

*Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor that which is evil. Cling to that which is good. In love of the brothers be tenderly affectionate to one another; in honor preferring one another; not lagging in diligence; fervent in spirit; serving the Lord; rejoicing in hope; enduring in troubles; continuing steadfastly in prayer; contributing to the needs of the saints; given to hospitality. Bless those who persecute you; bless, and don't curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice. Weep with those who weep. Be of the same mind one toward another. Don't set your mind on high things, but associate with the humble. Don't be wise in your own conceits. Repay no one evil for evil. Respect what is honorable in the sight of all men. If it is possible, as much as it is up to you, be at peace with all men. Don't seek revenge yourselves, beloved, but give place to God's wrath. For it is written, "Vengeance belongs to me; I will repay, says the Lord." Therefore "If your enemy is hungry, feed him. If he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in doing so, you will heap coals of fire on his head." Don't be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*

I have a tendency to like "unusual" movies. In fact, most members of my family groan out-loud when I recommend a movie—especially if I ask them to watch it with me.

One of my favorites from a long time ago is a spoof of 1950's horror movies called *Attack of the Killer Tomatoes* and yes, it is what it sounds like.

Another one I love is a comedy called *Rustler's Rhapsody*. I'd ask you how you liked these movies but chances are you've never even heard of them, let alone TRIED to watch them :)

*Rustler's Rhapsody* was fun mainly because of the premise. It seems someone thought it would be fun to take one of those black and white, early-talkie, perpetual good-guy, matching-boots-and-fancy-outfit, singing-cowboy heroes and pit him against a whole movie full of the meanest, dirtiest, smelliest, unshaven, shoot-you-in-the-back bad guys from the 1960's and 1970's spaghetti-westerns.

The good guy, Rex O'Herlihan, is so good that he orders milk when he goes into a saloon and if he absolutely HAS to shoot you, he can only shoot you in the hand—in fact, when he target-practices, he uses cutouts of hands with guns on sticks as targets. The bad guys, on the other hand, would do ANYTHING to get their way. In fact, they are pure-100%-evil.

The fun of the movie is how this naive goody-two-shoes almost accidentally overcomes the evil of the bad guys—over and over and over again.

All of that said, let's go back and reread the last verse in today's scripture: *Don't be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*

Paul's instructions to his readers—that includes us—are to overcome evil instead of being overcome by it. Overcome it, he says, just as the good-guy cowboy did—by overwhelming it—by drowning it with good.

So if you and I are going to overcome evil—you might say the first thing we need to do is define it. Who or what is evil? Murderers? Thieves? Quadaffi? Hitler? Satan? The IRS? (It is almost tax-time after all.)

I once did a paper about some of the more extreme heavy metal music and read several stories about people killing their families while they listened to that music.

When I was a kid my parents took me to a horror movie at the drive-in. It was all about an Air Force pilot who crashed into a building and as a result became a monster. I remember having bad dreams about that monster. Horror movies seem to have evil things in them.

So we have listed a lot of things and a lot of people—but the problem is that we haven't come up with a clear, clean, definitive definition of “evil.” We've just made a list—and an incomplete list at that. We could probably add to the list for the rest of the morning and still not get finished. We might even disagree with who or what belonged on the list.

So here is our problem: how can we overcome evil if we can't even define it—if we don't know what it is?

Maybe our problem as Christians is that we think of evil in terms of satanic monsters, as murderers and rapists and thieves and such. Maybe we tend to think of external things and people. Things far removed from us and our own lives.

We still don't have a definition, do we? I'm still convinced that we need to define it if we are going to defeat it. We have to know what to look for—or look out for.

In today's passage there is a definition of evil that works for me. The definition isn't laid out like in the dictionary, though. It comes in the form of an assumption. Paul seems to assume that evil is the opposite of good—like happy and sad, hot and cold, up and down, in and out, or here and there. For Paul there is not problem seeing the difference. For him they are on the opposite ends of a scale. As I've continued to think it through, I believe it is the definition of evil that works best for Christians.

Let me read verse 21 again—and then I am going to make an observation and an assumption: *Don't be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*

Today's passage reads almost like a set of instructions to Christians on how to overcome the world, how to overcome the power of Satan—OR—how to overcome evil outside us and inside us—our own evil tendencies.

It is my assumption that verse 21 is not just another verse in this passage. My assumption on reading it is that it summarizes the twelve verses before it—that it is the gist of what Paul wants his readers to know. If you will humor that assumption, we can go back to verse 9 and begin over.

