

Overcoming Evil With Good



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Romans 12, 13.*

Memory Text: “Be not conformed to this world: but be ye tranformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God” (*Romans 12:2*).

However much Paul is seeking to disabuse the Romans of their false notions of the law, he also calls all Christians to a high standard of obedience. This obedience comes from an inward change in our heart and mind, a change that comes only through the power of God working in a person surrendered to Him.

Romans contains no hint that this obedience comes automatically. The Christian needs to be enlightened as to what the requirements are; he or she must desire to obey those requirements; and, finally, the Christian should seek the power without which that obedience is impossible.

What this means is that works are part of the Christian faith. Paul never meant to depreciate works; in chapters 13 to 15 he gives them strong emphasis. This is no denial of what he has said earlier about righteousness by faith. On the contrary, works are the true expression of what it means to live by faith. One could even argue that because of the added revelation after Jesus came, the New Testament requirements are more difficult than what was required in the Old. New Testament believers have been given an example of proper moral behavior in Jesus Christ. He, and no one else, shows the pattern we are to follow. “Let this mind be in you, which was also in [not Moses, not Daniel, not David, not Solomon, not Enoch, not Deborah, not Elijah] Christ Jesus” (*Phil. 2:5*).

The standard doesn't—*can't!*—get higher than that.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, December 23.

Your Reasonable Service

With chapter 11, the doctrinal part of the book of Romans ends. Chapters 12 through 16 present practical instruction and personal notes. Nevertheless, these concluding chapters are extremely important because they show how the life of faith is to be lived.

For starters, faith is *not* a substitute for obedience, as if faith somehow nullifies our obligation to obey the Lord. The moral precepts are still in force; they are explained, even amplified, in the New Testament. And no indication is given, either, that it will be easy for the Christian to regulate his or her life by these moral precepts. On the contrary, we're told that at times it could be difficult, for the battle with self and with sin is always hard (*1 Pet. 4:1*). Christians are promised divine power and given assurance that victory is possible, but we are still in the world of the enemy and will have to fight many battles against temptation. The good news is that if we fall, if we stumble, we are not cast away but have a High Priest who intercedes in our behalf (*Heb. 7:25*).

Read Romans 12:1. How does the analogy presented here reveal how we as Christians are to live? How does Romans 12:2 fit in with this?

In Romans 12:1, Paul is alluding to Old Testament sacrifices. As, anciently, animals were sacrificed to God, so now Christians ought to yield their bodies to God—not to be killed but as living sacrifices dedicated to His service.

In the time of ancient Israel, every offering brought as a sacrifice was examined carefully. If any defect was discovered in the animal, it was refused, for God had commanded that the offering be without blemish. So, Christians are bidden to present their bodies “a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God.” In order to do this, all their powers must be preserved in the best possible condition. Although none of us are without blemish, the point is that we are to seek to live as spotlessly and as faithfully as we can.

“Be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind (Romans 12:2). In this way the Apostle describes (Christian) progress; for he addresses those who already are Christians. The Christian life does not mean to stand still, but to move from that which is good to that which is better.”—Martin Luther, *Commentary on Romans*, pp. 167, 168. What does it mean to move from good to better in the Christian life?

To Think Soberly

We have talked a great deal this quarter about the perpetuity of God's moral law and have stressed again and again that Paul's message in the book of Romans is not one that teaches that the Ten Commandments are done away with or somehow made void by faith.

Yet, it's easy to get so caught up in the letter of the law that we forget the spirit behind it. And that spirit is love—love for God and love for one another. While anyone can profess love, revealing that love in everyday life can be a different matter entirely.

Read Romans 12:3–21. How are we to reveal love for others?

As in 1 Corinthians 12 and 13, Paul exalts love after dealing with the gifts of the Spirit. Love (Greek, *agape*) is the more excellent way. “God is love” (1 John 4:8). Therefore, love describes the character of God. To love is to act toward others as God acts and to treat them as God treats them.

Paul here shows how that love is to be expressed in a practical manner. One important principle comes through, and that is personal humility: a willingness of a person “not to think of himself more highly than he ought” (Rom. 12:3), a willingness to “give preference to one another in honor” (Rom. 12:10, *NASB*), and a willingness not to “be wise in your own opinion” (Rom. 12:16, *NKJV*). Christ's words about Himself, “Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart” (Matt. 11:29), catch the essence of it.

Of all people, Christians should be the most humble. After all, look at how helpless we are. Look at how fallen we are. Look at how dependent we are, not only upon a righteousness outside of ourselves for salvation but also on a power working in us in order to change us in ways we never can change ourselves. What have we to brag of? What have we to boast of? What have we in and of ourselves to be proud about? Nothing at all. Working from the starting point of this personal humility—not only before God but before others—we are to live as Paul admonishes us to in these verses.

