

Sermon Transcript from December 11th, 2016
Transformative Love
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I'm looking forward to diving into Romans 12 with you here today. So, I will pray and then we can jump in.

Heavenly Father, we thank You that we come together today to look into Your Word because You promised to meet us. We don't do it as an empty exercise, we don't do it because we have to, we don't do it out of just rote obligation, but we do it with anticipation. We do it believing that You are a living God and that Your Word is living and active and that Your Holy Spirit is present now with us. So, I pray, Lord, that no matter how we came in these doors, whether we came in strong in faith or weak, brand new to Christianity or old and jaded or whatever it is, Lord, You know our hearts better than we do. You know what we need to hear. So, I pray that You would help me to faithfully proclaim Your Word this morning and that You would help each and every one of us to respond to it and to recognize that You have given us the power of Your Spirit to live in this city for Jesus. Challenge us, encourage us and show us the way forward. We pray this in Jesus' name, amen.

Well, we've just been through about two years in our country of a very clear lesson of how not to deal with conflict. Can we agree to that? If we looked at it, battle lines were drawn and the goal of each different camp seemed to be to dehumanize the other so that they can feel self-righteous. And I'm not simplifying it, it really happens that way. Right? Distance demonizes. If I can make you the other, if I can push you away, then I can believe everything I want to believe about you. But, if we're up close and personal and we're having conversation, then it's so much harder to do that. We don't want to deal with conflict in the same way that our culture deals with conflict. And yet, I think we are so immersed in it sometimes that we're blind to it. We are so shaped and formed by our culture that we don't even realize all the ways that it's impacting us.

So, we have texts like the one we're going to be in today in Romans 12 that can wake us up, that can give us a vision for how we live and relate to other human beings, other image-bearers of God in fresh and new and challenging ways. This is one of the reasons why I find cross-cultural learning to be so valuable. I've learned so much in the last six months in particular from the theology of Archbishop Desmond Tutu. It doesn't mean we have to go everywhere he goes in this theology, but the fundamental idea he has of relating to other human beings as image-bearers of God is so powerful. If you guys don't know who he is, he won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1984 for his work fighting Apartheid, and he has done so much to contribute to the world's conversations on peace, with the Gospel motivation as the foundation underneath it.

I've been particularly impacted by him. I had the opportunity to go travel to Cape Town in October and be a part of his 85th birthday celebration. And this man, for his 85th birthday, who's frail and can barely stand and walk around a bunch, what he wanted to do was lead a Eucharist service on his birthday and then end his birthday with the sixth annual peace lectures. So, peace and Christ and what it means to be united to Him are at the heart of what he does.

But, I wanted to share a quick story as we jump in to Romans 12 today. Desmond Tutu was put in charge of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission by Nelson Mandela. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission was charged with bringing forth reconciliation in a nation that had been torn apart by Apartheid, a nation that had unimaginable atrocities and oppression, and they were put in charge of figuring out a way to discover the truth for the purpose of reconciliation and bringing everyone back together. Now, Desmond Tutu's honest. There were many failings. But, there was so much beautiful in what they did. His first meeting of this Truth and Reconciliation Commission has stuck with me, and his words are recorded in his book, "No Future Without Forgiveness."

And he gets together with this group and it's about 14 people of commissioners, and they're from a broad cross section across South Africa. And he says, "The worst thing that we can do is to come together today and pretend to be neutral human beings, because we are not. We all come with distinct experiences and backgrounds. What we must do is come being who we are in fullness and then have the humility to learn from each other. And if we can do that, we might just have hope in leading our nation forward in reconciliation."

So, Desmond says, "What you must know about me is I'm a Christian and I'm a theologian. I say that because everything I'm going to speak to you is going to have my theology in it. I don't expect you to believe everything I'm going to say. I'm not going to

try to jam it down your throats. But, you must know that's my perspective. And the very foundation of everything I'd hoped for in this commission is that I believe, according to my theology, that every human being is created as an image-bearer of God, entitled to the dignity and the worth and the honor of being an image-bearer. And our system of Apartheid has dehumanized, has denied the rights of an image-bearer to a vast majority of our population because of the arbitrary thing of the color of their skin. So, because individuals have been oppressed and harmed in our nation, we must look truthfully and honestly, we must be completely straightforward about every atrocity that was committed, because those are image-bearers.

"But, on the other side, in a more challenging way, every human being is an image-bearer of God. Which means even the perpetrators of the worst evils in our country, the worst evil of Apartheid are not themselves the face of evil. They are broken image-bearers capable of repentance and change, and we must call them forward to repentance and change."