How do we overcome evil? The first thing is to have a real experience—a real relationship with God. I'll bet you can't see where I got that out of verse 9. I really did—but by the way of context. Just before these verses, Paul describes Christians—the body of Christ. These verses begin with: *Let love be without hypocrisy.* This probably means your love for God and your love for people in this body and of fellow Christians and your love for the people out there in the world around us. It means we are not to “fake it” or pretend. We are to have real, genuine, authentic love for God and all that he loves.

So—since God is love and since we fleshly creatures cannot love fully without a relationship to God, then in order to love truly and honestly and completely (without hypocrisy) we must begin with a REAL relationship to God.

THAT is where we begin overcoming of evil. A genuine love relationship with God and a resulting genuine love for his creations is step one in overcoming evil.

The second step is a great one. In fact, if we could only follow one step in these instructions, one piece of Paul's advice, this would be the one to choose. Verse 9b says: *Abhor that which is evil. Cling to that which is good.*

We don't really do that do we? At least lot of times we don't. Abhor means to “shrink back” or even to “shrink back in fear.” It is a word picture. My dad's garage is open all the way up to the roof but the doors are only one story high—so if a bird gets in there it often dies. It can't understand that in order to get away, it has to fly down. A few years ago, a hummingbird got in there and was confused and pretty well destined to die, so we got a long pole and proceeded to try to get him out of there. It took a LONG time to make it happen, because every time he saw the pole he scooted just as far up into the corners of the roof as possible. We were trying to help, but to him, the pole was evil and he was shrinking back in fear and getting as far away from it as possible—in this case he was going AWAY from help.

We Christians are charged with making ourselves scarce when evil is near, to shrink away. But instead of running away, we often get curious and we want to see it up close. How many of us have fallen because we wanted to see what the big deal was—what was so bad about this or that. When we stay put instead of leaving, we are flirting with evil.

When I was in high school, some of us guys would meet up after we took our dates home and spend the rest of the night creating a bit of mischief. We would have a few drag races and do some other things I won't mention right now. Still, I had a cut-off point and when things got out of hand, I would leave and go home. Now, I was NOT perfect (and I could tell some stories to prove it) but there were some lines I wasn't willing to cross. Once I could sense things were turning bad—evil if you will—then I wanted to be home in bed instead. At least once things got out of hand and they all got arrested. I never really thought about it then, but I was shrinking from evil, at least a certain level of it.

Not only are we to abhor or shrink from evil, Paul says we are to cleave to or cling to the good. This is also a word picture—to cling to or cleave to means the same as being GLUED to. We are to GLUE ourselves to good. Now, as I indicated, I was not so great at this part—I was in the middle of what was happening up to the point that I said, “no more for me thanks...” Had I been “glued to good” I wouldn't have been there in the first place.

This passage is full of further instructions and we will look at those—but if we do these two things, if we will shrink from evil and if we will glue ourselves to good, we won't fail, we won't wind up in the middle of a place we shouldn't be. We would always be victorious.

But Paul knew about our struggles because he had struggles of his own. Knowing our struggles, Paul gave us some more specific ways to overcome evil.

Verse 10 says: *In love of the brothers be tenderly affectionate to one another*; We are to mutually love our fellow Christians—in spite of our differences and in spite of our personalities and our tendencies. We are not to love based on gifts, knowledge, material things, or any other external reason—we are to love because we are brothers and sisters in Christ.

We are to love because God first loved us. We are to love in spite of who we are and in spite of who our fellow Christians are.

Immediately that puts our hackles up doesn't it? Doesn't Paul—doesn't GOD know what we have to put up with? Don't they know how imperfect all these people are? How aggravating they can be?

Paul does know that, so he follows that line with the “how.” *in honor preferring one another*.

Simple really. How do we love each other as God requires? By preferring each other in honor. All we have to do is put each other first. I put you first and you put me first (of course after we both put God first.)

Simple—but notice I didn't say it is easy. We want other Christians to “qualify” don't we? We often want them to be like us—to have OUR gifts and our abilities and our qualities before we love them. We want them to have it all together. We want them to deserve our honor and our love.

Thank God that HE doesn't think like that—and that he didn't when he sent his Son. The sending of the Son was in NO WAY because we deserved it and in NO WAY because we qualified.

He had it all. Honor and glory and power. Divine music. Divine food—I guess that would mean angel food cake and divinity with pecans. He had it all and lacked nothing. And he deserved what he had—YET—he chose to prefer us and honor us with his sacrifice.