Read Romans 12:18. How well are you applying this admonition in your own life right now? Might you need some attitude adjustments in order to do what the Word tells us here?

The Christian and the State

Read Romans 13:1–7. What basic principles can we take from this passage about the ways in which we are to relate to the civil power of government?

What makes Paul’s words so interesting is that he wrote during a time when a pagan empire ruled the world—one that could be incredibly brutal, one that was at its core corrupt, and one that knew nothing about the true God and would, within a few years, start a massive persecution of those who wanted to worship that God. In fact, Paul was put to death by that government! Yet despite all this, Paul was advocating that Christians be good citizens. Even under a government like that?

Yes. And that’s because the idea of government itself is found throughout the Bible. The concept, the principle of government, is God-ordained. Human beings need to live in a community with rules and regulations and standards. Anarchy is not a biblical concept.

That being said, it doesn’t mean that God approves of all forms of government or how all governments are run. On the contrary. One doesn’t have to look too far, either in history or in the world today, to see some brutal regimes. Yet even in situations like these, Christians should, as much as possible, obey the laws of the land. Christians are to give loyal support to government so long as its claims do not conflict with the claims of God. One should consider very prayerfully and carefully—and with the counsel of others—before embarking on a path that puts him or her in conflict with the powers that be. We know from prophecy that one day all of God’s faithful followers will be pitted against the political powers in control of the world (*Revelation 13*). Until then, we should do all that we can, before God, to be good citizens in whichever country we live.

“We are to recognize human government as an ordinance of divine appointment, and teach obedience to it as a sacred duty, within its legitimate sphere. But when its claims conflict with the claims of God, we must obey God rather than men. God’s word must be recognized as above all human legislation. . . .

“We are not required to defy authorities. Our words, whether spoken or written, should be carefully considered, lest we place ourselves on record as uttering that which would make us appear antagonistic to law and order. We are not to say or do anything that would unnecessarily close up our way.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 69.

Love One Another

“Owe no man any thing, but to love one another: for he that loveth another hath fulfilled the law” (Rom. 13:8). How are we to understand this text? Does it mean that if we love, we have no obligation, then, to obey the law of God?

As Jesus did in the Sermon on the Mount, Paul here amplifies the precepts of the law, showing that love must be the motivating power behind all that we do. Because the law is a transcript of the character of God, and God is love, to love, therefore, is to fulfill the law. Yet, Paul is not substituting some vague standard of love for the precisely detailed precepts of the law, as some Christians claim. The moral law is still binding, because, again, it is what points out sin—and who is going to deny the reality of sin? However, the law truly can be kept only in the context of love. Remember, some of those who brought Christ to the cross then ran home to keep the law!

Which commandments did Paul cite as examples that illustrate the principle of love in law-keeping? Why these in particular? *Rom. 13:9, 10.*

Interestingly, the factor of love was not a newly introduced principle. By quoting Leviticus 19:18, “Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself,” Paul shows that the principle was an integral part of the Old Testament system. Again Paul appeals to the Old Testament to support his gospel preaching. Some argue from these texts that Paul is teaching that only the few commandments mentioned here are in effect. If so, does this mean, then, that Christians can dishonor their parents, worship idols, and have other gods before the Lord? Of course not.

Look at the context here. Paul is dealing with how we relate to one another. He is dealing with personal relationships, which is why he specifies the commandments that center on these relationships. His argument certainly shouldn’t be construed as nullifying the rest of the law. (See *Acts 15:20, 1 Thess. 1:9, and 1 John 5:21.*) Besides, as the New Testament writers point out, by showing love to others, we show our love to God (*Matt. 25:40; 1 John 4:20, 21*).

Think about your relationship with God and how it is reflected in your relationships with others. How big a factor is love in those relationships? How can you learn to love others the way God loves us? What stands in your way of doing just that?

Now Is Our Salvation

“And that, knowing the time, that now it is high time to awake out of sleep: for now is our salvation nearer than when we believed”
(*Rom. 13:11*).

As we have stated all quarter, Paul had a very specific focus in this letter to the Romans, and that was to clarify for the church at Rome—especially the Jewish believers there—the role of faith and works in the New Covenant context. The issue was salvation and how a sinner is deemed righteous and holy before the Lord. To help those whose whole emphasis had been on law, Paul put the law in its proper role and context. Although, ideally, Judaism even in Old Testament times was a religion of grace, legalism arose and did a lot of damage. How careful we as a church need to be that we don’t make the same mistake.

Read Romans 13:11–14. What event is Paul talking about here, and how should we be acting in anticipation of that event?