It's this beautiful idea of the Gospel, right? There are no others, there are only image-bearers. Our fundamental tenant, going all the way back to Genesis 1:27, the fundamental way that we ought to view every other human being on this planet is that they're an image-bearer of God and that God intends us to live together and that through the power of the Gospel this becomes possible, and we're going to look at this today.

Desmond Tutu was transformed by the power of the Gospel and by the power of the Holy Spirit. What we're going to read about today in Romans 12 happened to him. He was transformed by these truths. Romans 12 is speaking about the transformation of all of our relationships. You guys have been going through this the last number of weeks and I've listened to and been blessed by the messages. In Romans 12:1-2, we see that our relationship to God is transformed and that we become living sacrifices. In Romans 12:3-8, we see that our relationship to ourselves change; they're transformed. We have a healthy self-image and a sober assessment of our own gifts. And in Romans 12:9-21, we see that our relationship to one another is transformed, that it can be marked by sincerity and generosity and hospitality and humility, and all of this on the foundation that I'll read here in a second of Romans 12:1-2. This is what we're after.

"Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will."

That's what we're after. What does it look like for us to become living sacrifices, transformed by the power of God? Romans 12:14, where we pick up today, is a continuation of what you guys heard last week of the statement that love must be sincere. And as we work through this text today, here's my goal: I want to persuade all of us that there is true transformational power in love, that evil can be overcome with good, that the way of the cross, the way of Jesus, is the way of all of those that are united to Christ. I'm going to be working to build hope in us that we can actually live and love, and the way that this passage talks about. We're not after some kind of utopian delusion. We're not after pretending that life isn't hard and complicated and that conflicts aren't difficult. We're not trying to do that all.

What we're trying to do is see how we can be transformed by the power of the Gospel and believe that the supernatural power of the Holy Spirit in Christ can actually enable us to live that way, that we can live lives that are being progressively transformed little by little over as much time as you might need, but transformed nonetheless. We want to together believe that Christ is who He says He is and that we are who He says we are, and that as we begin to do that we will learn that we can, through the power of Jesus Christ, overcome evil with good. It's going to be our main theme today because it's the main theme in the verses we're looking at. We can and are called to overcome evil with good, and we're going to look at the progression in this text.

First, we're going to look at how love produces empathy. Second, we're going to look at how love restrains. We're going to look at the negative commands. Third, we're going to look at how love empowers what's called "the positive commands," and we're going to see how God's going to teach us and train us a different way of looking at other human beings, a different way of dealing with conflict, a different way of dealing with relationships.

So, first, let's dive into this. Love produces empathy. Empathy, we all know this, is the ability to understand and share the feelings of another. Again, the foundational idea behind all of this is that every human being is an image-bearer of God. There is no other, there are

only image-bearers. There is no one distant that you're allowed to demonize, there are only image-bearers that you need to get to know better and learn about and have empathy for.

Romans 12:14-16: **"Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited."**

See that? It's empathy. Every human being is an image-bearer of God entitled to the dignity and the worth and the honor and the love that comes with that. And as we experience God's love for us, that love sensitizes us, it gives us empathy, it gives our hearts the ability to extend love to other people. The first place that God transforms us is relationally. He transforms our relationship with Him and then He begins to transform our relationships with each other. Our whole perception of reality is rooted in our relationships. That's how God made us. That is why we have to get this right and devote our lives to relating to each other in the way God's called us to relate. We have to look at how we can have empathy and love for others.

So, first here: bless those that persecute you. To bless is to call down God's favor on another. It's hard not to empathize with someone that you're praying for. Rather than calling down curse, you're praying, you're asking God to bless them, you're entering into their experience.

Secondly, rejoice with those who rejoice. Mourn with those who mourn. You're entering into their experiences. You're identifying with them. Now, if we're honest, rejoicing with those that rejoice can oftentimes be a whole lot harder than mourning with them. Especially if things aren't going particularly well in your life. We live in a very competitive city and we live in a very expensive city. All of us feel these pressures, right? And how easy is it, when you've been looking for an apartment for six months and one of your brothers or sisters in Christ comes to you and goes, "Matt, I got an amazing deal."

You're like, "That's... that's great. Yeah. No, I'm a struggling artist and you work at Google, but you need the amazing deal, not me. It's fine."

Someone else comes up to you and goes, "Man, I've been in the church for two weeks and I think I've met the person I'm going to marry."

"I've been here for seven years and I haven't met that person yet. But, you know, good. That's good. I'm happy for you."

