

FORGIVENESS THROWS EVIL OFF BALANCE



Scripture:

Psalm 51:1-10

¹Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. ²Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.

³For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. ⁴Against you, you alone, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are justified in your sentence and blameless when you pass judgment.

⁵Indeed, I was born guilty, a sinner when my mother conceived me.

⁶You desire truth in the inward being; therefore teach me wisdom in my secret heart. ⁷Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. ⁸Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have crushed rejoice. ⁹Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities.

¹⁰Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.

Matthew 18:21-35

²¹Then Peter came and said to him, “Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?” ²²Jesus said to him, “Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times.

²³“For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. ²⁴When he began the reckoning, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him; ²⁵and, as he could not pay, his lord ordered him to be sold, together with his wife and children and all his possessions, and payment to be made. ²⁶So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you everything.’ ²⁷And out of pity for him, the lord of that slave released him and forgave him the debt. ²⁸But that same slave, as he went out, came upon one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denaris; and seizing him by the throat, he said, ‘Pay what you owe.’ (*The ten-thousand talents versus one-hundred denaris is like ten million dollars versus one-hundred dollars.*)

²⁹Then his fellow slave fell down and pleaded with him, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you.’ ³⁰But he refused; then he went and threw him into prison until he would pay the debt. ³¹When his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed, and they went and reported to their lord all that had taken place.

³²Then his lord summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked slave! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. ³³Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?’ ³⁴And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he would pay his entire debt. ³⁵So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart.”

This is the Word of the Lord! Thanks be to God!



FORGIVENESS THROWS EVIL OFF BALANCE

Presbyterian pastors don't talk about evil from the pulpit very often. I believe evil gets stronger when we obsess about fearing evil. That is why I don't read Stephen King books or watch scary movies. I think it makes the forces of evil stronger when we fill our minds with it. Yet, it is also naïve to think evil doesn't exist in the world. We live in an imperfect world; evil and chaos do exist and affect all of us daily. God isn't finished with the world yet. As Christians we are called to help God's work to transform the world into the kingdom of God (on earth as it is in heaven) by overcoming evil with good.

Thinking back, I'm not sure where or how I learned about evil. I saw for myself the consequences of the evils of war during the Vietnam War. I learned of the evil that results from too much alcohol when a good friend, Vern Tripp, was killed by a drunk driver on his way to our high school. In Sunday School I learned about how Jesus was tempted by evil in his forty days of preparation for ministry. As a young adult I read CS Lewis's satirical story on the devil and evil's power over us personally in a book called "*Screwtape Letters*."

Have you ever thought about how your understanding of evil developed over time? Webster's dictionary defines evil as something that is "immoral, bad, and harmful, which causes suffering, sorrow, distress, or calamity."

COSMIC EVIL

The kind of evil I am addressing today is a cosmic evil which I define as a destructive force whose purpose is to facilitate the destruction of all of God's creation sometimes by inspiring our own self-destruction. The opposite of evil is goodness, love, forgiveness, reconciliation, mercy and justice.

When we listen to evil, study evil, or promote evil, (even unintentionally), we are helping evil win the balance over good in this world.

Sadly, the news media loves to report about evil in such a way that evil appears to always win the day. When a car veers off the road and two little girls are killed, evil won that day. When ISIS captures innocent children and teaches them to be heartless assassins, evil won that day. When four planes crashed and thousands of people died on September 11, 2001, it definitely felt like evil won that day. When we don't stop ourselves from saying

negative things about another person, evil seems to win on those days, too.

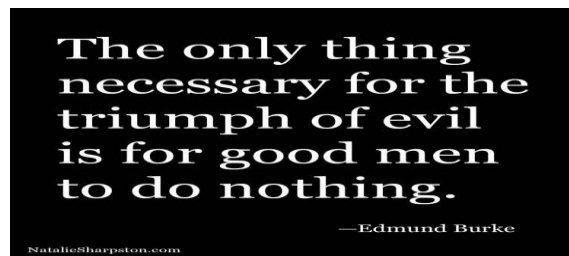
HOW DO WE COMBAT EVIL?

Did you notice that today's scripture reading was about a church member sinning against another church member? Peter, the Rock of the Church, was suffering from someone in his own church family who was sinning against him.

Evil comes in many forms. And it can start small and grow into a large destructive force, like a tornado that begins as a little funnel in the sky and grows more powerful. Evil gossip can bring a whole church down. Maybe that is the evil Peter was dealing with when he asked Jesus for help.

So how do we combat evil? A simple answer is: with love and forgiveness. But love and forgiveness isn't a simple one time cure. It is an ongoing struggle to combat the power of evil that we must commit ourselves to on a daily basis. We must be intentional about warding it off.

Edmund Burke said:



FORGIVENESS AND RECONCILIATION

So here's an idea for you. When you awaken in the morning, first always thank God for the gift of another day of life, and then put on this armor to battle evil for the rest of the day. Your armor is a mantra that you repeat to yourself: "*Only words of love, gratitude, and forgiveness will come out of my mouth today. I will do all I can to promote reconciliation, healing, and hope.*"

Basically that is what Jesus instructed Peter to do, to protect himself with an attitude of forgiveness. Peter's greatest shield against the evil of sin was to hold up forgiveness and reconciliation. When your mind is full of love, gratitude, forgiveness and hope, you are ready for battle. No evil sin can break through your force field.

Martin Luther King, Jr. said:
**"Forgiveness is not an occasional act,
it is a constant attitude."**

Always acting the opposite of what the devil wants throws evil off balance. Responding to hateful acts with hate, keeps us firmly on the path of self-destruction by magnifying the hate.