How fascinating that Paul was talking here to the believers, telling them to wake up and get it together because Jesus was coming back. The fact that this was written almost two thousand years ago doesn’t matter. We must always live in anticipation of the nearness of Christ’s coming. As far as we all are concerned, as far as our own personal *experiences* go, the Second Coming is as near as the potential for our own deaths. Whether next week or in 40 years we close our eyes in death, and whether we sleep only four days or for 400 years—it makes no difference to us. The next thing we know is the second coming of Jesus. With death always potentially just around the corner for any of us, time is indeed short, and our salvation is nearer than when we first believed.

Although Paul doesn’t deal much in the book of Romans with the Second Coming, in the Thessalonian and the Corinthian letters he covers it in much more detail. After all, it’s a crucial theme in the Bible, especially in the New Testament. Without it and the hope it offers, our faith is really meaningless. After all, what does “justification by faith” mean without the Second Coming to bring that wonderful truth to complete fruition?

If you knew for certain that Jesus was coming next month, what would you change in your life, and why? If you believe you need to change these things a month before Jesus comes, why shouldn’t you change them now? What is the difference?

Further Thought: “In the Bible the will of God is revealed. The truths of the Word of God are the utterances of the Most High. He who makes these truths a part of his life becomes in every sense a new creature. He is not given new mental powers, but the darkness that through ignorance and sin has clouded the understanding is removed. The words, ‘A new heart also will I give you,’ mean, ‘A new mind will I give you.’ A change of heart is always attended by a clear conviction of Christian duty, an understanding of truth. He who gives the Scriptures close, prayerful attention will gain clear comprehension and sound judgment, as if in turning to God he had reached a higher plane of intelligence.” —Ellen G. White, *My Life Today*, p. 24.

“The Lord . . . is soon coming, and we must be ready and waiting for His appearing. Oh, how glorious it will be to see Him and be welcomed as His redeemed ones! Long have we waited, but our hope is not to grow dim. If we can but see the King in His beauty we shall be forever blessed. I feel as if I must cry aloud: ‘Homeward bound!’ We are nearing the time when Christ will come in power and great glory to take His ransomed ones to their eternal home.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 8, p. 253.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 In class, go over the question at the end of Thursday’s study. What were the answers that people gave, and how did they justify them?
- 2 The question of how we are to be good citizens and good Christians can be very complicated at times. If someone were to come to you seeking advice about standing for what he or she believed was God’s will—even though it would put him or her in conflict with the government—what would you say? What counsel would you give? What principles should you follow? Why is this something that we should proceed toward only with the utmost seriousness and prayerful consideration? (After all, not everyone thrown into the lions’ den emerges unscathed.)
- 3 What do you think is harder to do: to keep strict adherence to the letter of the law or to love God and love others unconditionally? Or could you argue that this question presents a false dichotomy? If so, why?
- 4 As we near the end of this quarter, talk about, in class, what you have learned from the book of Romans that helps us to understand why the Reformation was so important. What has Romans taught us about what we believe, and why we believe it?

Saved in the Sky: Part 1

Editor's Note: *Pastor Nikolai Zhukaljuk has served the Seventh-day Adventist Church for more than 40 years as a pastor, writer, publisher, and former president of the Ukrainian Union Conference. In the story below, he shares a pivotal moment from his time in the Soviet military.*

My time for mandatory service in the Soviet army was nearly finished. One of my responsibilities was to serve as a journalist for the military newspaper. My superiors were pleased with my work and wanted me to continue as senior editor. They offered me an apartment in Leningrad, which during that time was very difficult to obtain. There was just one condition—I would have to become a Communist. During Soviet times, a person couldn't work in such positions without being a Communist.

In a few days, I was invited to meet with the general. He told me, "You can continue with military service. We'll give you officer rank, and you can stay with us. You will have business trips, travel to different places, and work with the military district. You can stay in the army and work here."

So now I had two proposals—to become a chief editor or a military officer. This was a great temptation—I was thinking of what it would mean to become an officer and of all the things I would get. On the other hand, to have an apartment in Leningrad was a dream for me! I seriously considered accepting one of these offers, even though it would mean renouncing my faith in God and becoming a Communist.

At that time, I also served as a military skydiver and had participated in about 80 jumps. One day, as we prepared for another jump, the chief commander told me, "I'll go first, and you will be the last one to jump. We will have 15 soldiers in between." The parachutes of all the soldiers ahead of me would open automatically, but I would need to open mine manually. I thought this would be fine, *I'm brave, I'm very experienced, I've done this many times before.*

I jumped last. After a brief free fall, I pulled the rip cord. Nothing happened. Trying not to panic, I reached for the emergency cord and pulled. Again, no parachute appeared. There was nothing but blue sky above and the ground coming up fast below. I understood that this was the end. The feeling that overwhelmed me at that point is something only someone who has been in the sky can fully understand.

To be continued in next week's Inside Story.