And it goes on and on and on, right? But, what do we need? We need empathy. We need to enter into the experience of this other person and recognize if God is blessing them, if God's doing stuff in their life, it's a good thing. And that because we're interdependent, because we're connected, because we're in the same church community, it's part of our experience as well. This is what God's after with us.

Next, live in harmony with one another. We are to literally think one thing towards the other. We are singing off the same sheet of music. Harmony and melody. Everyone is harmonizing against the melody line where the melody line is Christ Himself. There can be no discord in us. We are all reading from the same sheet music. We are all singing the same song. We are all pursuing the same mission. So, we enter in together with one mind. Think Philippians 2. Think James 2. We enter into one mind with each other and we pursue the purpose that God has for us together.

Next, do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited. Again, the baseline truth here: all are image-bearers. Every tribe, every tongue, every nation. There is no Jew, no Gentile, no slave nor free, all are one in Christ. There is no greater ethnic distinction in the ancient world than Jew and Greek. There is no greater socioeconomic distinction in the ancient world than slave and free. So, what he's saying is there can be no socioeconomic or ethnic distinction in between us. We are all image-bearers and called to be one. The Apostle Paul develops this truth everywhere in every single one of his books. James does it in James 2. There is to be no favoritism in our midst. That's what we're called to do.

Now, I am called to empathize; to befriend. There is no one that I'm too good to empathize. There is no one that I'm too good to befriend. Pride will kill love and community absolutely every single time. We need to be willing to associate with people that have no status, people that have no social significance, people that can't do anything for us except love

us and show us a bigger picture of who God is. Our natural tendency is to want to be around people that are just like me. And good, it's important to have friends that are like you. But, it's equally, if not more important to have friends that aren't like you, that can expand and deepen your experience of God Himself.

Think about this for a moment with me: we know God through His Word, through the power of the Holy Spirit, through our personal communion with Him. That's a huge foundation of how we know God. It's also very clear that the other way we are to know God, the other most significant way we are to know God is through the body of Christ. If the body of Christ is every tribe, tongue and nation, no Jew, Gentile, slave or free, and I'm only over here associating with people that are just like me, then what am I doing? I am cutting myself off from an ability to have a deeper understanding and experience with God Himself. God wants us to associate with those that aren't like us so we can deepen our experience and show what He's doing in this world in a bigger, broader way.

We need each other. We go out of our circles and we love like Christ loves. Love produces empathy. Desmond Tutu says it this way:

"Differences are not intended to separate; to alienate. We are different precisely in order to realize our need of one another."

That's a powerful truth and it's a powerful truth that God's calling us all to live out. We need to understand this. We need to pursue this. We are called to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. And we all know the power of love. After a long day at work or out, a parent will stay up all night with a sick kid because they love them. We know how powerful love is. A few years ago, my son, my middle son, got hit with the stomach flu. My wife had been caring for the family all week as all these different things were coming through the family. I've got three boys. And at one point in time one was in preschool, one was in elementary school and one was in middle school and then we had church. So, every conceivable virus or bug in the city was funneled through my house.

So, my middle son gets a stomach bug. Stomach flus are gross, right? I won't go into why they are caused. Anyway. So, I come in and I want to love my son. So, I'm going to stay up all night with him. He's dry heaving and throwing up and it's gross and I put all these towels all over the couch and I sit down with him and he's got the bucket in front of him. And it was disgusting and I was doing it, honestly, out of obligation when I initially did it. "I need to care for my wife, I need to do my fatherly duties, I need to show my son how much I love him."

But, sometime around midnight when my son is suffering and he's just in pain and my arms are around him praying for him and talking to him, duty and obligation was transformed into, "What an incredible privilege this is. I get to love my son. I get to be alongside of him through this suffering."

So much so that my mother-in-law was staying with us and she came out at about 2am and offered to relieve me and I was unwilling to, at that point, relinquish the privilege of being up with my son. It was a beautiful thing. It's not a beautiful thing to have the stomach flu. That was gross still. But, what made it beautiful is the ability to sacrificially love. And that, at the very core, is what love is all about. We sacrifice. We love others.

Now, there's a unique love that a parent has for a child, that a spouse has for their other. I understand that. But, do you recognize that the character of the love that we are to have for every image-bearer of God is in that same stream? I am to think, "How can I sacrificially lay my life down for you and love you in a way that will have a transformative impact on your life?"

Love produces empathy. Listen to these words again:

Romans 12:14-16: **"Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited."**

Now, we're going to see a progression here, but the first step to overcoming evil with good is empathy. We need to let God do that in our lives. Secondly, love restrains. These are what are called "the negative commands." These four commands are about relinquishing the right to get even and to retaliate. Think of these negative commands as part of how God is training us to love. I like how James K.A. Smith talks about this idea of God training us

in his book "You Are What You Love."

