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Matthew 16:21-28; **Romans 12:9-21**

ARE YOU SURE?

Are you sure you want to be a Christian? Are you really sure? Both of today's scripture passages should give us all pause when answering that question. We hear Jesus say that anyone who wants to be his follower must be prepared to take up their cross and follow him. And we all know where that took Jesus. We hear the Apostle Paul tell us that Christians are the ones who bless those who persecute us and who feed our enemies and overcome evil with good. These are not just suggestions--like, "Wouldn't it be nice if we all tried to live this way." These are descriptions for what the Christian will be like and how the Christian will act.

These two passages emphasize that being a follower of Jesus, being a Christian, is not easy, and pleasant, and socially respectable. It's not about coming to a pretty building, singing some nice songs, and passing the peace with some friendly people. Rather, being a Christian will involve some pretty heavy lifting in your life. Are you ready for that? Because doing good to your enemy is about as heavy as it gets.

Both of today's scriptures address how we deal with evil. Jesus is talking to his disciples and he tells them that there is evil headed his way. He prepares them for what is awaiting him in Jerusalem: how he will suffer, how he will be arrested and then killed by the leaders and people who oppose him. This is very hard for his disciples to accept. But then Jesus makes it even harder by telling them that "if any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." To be a follower of Jesus means to follow Jesus on the path that confronts evil in an entirely new way. You and I know how Jesus will confront evil, right? When the Romans come to arrest him, Jesus will organize his disciples into an army and will use

their swords to attack and kill. When bound and beaten by his captors, Jesus will spit in the face of the soldiers and curse them. When hanging on the cross, Jesus will call out to his disciples, "Keep fighting, spare no one!" Later, a bitter and angry Jesus will confront the disciples who betrayed and denied him, by kicking Peter out of the group.

Ok, not really. I was just testing to see if you were awake. That's *not* how Jesus confronted evil. That's how *we* confront evil. Jesus' confrontation with evil will not involve him engaging in violence or vengeance or hatred toward his persecutors. Rather, Jesus will confront evil with the truth of God. Jesus will confront evil with mercy. Jesus will confront evil with forgiveness. Jesus will confront evil with love. Jesus says to us his followers, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." To follow him in how we confront evil.

Let's be clear. This is not the promotion of a kind of "doormat" theology. Jesus is not telling his followers to be doormats to the evil of this world. He is not telling us to be passive in the face of evil or to accept evil without resistance. Rather, he is calling his followers to confront evil with a different kind of strategy. His strategy is designed to overcome evil with the transforming power of good.

That's what Easter is all about, isn't it? Easter, the event which lies at the core of the Christian faith, is about God's power to transform evil with the power of good. God takes all the evil of Good Friday, the evil that killed and tortured, the evil that lies within the human heart and which lies within human society, and transformed it through love, mercy, and forgiveness.

The Apostle Paul echoes the call that Christians are to adopt this strategy in our lives. Evil is to be hated, Paul tells us. And evil is to be opposed. But Paul calls us to oppose evil with

good. Parts of his strategy are easy enough. Evil should be opposed by loving one another. Evil should be opposed by persevering in prayer, rejoicing in hope, showing kindness to strangers.

But then the strategy grows considerably more difficult. Think about those people who have harmed you, who oppose you, who are unjust to you, who threaten your wellbeing in some way. The ex-husband or wife. The unfair boss. The mean-spirited colleague or in-law. Think about leaders who pursue unjust policies, dangerous policies, or groups of people who voice hatred and intolerance. Think about that kind of evil. Now, Paul tells us, do not curse those who persecute you. Instead, he says we are to bless them.

I assume that this is as hard for you to imagine doing as it is for me. Now, I would like to think that I would never commit violence against someone who has harmed me or a loved one, but it is quite a different matter to refrain from cursing them within my heart or to keep from harboring anger, bitterness, and resentment. And what is this business about blessing our enemy? How are we to understand these impossible sounding instructions?

I think Paul must have understood something important about the human condition. I think he understood that what enters our hearts shapes our behaviors and our attitudes. And so, the hatred and bitterness and anger we allow to enter our hearts are themselves a form of violence. That anger within you toward your ex, toward your boss, toward the racist neighbor, toward the political figure you can't stand, those feelings of hate are themselves a form of violence. These are the feelings that give rise to the evil of this world. And when Paul tells us to bless our enemies, I do not think he means that we condone our enemy's behavior, but that we never lose sight of their humanity and their right to God's love and care. That is why Paul tells us to "let love be genuine." The kind of love Paul means is not a warm emotional feeling but

rather a sense of commitment to the welfare of another--even our enemy. Let love be genuine--not just pretend. Somehow, some way, our task is to nurture genuine love in our hearts.

You see the kind of heavy lifting that is expected of us Christians? Genuine love toward our enemy! That's hard work. It would seem impossible if we did not have examples around us. If we look hard we can find them--glimpses of people striving to follow Christ's strategy against evil and cruelty and injustice. History has given us people like Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. and Archbishop Desmond Tutu in South Africa--all of whom voiced a strategy for combating evil while never defacing the humanity of the enemy.

Closer to home we can find signs of goodness and kindness and sacrifice in people who are quick to respond to human need and suffering who side with the vulnerable. In the news this week we have witnessed the people of the Houston region endure great suffering and hardship due to Hurricane Harvey. We have seen scenes of horrible loss and devastation. And we have also heard stories of great acts of compassion and generosity. Into this scene of suffering, arrived an informal network of strangers coming from near and far with their private boat--the Cajun Navy some call it--to rescue thousands of trapped individuals. Others have helped rescue pets. I saw a story of one woman who took a complete family of strangers into her apartment. Paul says to us, "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

Maybe the surprise of the week came from the country of Mexico. Here is our neighbor to the South which in the past couple of years has been spoken about and treated rudely by our current President. In addition, our country, its wealthy domineering northern neighbor, is demanding that Mexico must pay billions of dollars for a wall it does not want. And yet, in response to the devastating floods in Texas, Mexico has stepped forward and offered to send relief supplies and aid workers. Maybe the Mexicans have taken to heart Paul's instructions, "If

your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink." Maybe, maybe we Americans can learn something from this gesture of hospitality extended by another country toward its hostile neighbor in our time of need.

This business of being a Christian is hard, very hard. To love our enemies, to refrain from cursing them, to actually do good to them--this is very hard work. So I wonder, are you sure you want to be a Christian? It's not for the faint of heart.

On the other hand, what is the alternative? The alternative to the hard road of following Christ is that we go on resenting our enemies, hating our enemies, hurting our enemies. But this is what humans have always done since the dawn of time. And this has never been a winning strategy--for us individually or collectively. That old, old strategy toward evil has been tried and tried again and again with devastating effects for all. So perhaps it is time we wised up and realized that the only way out of this morass of evil and suffering is for each of us to pick up our cross and follow Christ on that hard, hard road of love.