

Romans 12:20-21

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/rom/rom-12/romans-1220-21/>

Agape love seeks the best even for our enemies. This is how to beat evil, not by battling it with vengeance. Evil is defeated by good.

Here in verse 20, Paul is quoting Proverbs (Proverbs 25:21- 22), once again effectively using the Old Testament to support his teaching: *But if your enemy is hungry, feed him, and if he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.*”

In verse 21, he sums up the point of this wisdom: *Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*

The Proverbs are truthful sayings, principles for living righteously. Once again, Paul demonstrates that there is nothing new about his teaching. The Bible is consistent throughout—righteousness comes by faith, from Abraham to Solomon, all the way up to the time of Paul, and by implication all the way until today. This spans four thousand years. This should be no surprise since God never changes (Hebrews 13:8).

The key to defeating evil, according to Paul, is to overcome it with good. If we are mistreated, we should not seek vengeance for ourselves (Romans 12:19). Instead, we should try to bless the person who has harmed us.

The message here is not to be a passive victim who is taken advantage of by others; it is to overcome evil with good: *If your enemy is hungry, feed him, and if he is thirsty, give him a drink* (v 20). The natural temptation when someone is abusing us is to react, to fight back in the same manner, to “sink to their level,” to act with equal sinfulness. Practically speaking, when we react we actually validate and aid our attacker. A one-person fight is of no interest. When we engage, we draw attention to our detractor, and in doing so elevate the accusation—to our own detriment.

A humble attitude knows that God will set all wrongs right (Romans 12:19); it is not our job to judge the world. Therefore we can trust God to bring justice, meaning that we should not give way to anger and vengeance. The way to resist this natural temptation is to fight fire with water. We can calm hostility by looking for ways to benefit our enemy. That, of course, does not mean our enemy will see our response as a benefit. In fact, that will likely not be the case. In returning good for evil we *heap burning coals on his head*.

There are obvious connections to what Christ taught on interpersonal conflict, such as the Golden Rule (which applies to all human interaction), that we ought to do unto others as we would have them do unto us (Matthew 7:12). Further, Christ taught that if someone hits one side of our face, we should turn the other side to our oppressor as well (Matthew 5:39). Practically, this is also advice to avoid reacting.

By offering kindness instead of reacting, we *heap burning coals on [our enemy's] head* (v 20). This image of *burning coals* on our enemy's head would indicate that the best way to pay them back is to do good to them.

Perhaps the main point is that when we demonstrate benevolence in the face of hostility, we create a contrast that makes our enemy look terrible. Perhaps God is promising that when we return good for evil, He will make sure there is ample judgement upon the evil, because we were willing to trust Him. It could be both of these things.

Our motivation for treating evil with goodness should not be to punish the evil act, that is God's business (Romans 12:17-19). However, we are instructed here to *overcome* evil. *Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good* (v 21). It is for our benefit and growth that we be above feuds and vengeance. By adopting this attitude, it sows peace into our own souls, and it also prevents us from being controlled by the actions of another. The great irony is that when we are bitter toward someone, we actually place ourselves under that person's control.

Still, there is a natural outcome when a sinner is met with kindness instead of retaliation; a hot sensation is on their head, whether this is conviction from God, a contrast visible to others, or the heat of God's displeasure. Whatever the case, it is likely to put shame on the person perpetrating the harm.

There is no guarantee that we will observe a particular outcome. Paul is describing principles to follow so that we can live by faith, and in faith. Even if an enemy continues to work evil against us, we have assurance that in time, God will repay harmful people for their actions. It is not our role to be the judge; our role is to *overcome evil with good*. This is how we live by faith: living harmoniously with others as God designed.

Biblical Text

²⁰ **“But if your enemy is hungry, feed him, and if he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.”** ²¹ **Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.**