He says it this way: "The key is to know that love is a habit, not merely a choice. Learning to love God is like learning to play Bach. It requires daily immersion in habits and practices that train the muscles of my heart to desire and thus do what it ought."

This section of Scripture that we're in today is training us how to overcome evil with good step by step. Romans 12:14: "Do not curse." This command cuts against all natural human instincts. When someone does something bad to me, I want to speak back, I want to strike back, I want to get back. It's called the sin nature, right? Blessing, on the opposite side of that, is calling down God's favor upon them. Cursing is calling down God's judgment. It's literally like saying, "To Hell with you." Words that we should never speak because this other person we're speaking to or thinking about is an image-bearer of God. We are to bless and not to curse.

Where do we see that? Kind of everywhere, right? And then in the ultimate and beautiful and amazing picture of Jesus Christ Himself. "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

We see in Isaiah 53 when Jesus, like a sheep, is silent before His shearers. It's incredible. Jesus always speaking words of blessing even as those are coming at Him with all manner of things. And He's showing us they way forward. We are called to the way of Christ. There are no others, there are only image-bearers. I am to work for love, to restrain the evil and not to curse others. Now, it's big and easy to think about this in kind of dramatic ways, right? But, oftentimes, this comes down to very simple ways. That means I am to work to bless and not to curse even when I'm driving my car and someone cuts me off. Even when I'm on Highway 37 and it's weekend traffic heading up to Napa and I, because I'm a good citizen, have been waiting for 45 minutes in this line. And by the time I get to the front of the line and this person zooms all the way up – this is just hypothetical – and they very dangerously cut me off and put everyone's life at risk and proclaim themselves to be the most important person on the thing, I am to bless and not to curse.

And this came home to me so strongly because the last time we did it, I was prepared, I was praying, I was thinking. I was like, "Okay. I need to set a good example to my kids. They're 14, 10 and 6." And this guy comes up and cuts in front of me and my 6-year-old says, "That guy's an idiot, huh, Dad?"

I have no idea where he learned that from. And I said, "No, son. He's an image-bearer. Clearly a broken image-bearer that needs to be redeemed and renewed, but an image-bearer nonetheless."

But, in all seriousness, I'm training my son that it's okay to have disdain for other people when they do stuff bad towards you. It's actually a moment of conviction. It's kind of funny, but it's serious. I need to train him and myself how to love, how to bless and not to curse. Alright.

Romans 12:17: **"Do not repay anyone evil for evil."**

Here's the progression. The next step after cursing someone, after declaring that they're worthy of my disdain, is to allow myself to repay evil with evil. And again, this isn't just big, dramatic events. We face everyday temptations to do that. Think about the next time that I'm angry with my wife or I'm angry at a coworker or I'm angry at a strained relationship in the church or I'm reminded of a previous friend who's never asked my forgiveness for a wrong and it hurts. I can begin to do what Tim Keller calls "Christian voodoo." Right? I know that I'm not supposed to act out and go and do something evil for evil, but boy, kind of in my head I'm pricking them with pins and I'm not going to be too sad if something bad happens to them. Right? I'm not calling down the blessings of God, I'm kind of willing the curse of God. And if something bad happens to them, so be it because they deserve it after all.

And we take on this kind of mentality of an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. And as Martin Luther King Jr. was fond of saying, "If we do an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, we will be a blind and toothless nation."

We will be a blind and toothless church. We will empty our power to accomplish the mission that God has for us in the city. Our love, our unity, our calling down blessing and not cursing is core to our mission as image-bearers of God. It's core to everything God's calling us to do in our families, in our church and in our city.

Romans 12:19: **"Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for**

it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord."

The overarching theme is trying to teach us that God is on His throne, that there very well may be and likely are bigger things in play in the situation than I realize, that maybe I'm not the center of the universe and maybe I'm not all that matters. Maybe God actually loves other people too and He wants to work in their lives. I don't know what God knows. I don't know what this other person I'm in this conflict with is going through or has gone through. I don't know what their childhood was like. I don't know what hurt and brokenness they might be dealing with on a daily basis. Hate breeds hate and a descending spiral of destruction. Trusting in God and not taking revenge breaks that cycle. Healing in the place of hurt; good in the place of evil. God knows all and He's on His throne. He alone has the ability and the call and the charge to judge the human heart. Evil is real and we're going to deal with it on a regular basis, but we must do it recognizing that God is on His throne.