I WITNESSED LOVE

If you pray and turn to God for help, then God will find a way to shine a light into the darkness of hate. God looks for a way to heal even the most destructive events with hope and love.

That is what I witnessed here just last Wednesday. Rather than feel hate towards the mother blamed for the car accident that killed her two daughters, this place was filled with love. The Church of the Roses was a sanctuary of healing filled with people in great sorrow looking for hope by bonding together in faith. Over five-hundred people gathered; some of them stayed for a full eight hours to show love and compassion for the family of Delilah and Sayra, who died tragically in the car crash in Petaluma.

Although evil seemed to win that Wednesday when the two precious little girls died, forgiveness and love won the battle this past Wednesday. This place was so bursting with love you could feel it in the air. So many people came to share their condolences and sympathy. There were police and Highway Patrol officers, chaplains, teachers, soccer players, Folklorico dancers, who did a dance in our front yard, and many others who helped make this a kingdom of God kind of place that day. Their outpouring of love for Delilah and Sayra jump started the healing and reconciliation process for the family. Thanks be to God! It was inspiring to witness!

When I spoke at the service, I told the family it was an honor to share our sacred space to help comfort them in their sorrow. I said our church expressed our deepest sympathy and that we had prayed for them before we knew the funeral would be held here.

RECONCILIATION

The Presbyterian Church was created to be a place of reconciliation and healing for all. We have some new people interested in becoming Presbyterians because they feel that spirit when they come to worship with us. And I am excited because if they choose to join us they will be affirming and supporting the main principles that make our denomination great!

One of those main principles of belief is reconciliation. Dr. Joseph Marrow explains what Presbyterians mean when they talk about reconciliation in an article in the publication **Presbyterians Today** titled: “The Cosmic Significance of Reconciliation.” He says, “God acts in Word and Spirit to repair divisions, restore dignity, renew relationships, and redeem tragic circumstances. Humanity is called to participate in God’s reconciling mission. In scripture the end point of that mission is given many names: a just kingdom, a welcoming banquet, a heavenly city, the new creation.

“Deep divisions of race, gender, economics, and even religion breed suspicion and hostility. And yet Reformed theology (which is the foundation of Presbyterian Theology) insists that because God is present in and cares for society’s relationships and institutions, we cannot abandon the public sphere.”

So we are all encouraged to take our faith out into the community and to invite the community in to be here with us as well. Being Presbyterian means working for reconciliation between peoples and promoting justice where ever we are.

That is why we hosted the Interfaith gathering here, too. That day was so beautiful with Bahai, Muslims, Sufis, Greek Orthodox, Jews, Unitarians, Buddhists and Christians all gathered here together.

A RUGGED ROAD TO FORGIVENESS

An example of how to promote reconciliation as far away as Ethiopia was in another featured article in the latest *Presbyterians Today* magazine, titled ‘A Rugged Road to Forgiveness.’ Presbyterian mission co-workers of forty years, John and Gwen Haspels, shared a tragic story of how they suffered greatly but over time felt healed through forgiving their attacker.

The two missionaries were driving down a road in Ethiopia where they were going to help build a church, when a man carrying an assault rifle jumped out in front of them. As the couple tried to dodge him, the man fired at them, severely injuring them both. Gwen lost half of her jaw and John lost an eye.

But Gwen and John had made a pact that during the whole month of October they would thank God for *everything* that happened. Everything! So as they were being urgently driven four hours to the hospital, Gwen challenged herself to think of reasons to thank God for the attack.

Gwen credits this verse that came to her mind from God for keeping them alive: *“Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good.” Genesis 50:20*

Reflecting back on that day she advises, “When we forgive, we are not saying that what was done is OK. It is not OK. It is not OK that John lost his left eye and that I have been through so much facial surgery. But when we forgive and bless the offender, we get healing, and we let God repay them. ‘Vengeance is mine,’ says the Lord. Praying for our enemies brings us to a point where we ask God not to repay them but to forgive them.”

In the same article, Gwen tells another story about a lesson in forgiveness that her daughter experienced. She said, “Our daughter was in nursing school under an instructor who had nothing good to say about Christians even though she had done nothing wrong. Still Gwen counseled her daughter to pray for the teacher, to bless her, and to thank God for her.

“The Holy Spirit went a step further.” She said, “The Spirit encouraged her daughter to ask forgiveness of her instructor for whatever Christians had done to her in the past.” Gwen said, “When my daughter did that, it changed the whole attitude of the instructor, and she no longer denigrated Christians in class.”

So throw evil off balance and diminish its power in the world by forgiving each person who offends you at least seventy seven times. God’s light of hope is able to break through the worst destruction.

A symbol of that hope rose out of the 9/11 destruction. I was amazed to read this quote by the wife of the pilot who flew United Flight 93 into Pennsylvania:

“If we learn nothing else from this tragedy, we learn that life is short and there is no time for hate.”

– Sandy Dahl, wife of Flight 93 pilot Jason Dahl

So may we recognize and battle the destructive evil forces in our world not with hate, but with reconciliation and forgiveness.

For God so loved the world.....

The following video was shown to the congregation.

(video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1EIVCPCwXy8>)

Benediction: If you are willing, repeat after me: “Only words of love, gratitude, and forgiveness will come out of my mouth today. I will do all I can to promote reconciliation, healing, and hope.”

Now you are ready to combat the destructive forces of evil and throw them off balance.

But you are not alone in the battle. Remember: Romans 8: 38-39, “For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor demons, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

And may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you now and forever more. Amen



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