

“Doing Good” | Romans 12:1-2

We serve a good God, Amen?

Last year we heard about a terrible explosion that took place in port of Beirut. Many lives were lost, and the nation was in turmoil. We heard that a container from the Nazarene Compassionate Warehouse had just arrived in the port of Beirut when the explosion happened. It was feared that the container was lost forever with its precious cargo for the people. But people prayed that a miracle could happen, that somehow that container could be spared. One year later, as clean up continues in Beirut, our container was found, still in tact! It has not been opened yet but will be freed from the rubble and delivered in the next couple of weeks.

Do you believe in miracles? You should! We serve a great God!

Many people have a wrong conception of God. They see God as mean, angry and punishing. These people have not read their Bibles very much, for from beginning to end the Bible reveals a God who is seeking to bring a lost and fallen world back to Himself. Why? Because God is love. Because God is good.

So it comes as no surprise that the instructions given in God’s Word to us are not about fighting back when our enemies attack, not protesting and whining, not taking up arms and starting a war, but to do good – even to our enemies. Our verse for this month says,

“Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” (Romans 12:21)

The context of this great verse is in the second half of the Apostle Paul’s letter to the Roman church. The first half of his letter had been about what God has done for us. The second half tells us what our response should be. Here in chapter 12 Paul reveals a truth that not all are ready to accept. He basically says, love God and your fellow man, no matter what it costs you, and you will discover that love wins – always!

In verse 9 the Apostle writes,

“Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good.”

Then in verse 21 he sums up his teaching by saying, “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”

This is a great ideal. Many people are trying to do that, even some of the most ungodly people are trying to do good in this world. Is this all Paul was getting at? Try harder to be a nice person, do good and then you have faith and spirituality all figured out?

Notable people like Bill Gates, who controls billions of dollars, run charities that fund the drilling of water wells in third world countries, sending medicine to countries struggling with AIDS, and setting up schools for children in developing countries. Does this mean Bill Gates gets a pass to heaven because he has done good? Is this what Paul means?

Many people think this is the way to heaven. They feel that if the good they do outweighs the bad they have done then they will be ushered into heaven. While on vacation I watched a movie about a man taking a pilgrimage on the El Camino de Santiago, the 800 km trail through Spain. In one scene, the pilgrims gathered at a place to leave a stone and say a prayer. The prayer basically asked that God would add the pilgrimage to the good deeds they had done so they could enter heaven. This is not scriptural. This is not the way to heaven. Good deeds will not get us into heaven.

So maybe Paul got it wrong. Maybe he should not have called Christians to overcome evil by doing good. Maybe this is not a Christian virtue after all.

Before going down that path, stop and read the first two verses of this chapter. As noted earlier, the first 11 chapters speak of what God has done for us. Then the last five chapters challenge the believer to live differently because of what we read in the first eleven chapters.

The hinge between the two ideas, what God has done and what we ought to do, is found in chapter 12 verses 1-2. For the next four weeks we will focus on these two verses as the guide to our destination: doing good so we might overcome evil.

Read with me these two verses from God's Word:

12 I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, *which is your reasonable service.* ²And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what *is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.* (KJV)

12 Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. ²Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will. (NIV)

It is clear that the Apostle Paul sees what he is saying as very important to the believers. He addresses them as *adelphoi*, a Greek word that can refer to brothers but also to all those connected to each other by faith, thus including women as well. This is why several of the newer translations have translated this, "brothers and sisters." This message is for all believers, no matter what your gender. This is for you!

The message God gave to the Apostle is vitally important, so he says he urges or beseeches the Christians to heed what he is saying. The word he uses here can have the sense of begging, or pleading that the people would listen and understand. This is vitally important so please pay attention. The importance of his message has not changed – it is still critical that we understand what is being said here. Before we can get to the "doing good" part of what God wants us to do, we have to understand this piece right here.

So what does God say to us through the Apostle Paul?

"I beseech you, brethren, in view of God's mercy..."

What he is saying is this: before you do anything you must stop and look at something. It is important to stop and look before you leap – it makes a big difference whether you are leaping on the 1 meter, 5 meter or 10 meter diving board!

What does Paul want us to take a look at? He wants us to look at God's mercy.

What is he referring to? What mercy? What does he mean?

Mercy, as you know, is being given something you do not deserve. In fact, you probably deserve something bad, but mercy presents you with something good.

Mercy is when the teacher says you may rewrite the exam so you can get a better grade.

Mercy is the police officer giving you a warning instead of the speeding ticket.

Mercy is getting an extension so you have more time to pay back your loan.