In expanding on this idea, N.T. Wright says this:

"We should note that this does not mean going soft on evil. Saying you shouldn't take revenge isn't a way of saying evil isn't real or that it didn't hurt after all or that it doesn't matter. Evil is real. It often does hurt, sometimes very badly indeed, and with lasting effects."

And it does matter. This is perhaps one of the fundamental differences between Christianity and, say, Buddhism. Because we believe in a creator God who made a good and lovely world, we believe that everything which defaces and distorts, damages or spoils part of that creation is not just another variety of goodness, but is actually its opposite: evil. The question is what are we going to do about it? Well, we see in Romans 12:21 what we're called to do about it.

"Do not be overcome by evil."

As we learn to bless and not to curse, to not repay evil with evil, to not take revenge, we are learning how to overcome evil with good. Following Christ with a renewed mind is not compatible with hate or an unwillingness to reconcile. Refusing to forgive, refusing to allow love to restrain is not transforming your mind in the direction of Christ, it's actually transforming your mind in the direction of evil, in the direction of opposition to all of God's purposes. It is taking you away from the way of Christ. You cannot lack forgiveness in your heart towards other people and be pursuing God in a healthy and holistic way. If you're holding on to stuff, you're holding on to things that aren't going to be good for you. What's the fruit of that? Does healing come from that? No. Does wholeness come from that? No. Does spiritual or emotional health come from that? No.

More than likely, what's it doing? It's just increasing your experience of brokenness and destruction in your life and in the life of the person that's in this conflict with you, doesn't it? That's all it's doing. We reject that. We need to see the power of transformative love and believe that God can do everything He says He can do. We must not settle with being nice on the surface and burning inside. We must not let bitterness settle in. I can't just put a facade on, right?

One of the biggest temptations for us as Christians is we can learn how to be nice and we can just smile at people and act as though that's what we're after, right? I can smile at you and shake your hand and then in my heart I'm bitter at you still. We need to let the transformation of the Gospel go all the way down to our heart and begin to transform how we truly view other people.

I learned a poignant lesson on the differences between appearances and reality a little while ago. My wife was persuaded by some friends, we'll call them, to get into essential oils. Essential oils, apparently, can cure anything from a sore throat to cancer if you use them right. So, I come home late one night and I had missed dinner with the kids. But, I had in my possession a beautiful, fresh baked loaf of bread that a friend of mine who's a baker in the town had given to me that day. And I was really looking forward to eating it. And I sat down at the table, my kids are eating ice cream, we're talking about our days. And I thought, "What great providence."

In the middle of our table is a little ramekin – a ramekin that we use olive oil for – and it's got this beautiful green oil in it. And I thought, "My wife must have put that there just for me."

So, I take a big chunk of this bread and I dip it in as thick as I can and I throw it down, eating it as fast as I can, and I had this incredible burning sensation all the way down my

throat and, I swear to you, all the way into my stomach. It was eucalyptus oil. Now, mind you, it looked just like olive oil to me. But, all joking aside, we cannot be satisfied with appearances. We're not after just being nice. We're after radical transformation from the inside out. There's no point in deceiving others or, worse yet, deceiving yourselves. If you do not have forgiveness and love in your heart, if love is not restraining and transforming you, you are being overcome by evil. Simple.

Here's what John Stott says:

"A stark alternative is set before us. No neutrality and no middle way is envisioned. If we curse, we pay evil for evil or take revenge, then, because all these are evil responses to evil, we have given into evil, been sucked into its sphere of influence and been defeated, overcome, and even overpowered by it."

But, there's always hope for us. God does not just give us four negative commands; He gives us love, empowering and positive commands that go along with it, and we're going to finish in this section. Love empowers. These positive commands of God can do transformative and amazing things in our lives. Before I go on, let me remind us of where we stand because of who Christ is. We do not do anything in our own power, but we can do incredible things because of what Christ has done.

Romans 5:1-5. This is true of you. Think about this. If you're a follower of Jesus, this is true of you. **"Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us."**

God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us. God's love is actively empowering us. We are being trained by the moment to overcome evil with good. We are not left alone, we are empowered by God and we're united to Jesus. The positive commands.

Romans 12:14: **"Bless those who persecute you."**

We spoke about this earlier. We talked about this when we talked about love producing empathy. We are to bless, to pray for those that are doing evil to us. We are to seek to understand them, to love them. We are to seek to see them transformed by the love of Christ. It's not easy, but it's so beautiful when we can pursue it. And it's exactly what Christ has done for us, isn't it? It is hard to hate someone that you're praying for. It's possible, but it's really hard.

Romans 12:17: **"Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone."**

We are called to do what is helpful and beneficial, to serve people in the way that will bring about the most good, to serve them in a way that will be understood even by them that it's for their benefit. That's what we're called to do.

