality.

I’m glad to be part of a church that listens to Jesus,

- who came proclaiming a new kingdom,
- who taught about love even loving enemies,
- and who instead of leading an army against the Romans, died on the cross and rose again, to embody sacrificial love and to open the door to new life for the world.

As we wrestle with these complex issues, we need to continue to be grounded in God’s word and God’s love.

One of my favorite verses helps me to stay focused:

Keep alert, stand firm in your faith, be courageous, be strong. Let all that you do be done in love.

This is a good starting point to overcome evil with good.

One final thought. Overcoming evil with good isn't just about wrestling with the big complex issues in our world. It's about how we face things in our daily lives.

I read a story this week shared by a woman who works at a book store in a college town. (The story didn't say it was Madison, but it didn't say it wasn't Madison....)

Anyway, one day an older woman is checking out and she starts chatting with the cashier, telling her about how she is going to buy some good books and some chocolate for her husband. Then the woman notices a young man behind her, waiting to purchase a bunch of text books.

She tells him to give her the books. He is confused. She tells the clerk she's going to pay for the books. The young man objects, noting that he has something like \$400 worth of books. She dismisses him and insists on paying for the books. And she adds some chocolate and a copy of a Harry Potter book as well.

Then the woman said, "It's important to be kind. You can't know all the times that you've hurt people in tiny, significant ways. It's easy to be cruel without meaning to be. There's nothing you can do about that. But you can choose to be kind. Be kind."

The young man hugs her and walks out, sort of in shock.

Then the woman tells the cashier: "My son is a homeless meth addict. I don't know what I did. I see that boy and I see the man my son could have been if someone had chosen to be kind to him at just the right time."

Here's a woman facing the evils of drug addiction and family stress, and she's trying to overcome with random acts of kindness.

And the story doesn't end there. A few days later, the young man's mother comes in and tells the cashier that he donated the \$400 he had set aside for his books to a local homeless shelter.

<https://www.boredpanda.com/wholesome-old-lady-buy-student-400-dollar-textbooks/>

Sometime this week, you'll be confronted by evil, or sin, or at the least someone who is rude, angry, inappropriate. You have a choice as to how to respond.

As we stick together and pray and open ourselves to be transformed by God, one step at a time, in small ways and big ways, we are overcoming evil with good. Amen.