He honored us with his presence on earth and he honored us by giving his life for us. We are to follow his example by loving each other as he loved us. Not requiring others to meet ANY qualifications not requiring that they deserve or qualify for our love. For God's sake, where would we be if Jesus acted that way?

Verse 11 says that we should not *lag in diligence*. In some translations it says not to be “slothful” as we go about God's business. I assume you know what a sloth is—it is an animal that moves very slowly, sometimes you have to watch them for some time even to see them move at all. God expects more from you and me.

If we are slothful in the business world we won't keep a job. I remember a guy who worked in the same shop as me. He was SO slow. The boss stayed on him about it. Over and over and over he would yell at him. Finally, he said, “bossman—I only got two speeds. And if you don't like this one, you SURELY won't like the other...”

I understand that verse to mean that God expects us to be ready and able to do his work—to do it properly and in good time (not like a sloth). We are to always be in gear—and NOT in reverse.

As we follow Paul's train of thought here, we will be ready and able to do God's work if we remain fervent in spirit. Fervent isn't a word we often use but it is also a word picture. Fervent is a boiling pot that overflows. This is not lukewarmness but fire and power. This is Z.E. A. L. zeal.

If you know anyone with zeal—they are probably selling AmWay or some other direct marketing product. My sister in law used to get all caught up in those things and she sold a bunch of it because of her own excitement. Those direct-marketing companies work on the principle that if we find something great and if we are excited about it we will want to share it with our friends and family. Funny—that is basically the same marketing plan God has.

Do you know someone who direct-markets something? THAT is how we should be as Christians. WE should be SO excited. We have found the greatest cleaning product in the universe—and it is NOT Simple Green. It is so good that it will turn the blackest heart as white as snow.

Serving the Lord—doing his work with zeal and sharing him with others. That is about the only pyramid marketing plan out there where you know for sure you won't get stuck with a thousand bottles of something no one wants.

Let's go fast now.

Look at verse 12: *rejoicing in hope; enduring in troubles; continuing steadfastly in prayer.* Rejoicing in the hope of Christ—of the things to come. Hope of salvation. Hope of future. Hope of heaven. Enduring whatever comes because of that hope.

Overcome evil by being steadfast in prayer—continuing in prayer or instant in prayer. This means to be constantly in touch with God—it doesn't mean to constantly be closing your eyes and praying aloud but constantly being aware of him and doing what I call “one-word-prayers” and keeping a connection.

When we are aware of God's presence and of his strength and guidance in our lives we are more likely to want to and be ABLE to overcome evil in our lives and in our hearts. Pray always. Be instant in prayer.

*...contributing to the needs of the saints; given to hospitality.* Taking up collections. Doing good. Picking up limbs. Mowing grass. Washing cars. Cleaning houses. Cooking food. Time that is taken up in serving others in God's name CAN'T be used for evil. Do good for fellow Christians and be hospitable to all.

Bless those who do you wrong. Remember earlier I said we are to love and honor each other even though none of us deserve to be honored and loved. Even those who persecute us and do us wrong and don't deserved it—ESPECIALLY those who don't deserve it. Don't curse them or hate them. Bless and love them.

If that doesn't smack you up side the head, you aren't listening—jus' sayin'

Looking quickly at the rest of the passage. Rejoice with the rejoicers and weep with the weepers. Get down and dirty and connect with those around you. Be in their lives. GET INVOLVED. I can tell you that it can really hurt when we get involved in the lives of others—but if we are to overcome evil that is what God says it takes.

Look further. Verse 18. As much as it is up to you—for your part—live in peace. Sometimes we can't win can we? Sometime people get mad at us. Sometimes we are hated. DO NOT take part in that and respond in kind. Let it go.

Leave vengeance to God.

Look at verse 20. I assume we are supposed to genuinely help our enemies—with that intent. NOT in order to heap coals of fire on their heads but out of compassion and care.

We don't like that do we? We want to fight fire with fire. We want to trade words for words and actions for actions. We want to hurt those who hurt us. Paul says no to that. God says no to that.

How do we overcome the evil of our enemies? With good. How do we overcome evil in our fellow Christians? With good. How do we overcome the evil that lurks in our own hearts—waiting and watching for a chance to get out and hurt others?

Good question—and one that Paul answers in these verses.

How do we overcome evil? It looks like God wants us to drown evil with a flood of good from our hearts, our minds, and our hands.