Romans 12:18: **"If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone."**

This is not just a call to go and do something. This is Paul pointing us to something that's true about our identity. Jesus said that His followers are peacemakers. We read elsewhere in the apostle Paul that we are called "ministers of reconciliation." Being a peacemaker, being a minister of reconciliation, seeking peace, doing these things is part of your core identity as one that's united to Christ.

Chrysostom, all the way back in the fourth century, said this:

"For in fact this was the crucial work of the Only Begotten: to bring together things divided and to reconcile the alienated."

Now, of course these teachings can be misused. For some of you, your conflict is fairly simple and you're making it complex because you don't want to let it go. So, you're like, "Well, it's possible. As much as it is, it's not really possible. This is really difficult. So, I'm going to shy away from it."

Look at your situation. Consider before the Lord what you're actually doing. Are you doing everything you can as far as it depends on you to live at peace with everyone? Now, for others, your conflict might feel hopeless because it actually is legitimately complex, and you can't see a way forward. You're in a conflict now and you don't know what to do.

Well, here's the first thing we can do. We can bless and not curse. We can lay the guns down. We can begin to pray and love and seek to understand this other person that we're in the conflict with. We can pursue listening and understanding. There is always hope in Christ. Again from N.T. Wright on this:

"For Paul, the question of what we are to do begins with the question of what God has done about it."

Quite a bit of the letter earlier on has been devoted to answering this question and it boils down to what he says in Romans 5:6-11. While we were still sinners, the Messiah died for us. There are many other things to be said about God's moral governance of the world. But, at the center of the Christian story stands this claim that when human evil reached its height, God came and took its full weight upon Himself, thereby exhausting it and opening the way for the creation of a new world order. Revenge keeps evil in circulation, whether in a family or a town or an entire community like the Middle East or Northern Ireland. The culture of revenge, unless broken, is never ending. Both sides will always be able to justify further atrocities by references to those they themselves have suffered.

We must break the cycle in our lives, in our churches, in our cities, in our culture, in our world. Everywhere that God sends us we're called to break this cycle. And the way we break it is through forgiveness and through Christ alone. We live at peace because Christ has laid His life down for us. Forgiveness does not depend upon the other person's posture towards us. Reconciliation and restitution, those depend on that. But, my ability to forgive somebody else is solely based on the foundation that Jesus Christ has laid His life down for me. So, I have the ability to lay my life down for others through the power of the Holy Spirit. Period. End of story.

Romans 12:19: **"Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord."**

Again, getting back to the idea of God as in control. You are not on the throne. You do not know everything about this other person. Conflict has a tendency to flatten things out, doesn't it? We have a tendency to judge others by our perception of their motives and judge ourselves by our best intentions. Let me give you an example. If someone else lies to me, they're just a liar. If I lie to somebody else – and we all do, right? But, you need to understand where I'm coming from. There are extenuating circumstances. We can tend to flatten things out when we do this. Distance, again, demonizes. Distance enables us to think something about somebody else whatever we want to think, because we're not judging them based on who they actually are, we're judging them on a flattened out kind of way of doing that. And this can happen interpersonally, but it can happen in a big way in our society, right?

If I'm a young man and I keep getting spurned by women for a variety of women, then it's not just this woman that didn't like me, it's "women are this." And the same way the other way around, right? If I'm not relating to someone of a different ethnicity or race than I am, or class for that matter, I can do the same thing, right? I don't know them and I'm not entering in. I had a negative experience. So, all of those people are like this. We begin to do that. We can do that with experiences in church. I've done this before. I've been in churches where I had a very negative experience with a pastor. And, if we don't reconcile those experiences and we don't really bring them before the Lord and seek to bless and seek to see what God would do in the midst of it, what we can end up doing is saying in my next negative experience is, "Well, all pastors are just like that."

We do that in every single area of our lives. We are not allowed to do that. There is no other, there is no broad generalization, there are only image-bearers of God that we are called to empathize with, to understand, to come alongside and to go deep to pursue reconciliation. That's God's call on our life.

Romans 12:20: **"On the contrary: 'If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.'"**

That's a citation from Proverbs 25. Give your enemy what he needs is basically what he's saying, not what you think he deserves. Now, the commentators are undecided on the exact meaning of heaping burning coals on his head, but the general consensus – I

know, right? It can sound negative. What they think, just as a sidebar, is that in an ancient Egyptian custom, someone would carry coals above their head as a sign that they were sorry, a sign of repentance. So, the whole context of the passage is you're trying to work for the betterment of this person. So, that's the idea, right? You're doing things to them that are making it impossible for them to continue on in the path that they're in. You're trying to overcome love with goodness or overcome evil with goodness and love and you're trying to see them brought back to repentance.