Mercy is someone forgiving you when you totally messed up, causing harm and heartache to the other person.

We have received mercy from God, and this is the starting place to our journey to do good so that evil might be overcome. So this morning we will pause and look at the mercy we have received from God, the good He has done for us when we deserved something quite different.

To understand God's mercy as the Apostle Paul saw it we have to go back to the beginning of this letter and follow his argument.

In chapter one the Apostle outlines how God's wrath is being revealed against all godlessness and wickedness. What is the main thing we do that falls under the category of wickedness and godlessness? We deny that there is a God in heaven, and therefore either make false gods or let their own appetites and pleasures become our god. This leads to sexual immorality and impurity, fighting against God's plan for family, a man and a woman united together under God for the sake of their children and society.

Paul would go on to provide quite a list of sins that come as a result of walking away from God's order: wickedness, evil, greed, depravity, envy, murder, strife, deceit,, malice, gossip, slander, God-haters, insolent, arrogant, boastful, inventing new ways to do evil, disobedient to their parents, lacking understanding, unfaithful to their partners, no love, no mercy, approving of the things that are contrary to God's righteous decrees (cf. 1:29-32).

That is quite the list of evil things people can, and will, do. We see it all around us even now. We hardly know who to trust anymore because of deceit. And why the deceit? Usually it can be traced back to greed. And every day we see people turning away from God's Word to follow whatever path they feel will make them happiest...

Well, we might be tempted to say, there really are some terrible people out there. Crime is all around us, and even people who are not criminals can be very nasty people. Yes, shame on them...

So that we do not get that "better than thou" attitude, the apostle points out that

“... there is no one righteous, not even one...” (3:10, quoting Psalm 14:3) and

“all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” (3:23)

This means we all deserve the wrath of God, the punishment deserved for turning your back in disobedience on your Creator and God. Even those trying to keep God’s rules fall short, usually because there is a deeper problem in the heart of the individual. Sin has a tendency to cause us to focus on the wrong things, to desire the wrong things, to live for the wrong things.

So we cannot do good because we are flawed to the core. This flaw called sin infects everyone. COVID may have infected millions of people, but millions more were unaffected. Sin has a 100% infection rate. In fact, we are born with the stain of sin in our lives – we are born facing the wrong way. Instead of moving to God, we walk away. Our parents may help steer us the right way, but we may or may not choose to walk with God. Our default is to walk away.

So does it matter that we are all sinners, infected with the disease of sin? People who got COVID survived and many have recovered completely, while others are slowly recovering. So what if we are sinners?

Paul gives us the grim consequences in 6:23:

“For the wages of sin is death...”

This death is a spiritual death, a separation from God now and throughout eternity in a place called hell. We are doomed...

... except for the mercy of God. Romans 6:23 goes on to say,

“...but the gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord.”

We deserved death. We deserved punishment because of our sin. But in mercy God sent Jesus to pay the debt we owed, to die in our place, to take our punishment. We can have eternal life – that means we can start to really live now and we continue to live for eternity in God’s heaven if we acknowledge our sin, ask God’s forgiveness, believe Jesus died in our place and by God’s help, we turn away from our life of sin, our life without God.

What do we do to fix the sin problem? Nothing. Jesus did it all. We simply trust that fact and receive the free gift of forgiveness and eternal life through faith in Jesus.

That is the mercy of God the Apostle wants us to think about. We cannot be good, or do good, because of sin. Sure, sinners can do good things, but there will always be a catch – it is not unto the Lord. And we were created to give glory back to our Creator – to God. We cannot do this when there is sin in our lives.

But what Jesus did on the cross of Calvary, what he did when he took the beatings, the crown of thorns, the nails, the pain and death of crucifixion, dealt with the sin of our lives once and for all. Nothing more needs to be done to remove the sin infection of our lives. We need only repent and accept by faith the salvation offered to us as a free gift by God through Jesus.

This morning as we partake of communion may we remember the mercy of God. Without it we were lost. With it there can be life and joy and peace – if we will receive it through faith in Christ.

The starting place on our journey to overcoming evil with good is to have the evil removed from our own lives through faith in Jesus. He alone can deal with our sin problem. Have you gone to Him to receive mercy, or are you still lost in sin?

As we prepare for Communion, may we let the Lord examine our hearts. Have we confessed our sin to Him? Have we sought his forgiveness and grace? Have we received the new life He promises to all who receive him, who believe on his name?

As the worship team leads us in the next song to prepare us to come to the Lord's Table may we return to the starting place of our faith – may we view God's mercy.