

Overcoming Evil with Good

A Sermon by Rich Holmes on Romans 12: 17-21

Delivered on July 19, 2020

In the early seventies at Princeton Seminary, two guys named Darley and Batson decided to conduct an experiment. They took a group of ordinary Seminary students and met with them all individually, and they told them that to fulfill a requirement for one of their classes they would have to walk from one building on the Princeton campus to another building all the way on the other side of campus. There, the students were told they would give a talk on Luke Chapter 10 verses 25 through 37, otherwise known as the story of the Good Samaritan. Now, what the students who met with Darley and Batson didn't know is that they were being divided up into three groups. One group of the Seminary students were told that they were running ahead of time to get to the other building and they could therefore make their way across campus at a leisurely pace. A second group was told that they were right on time, and a third group was told that they were running a little late, and they would have to hurry. What the students also didn't know is that a man who was a part of the experiment would be waiting for them as they made their way to the doorway of the other building. This man would have the appearance of a homeless person, he would be slumped in the doorway and he would be moaning and groaning as if to say 'please help me'. Now you will be pleased to know that among those students who were told they were running ahead of time for their talk, a clear majority of them stopped to ask the man if he needed any help and if there was anything they could do for him. Fewer did this among those who were told they were running on time, but still, a good many of the students from this group also stopped to talk to the man. But you may be shocked to know that

among the group that was running late, only ten percent of these stopped to talk to the man, a full ninety percent just ignored him.

Seminary students, seminary students who were preparing for a life of ministry, seminary students who were all moments away from giving a talk about how wonderful it is to be a good Samaritan, why did so many of them find themselves in the ironic position of passing up a perfectly good opportunity to be a good Samaritan?

Well, I don't know that I can give a full explanation of why they did what they did. But here's a partial explanation. They weren't callous and uncaring people. But they were people who also had the role of being students on a campus and as students, they were focused on their duty of getting to class on time. They were conscientious students who all their lives had been taught that good students show up to class on time and bad ones don't, and in their zeal to be good students, sadly they decided to make their Christian compassion take a back seat to their dutifulness. That's not to defend what they did, but it is to explain what they did.

It is frankly surprising how much good faithful Christians will do that is callous, sub-Christian and yes, even evil in the name of what is good. In this New Testament lesson from Paul's letter to the Romans, Paul tells us do not repay evil for evil. Now, I am guessing that if someone would stand up before Northminster or any church anywhere and say don't repay evil for evil, everyone would stand up and cheer. That is a lesson that Kelly and I teach our children and I imagine it's probably a lesson that everyone here would teach their children as well. If you're anything like us, then you probably tell your children things like if someone goes around calling you ugly names, you don't pay them back by going around calling them ugly names. Or,

if someone takes something that belongs to you, you don't get them back by taking something that belongs to them. Two wrongs don't make a right, I remember my father used to say.

But most of the people to whom I am addressing this sermon today are not children who are learning the basics of morality, but adults, and adults who I would think already agree with Paul that we should not return evil for evil. So is this sermon a waste of time?

Well, before you say yes, imagine, if you would, that you are a lawyer and you're handling the last will and testament of a client of yours who just died. Your client was a very wealthy and successful pediatrician and you have in your possession a will which says that he is leaving his inheritance to a local hospital so that they can build a new pediatric wing. You can't imagine all the good that will be done from constructing this new wing. But you also know that the elderly pediatrician has a son who is a complete sociopath. The son got involved in organized crime and a few years ago, his father who was so ashamed of him vowed he'd never speak to him again. But as his father got older and his health became fragile, the gangster son knew that it wouldn't be long before he dad died and left his inheritance to somebody. So he went to his father and told him a pack of lies about how he'd cleaned up his act and turned his life around, and he put on this affectionate act for his father in his final days. You think the old pediatrician wasn't fooled by this show because you have his will in your hand, but then you find a newer will a will that trumps the old will. And in this new will, he's leaving everything to his gangster son. A lot of good can come out of that pediatric wing. The son will only use the inheritance for evil and there's a paper shredder sitting in your office. No one will ever know.

Or imagine that you are working on the campaign of someone named Smith who is running for political office. Smith could be a Republican or a Democrat, a liberal or a conservative, and Smith could be running for any office, it really doesn't matter. What does matter is that you believe in the things Smith stands for, and you also believe that if Smith's opponent, Jones, wins the election, lots of things will be done in the name of the voting public which are immoral and lots of people will suffer. So your candidate Smith decides to run a thirty second ad telling voters they can't vote for Jones, because Jones voted with the unpopular and widely despised politician John Doe twenty-five times. What the ad fails to mention, however, is that Smith himself voted with John Doe twenty-six times. So, the ad doesn't lie, but it is designed to give voters the misleading impression that Jones is more closely aligned with John Doe than your man Smith and you know that that's not true. You could, of course resign your position from Smith's campaign, but why should anyone do that, you say to yourself. After all, the ad doesn't lie, it just misleads, and if Jones wins the election it will mean disaster.