F.F. Bruce says it this way:

"Treat your enemy kindly, for that may make him ashamed and lead to his repentance."

In other words, the best way to get rid of an enemy is to turn him into a friend. And so, overcome evil with good. Now, wisdom has to be exercised here. It's not just this broad thing that you're not thinking about. Again, let's think about individual people that we're in conflict with. For example, an addict doesn't need your trust. An addict likely needs help in another way. A bully doesn't need more victims. A bully likely needs you to stand up and speak truth in love. We are giving to someone what they need, not what we think they deserve. We are loving them in a way that will make it impossible for them to continue on this path of objecting to God. That's the basic idea. The idea remains that we don't give them what we think they deserve, we give them what, under the inspiration of God, we believe they need.

And finally, Romans 12:21: **"Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."**

As we do all these things, we are being trained. We are being trained to overcome evil with good. It's what Miroslav Volf describes as a hands to heart to head transformation. We are going out there and loving and forgiving and it's beginning to transform everything about who we are, and we do this by the power of the Spirit in Christ. God is always with us and God is always enabling us to do everything we can do.

Now, in closing, I want to share just a couple quick stories. This is, again, from Desmond Tutu. He wrote a book called "Desmond and the Very Mean Word." It's a child's book. It's a brilliant book. I've enjoyed reading it to my kids. But, it's about a childhood incident that he had and it's something that laid an early foundation of understanding love and forgiveness. Here's how the story goes:

Desmond was riding his brand new bike in a township. He came to the edge of the township and there was a group of white boys that were yelling at him. He was worried he was going to lose his bike. So, instead of stopping, he rode his bike as fast as he could through them, and the boys yelled the meanest word they possibly could. He doesn't say what the word is, but it's probably their equivalent of the "N" word. They shouted it over and over and were laughing at him. As he rode away, he says this: "His teeth were clenched and the mean word kept repeating itself over and over inside his head like echoes in a dark cave."

So, he goes to see Father Trevor, the local Anglican priest that had been an influence in his life, and he busts into his office and Father Trevor comes up to him and says, "Desmond, what's wrong?"

And Desmond says, "Some boys, they shouted a very mean word at me."

Father Trevor comes up beside him and says, "I'm sorry that happened to you. They hurt your feelings, didn't they?"

And Desmond nodded.

"Can you forgive them?"

And Desmond says, "No! Never!" with his fists balled at his sides. "I will get them back."

Father Trevor sighed and he said this, "That's the problem, Desmond. You will get them back and then they will get you back and soon our whole world will be filled with nothing but getting back."

That night, Desmond went home kind of thinking about those words. But, he really just couldn't get that word they had said out of his head. Everywhere he went and everything he did. Every time he closed his eyes, he saw it flashing. Every time he opened a book, he saw it written on the page. So, the next day, he happened to ride by those boys

again and he shouted the meanest word he could possibly think of.

And at first, he felt really proud like he had done something, like he had accomplished something. But then, another feeling began to set in, and it wasn't a good feeling. That mean word that he had just said left a bitter taste in his mouth. So, he goes to see Father Trevor again. And Father Trevor is sitting down with him playing marbles and entering into his world. And he says, "Desmond, when people say mean words to us, we often feel ashamed of who we are. They can make us feel a little less lovable. But, it's not true, Desmond. Everything we do matters. If we smile or if we frown, if we say something nice or something mean. When we hurt someone, it hurts us too."

Father Trevor went by Desmond's house that night to check in with his parents and to check in on Desmond. He sees him out on the front porch still brooding. He sits down next to him and says, "You're still thinking about that mean word, aren't you?"

And Desmond nods.

He tells him, "Desmond, our hearts are fragile and easily hurt. That's why we're given a way to heal them. It's called forgiveness."

Desmond says, "How can I forgive? They haven't said they're sorry."

Father Trevor says, "You don't need to wait until someone says they're sorry to forgive them. You have the power to forgive whenever you are ready."

Desmond says, "I'm not ready."

Father Trevor says, "That's fine, Desmond. Only you will know when you are. But, let me tell you a secret, Desmond. When you forgive someone, you free yourself from what they have done or said. It's like magic."

A week later, he saw the boy and the boy was out in front of his house and the boy that had yelled the mean word at him was being dunked in a bucket of water by his older brothers. And the mother comes out and says, "You guys are just as bad as your father."

