

You may remember the story of *The Count of Monte Cristo*. Maybe you read the book once or saw one of the movies based upon it, such as the most recent in 2002. Or even if you haven't heard the story before, this is how it goes. A young man named Edmund is betrayed by those he thinks are his friends. One betrays him because of the woman Edmund is about to marry. One betrays him because of the Edmund's job, which he wants for himself. Another betrays him in order to protect his own reputation. As a result, Edmund is thrown into a prison where he is left to die. But Edmund manages to escape from the prison several years later. With information from an old prisoner, Edmund finds a buried treasure which makes him incredibly wealthy. Using this wealth, Edmund begins to lay a trap for those who once betrayed him, thinking that he will get revenge by destroying their lives the way that they once destroyed his.

*The Count of Monte Cristo* is a classic story, because it gives us an opportunity to think about a number of questions. How far would you go to get revenge on someone who has hurt you? How far is too far? What does it mean to forgive someone who has hurt you, especially someone who has hurt you in a terrible way? Even Edmund by the end of the story has to wrestle with these questions. But Paul in our Epistle reading for today deals with these same questions. Paul shows us why a Christian should not seek revenge, but instead leave everything in the hands of God.

Paul begins in verse 17: "Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all." Paul warns us not to do what is wrong in order to pay someone back for the wrong they have done to us. This is actually harder for us than it may seem. It's very easy for us to want to do the same thing or worse to someone who has hurt us in any way. It doesn't even have to be something big. Did someone say something mean about me? I'll make sure everyone knows about that terrible thing that they did! Did someone get that job that I wanted? I'll do what I can to cut them down and make their life harder because of it. It's very easy for us to fall into evil, because in a desire for revenge, we often want to do the same and more.

But we rarely think of something like that as evil. In our minds, it's good, because it gives them what we think they deserve. They deserve to have their lives ruined for speaking against me. They deserve to lose something big for taking away something that belonged to me. They deserve this! It's justice! But Paul shows us what is actually happening. It is repaying evil with evil. It is trying to fix a wrong by doing something wrong. It is not the Christian way.

Paul continues in verse 18: "If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all." The right thing to do is to be at peace with all. We should not seek to cause trouble or seek to stir something up. Because we are in Christ, we have a peace beyond all human understanding, a peace which lives even when all worldly peace is gone.

Of course, Paul does not mean that we should seek peace at any cost. He is not saying that we should be pacifists. Living peaceably with all does not mean that we should never say anything against evil. This is why he says "if possible." If possible, leave peaceably with all. But don't seek a kind of false peace which creates even more evil. What he means, then, is to not live in a way which creates more evil. This can happen either by seeking revenge or by saying nothing against the evil happening in the world. Not seeking revenge doesn't mean that you become a pushover. Rather, it means that you always seek to do what is right in the eyes of God.

This is why Paul goes on to say in verse 19: "Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.'" Avenging ourselves is taking something that belongs to God into our own hands. When we seek revenge, we are trying to be God. And this is what makes it so dangerous. Do we truly have the

power to lay down judgment? Do we truly have the understanding to bring justice, especially when we are the ones who have been hurt? Our thoughts and judgment are so easily clouded in a situation like that, because we struggle with sin. When we play God, we think that we will create a heaven on earth, but instead end up creating hell.

Besides this, wanting to take revenge shows that we don't really trust God. We don't trust that God will take care of us, so we take it into our own hands. We don't trust that God will give us justice, so we try to dish it out on our own. We don't trust that the Day will come when God will set all things right, so we try to set things right today. But we can "leave it to the wrath of God," because God will do what is right. He will repay all evil, whether now or on the Last Day, because He does not lie. He has said that He will do it, so He will do it. We can look to Him in all things, knowing that He will give us justice in all things.

So what should we do, then? Paul continues in verses 20 and 21: "To the contrary, 'if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.' Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." In other words, as Jesus tells us, love your enemies. If the one who has hurt you needs something, give it to them. No conditions. No crossing fingers behind your back. No doing it only because you have to. Show them a true love. If they are hungry, give them food. If they are thirsty, give them something to drink. If they are naked, give them clothing. If they are sick, give them medicine. If they need help on the side of the road, pull over. Give them what they need without hesitation and without question. Overcome evil with good.

Why? Because in this way you will "heap burning coals" on their head. The image Paul uses here is a blacksmith's forge. Heaping up burning coals around a piece of metal heats it up so that it can be shaped into something else. It could even make it hot enough to melt. In the same way, the one who is hard like metal toward you will be softened by your act of Christian kindness. It will throw them off guard, because it will be something that they did not expect. And by showing them kindness, you will lead them to repentance. And as Jesus tells us, all of heaven rejoices over one lost sinner who repents. Instead of an enemy, you will find a brother. And what could be better than that?

Let me use an example to show you what I mean. In the year 1818, a king in the middle of the Pacific Ocean became a Christian with some of his people through the work of missionaries. But some of those who had not converted decided to revolt. They were going to overthrow the king and go back to the old ways. But the king found out what they were going to do and captured them. You would think that this was an easy decision. These men were guilty of treason. They certainly deserved nothing less than death for their crime. But can you imagine their surprise when the king told them that they would not be harmed? Jesus had commanded them to love their enemies, and so the king would set them free. Even more, the king prepared a feast and invited them all to come. At this feast, one of the men who had tried to kill the king stood up and said that he too would become a Christian. And as a result, the whole island converted to Christ. This is what Paul means by heaping burning coals on your enemy's head. This is what Paul means by overcoming evil with good. By one act of Christian kindness, a whole people came to know Christ. And what could be better than that?

And besides all this, Christians, why shouldn't we do this? We are who we are because of the mercy which God has first shown to us. We aren't getting what we deserve, because Jesus has taken our sins upon Himself. When we had done evil time and time again, Jesus repaid it with good. So why wouldn't we show the same love to those who have hurt us? Why wouldn't

we seek to do what is right in every situation? Jesus has called us to Himself, and when we live at peace with all, we are living like Jesus.

So put everything into God's hands, Christians. He will care for you. Repay no one evil for evil, because you belong to Christ. Overcome evil not with more evil, because that will never end well. Rather, overcome evil with good, knowing that this is who Jesus has made you to be.