Or imagine that you are working for the CIA or the FBI or the Department of Homeland Security and you have found the terrorist who has planted a time bomb somewhere in the middle of Manhattan. The minutes are ticking away until the bomb goes off, killing ten million people, and it seems that nothing you are doing will seem to get the terrorist to tell you where he planted the device so you can send out a team to cut the wires before it goes off, but there's one thing that you can do which you know will make him talk. The terrorist has an innocent four year old daughter whom he loves very much. And what you can do is bring the little four year old girl to sit in front of her father and start torturing her until her agonizing screams force

her father to tell you where the bomb is planted. And I'll let you use your imagination and pick the torture yourself.

These aren't just cases of spreading lies to get even with a liar or stealing to get even with a thief. Think of all the millions of people would be saved if you could just find that bomb. Think of all the good that could be done if that pediatric wing could be built. Think of all the bad things that can be stopped if Smith wins the election. But Paul says no. You don't repay evil for evil. You don't do some act of evil in order to stop some other act of evil.

Sometimes in my role as a minister, I will find myself discussing the Christian faith with someone who tells me that they believe in religion in moderation. Now, I usually recoil in horror when someone uses that phrase "religion in moderation" or "Christianity in moderation", but I also think that I know what they mean. If we could sit down and talk about it, I bet what they would say is "Pastor, I have a real problem with people who are so committed to one way of seeing God that they see me as a threat if I disagree with them about even one thing. And a threat which needs to be neutralized through any means necessary." Or they might say "Pastor, I have a real problem with people who think if I disagree with them I should not be listened to, my point of view should not be considered; I should simply be shouted down, intimidated, thrown out of the church and in some cases even killed." What people mean when they say they like religion in moderation, in other words, is that they have a real problem with religious extremism.

If you are someone who stands up and cheers when someone says "Christianity in moderation", I want you to know that I abhor religious extremism. In the name of religious

extremism, planes have been flown into buildings, wars have been fought, Inquisitions have been conducted, books have been burned and science has been stopped in its tracks. There are few things worse than religious extremism. But I will never be a moderate when it comes to opposing evil in this world. Paul says that as Christians we should always stand against evil, and you don't use one evil to oppose another, or a small evil to oppose a greater one.

There was once a man in this country who was called a religious extremist for his steadfast refusal to tolerate the evil of racial injustice in our American society, and this person was called an extremist not just by people in the Ku Klux Klan or people on the political fringes of our society but even by well-meaning people in the clergy, but this man addressed these charges with the following words. "Was not Jesus an extremist in love?—"Love your enemies, bless those that curse you, pray for them that despitefully use you." Was not Amos an extremist for justice "let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream". Was not John Bunyan an extremist "I will stay in jail to the end of my days before I make a mockery of my conscience." Was not Abraham Lincoln an extremist "This nation cannot survive half slave and half free." So the question, is not whether we will be extremists, but what kind of extremists will we be. The question is not whether we will be extremists, but what kind of extremists will we be." The author of those words was not Malcolm X or Louis Farrakhan, or Rap Brown, it was Martin Luther King. Religious extremism? No. But moderation when it comes to opposing evil? Never. But maybe some will say that extremism in opposition to evil is as bad as any form of religious extremism, because surely, surely there are some cases when we should put up with small evils for the sake of stopping bigger ones. And maybe you think that we can all be convinced of the merits of moderation on evil if we just used our imaginations enough. And so

you ask us to imagine what if the little girl's dad wasn't about to blow up several million people, but what if, for some bizarre reason it was a billion people? Or what if the old pediatrician wasn't just leaving millions of dollars to build a pediatric wing, but a billion dollars to research childhood diseases?

Well, when we start talking numbers like that, I usually think about the story of the married couple who had the following conversation. Honey, would you cheat on me for a million dollars? No, honey, I love you, you know I love you, of course I wouldn't cheat on you for a million dollars. Okay, honey, well then, would you cheat on me for ten million dollars. Honey, how could you ask such a thing? Of course I wouldn't cheat on you for ten million dollars. I just told you, I love you. Okay, honey so how about 100 million dollars. Well, honey, you know I love you and everything, but 100 million dollars, that's a lot of money. I'd have to think about that. Okay, honey, so how about a billion dollars. Would you cheat on me for a billion dollars? Honey, do you know somebody who has a billion dollars?

The problem, you see, is that a world in which it is okay to do some act of evil if the price is right, is a world in which every single one of us is for sale. A world in which it is okay to be deliberately dishonest or a world in which it is okay to torture an innocent person, or a world in which it is okay to commit any act of evil if the price is right is a world in which every single one of us has a price tag attached to us and we can be sold. The gospels tell us that Judas sold our Lord for thirty pieces of silver. Maybe he wouldn't have sold him for twenty pieces of silver. Maybe he wouldn't have even sold him for twenty-nine pieces of silver. But he still sold him. He still had some price.

Paul says do not return evil for evil. Do not do one evil so that another evil can be stopped. Do not do big evils, do not do small evils. Do not do evils with good intentions or evils with evil intentions. Do not be a moderate when it comes to evil.