And he sees this scene of commotion and violence in this family and he begins to feel compassion for this boy. Surprising, but he felt compassion for him. And then he starts to think of what it would look like to forgive him. And he sees this kid in the story the next day and he's just being moved to do something. He doesn't even know what he's going to say, but he walks up to this little boy and he's standing in front of him and he says, "I'm sorry for what I said."

And this red-haired boy stammered for words, but he was kind of trying to say it. So, Desmond said, "It's okay. I forgive you."

And as soon as the words were out of his mouth, Desmond felt a little stronger and a little braver and stood up a little bit taller. He leaves the store and he sees that same boy underneath a tree sitting on a little milk carton. And the boy kind of motions him to come over. And Desmond's a little bit afraid, but he comes over. And the boy steps forward and smiles and gives him a piece of chocolate. And Desmond takes this piece of chocolate and he puts it in his mouth and he rides off.

And this is how the story ends. As the sun set behind the houses, Desmond peddled home fast. Not out of fear, but out of joy. The cool wind fell against his face. He wanted the sweet taste of the chocolate on his tongue to last forever. Slowly, he spread out his arms as wide as if he were flying. At last, Desmond knew what it felt like to be free. It was as if he could embrace the whole world with his outstretched arms.

I'll take two more minutes of your time. You can look at that and say, "Oh, isn't that a cute story of a child learning a lesson of forgiveness?"

But, mind you, this is the man that grew up to fight for forgiveness, to fight for reconciliation. And in 1984, he was awarded the Nobel Prize of Peace and he goes up to Oslo and he's giving this speech. And the end of this speech is so beautiful that I wanted to read it to you guys. Look at the full fruit of a foundation of forgiveness that he was taught as a child. This is from his speech given to the world and televised everywhere:

"When will we learn that human beings are of infinite value because they have been created in the image of God and that it is blasphemy to treat them as though they were less than this, and to do so ultimately recoils on those who do this? In dehumanizing others, they are themselves dehumanized. Perhaps oppression dehumanizes the oppressor as much, if not more, than the oppressed. They need each other to be truly free; to become human. We can be human only in fellowship, in community, in koinonia, in peace. Let us work to be peacemakers, those given a wonderful share in our Lord's ministry of reconciliation. If we want peace, so we have been told, let us work for justice, let us beat our swords into ploughshares.

"God calls us to be fellow workers with Him, so that we can extend the Kingdom of Shalom, of Justice, of goodness, of compassion, of caring, of sharing, of laughter, joy and reconciliation, so that the kingdoms of the world will become the Kingdom of our God and of His Christ, and He shall reign forever and ever. Amen. Then there will be fulfillment of the wonderful vision in the Revelation of St. John the Divine.

"After this I beheld, and lo, a great multitude, which no man could number, of all nations and kindreds and people and tongues, stood before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, and palms in their hands, and cried with a loud voice saying, 'Salvation to our God, who sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb.'

"And all the angels stood around about the throne, and about the elders and the four beasts, and fell before the throne on their faces, and worshipped God saying, 'Amen; Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might, be unto our God forever and ever. Amen.'"

This is what it means to pray that God's will will be done on earth as it is in Heaven. This is what it means – as that slide said earlier – that we would pray that God's will would be done in San Francisco as it is on earth. As much as I have learned and benefited from Desmond Tutu's stories, I am so much more grateful for the story that stands behind his story. The story of a young boy that was incarnated into this world, Jesus Christ Himself, who took upon Himself human flesh, became a man – that's what we celebrate at Advent, right? We are pointing to the story of Jesus Christ that came and accomplished reconciliation and peace and forgiveness for all of us. This time of year, we are celebrating the possibility of what can be accomplished with the power of forgiveness and reconciliation. Jesus Christ fought and he won. He is the embodiment of love, the embodiment of forgiveness. The power and source of all transformational love is in Jesus Christ Himself. The One that not only showed us the way, but walks alongside of us even now.

He gives you the power of His Holy Spirit and the strength to live as He's calling you to live, to love as He loves, to forgive as He forgives. This transformative love is what life is supposed to be all about. This transformative love gives us the power of Christ. Christ overcame evil with good and in Christ we can overcome evil with good. Amen?

Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we thank You for Your Word. We thank You that it is living and active and speaking to our hearts and our souls. I pray, Lord, that You would give us the courage to love as You love. Give us the courage to forgive as You forgive. Give us the strength and the power to overcome evil with good and to live in our families and our churches and our city and in our world in a way that will bring the transformative power of Your love to bear on absolutely everything we do. We praise You and we thank You and we look forward to the day when Christ will come once again to renew and restore all things. In Christ's name we pray, amen.