

Responding to Malice

Romans 12:17

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

You're in the outside lane of traffic and suddenly you have to hit the brakes because the whole lane has stalled as some dumb guy up there decides to turn left. There's a little space on the inside lane and you hit your turn signal and you begin to move. At the same time the little yellow Mazda in the inside lane sees you and he hits his accelerator and closes that gap.

So your lane gets moving again. Then the inside lane stalls as some guy decides to turn right. Lo and behold, there is the little yellow Mazda with his turn signal blinking, "Please, let the little Japanese gentleman into your lane." And that's the moment of truth, isn't it?

Your foot hits the floor, and it's really more just an adrenalin kind of reaction. It's not even a mental reflection. It's just a kind of automatic response, "You wouldn't let me in? I am not letting you in. You cut me out. I am cutting you out. You wouldn't let me live? I won't let you live."

It's really just like one little dog biting back at another little dog. You see, it really is a whole attitude -- a kind of 'tit for tat'. Okay, when I needed to get into that lane to keep moving, you wouldn't let me in. Alright, I am not letting you into this lane. It's all kind of an automatic response reaction.

Now if you have a nervous kind of stomach, it does give a little twinge to it. (You know it does.) Or if you're a little uptight or you're a little preoccupied, that makes you a little more uptight or a little more preoccupied. Those emotional responses should warn us that something is wrong. But even if they didn't convince us that something was wrong, you know that the attitude of antagonism that you have to whoever is driving that little yellow Mazda is utterly irrational.

It should make you realize something's ridiculous here. "I mean here I am having a real spirit of antagonism towards some guy -- (I don't know if it's a guy or girl) -- or somebody that I have never seen and probably will never see again." It should all cause us to pause because if we keep going on this way, we're going to have masses of unseen and unknown enemies driving on all the roads around us. But you know loved ones, even if those response reactions don't tell us, "Look, there's something wrong in the way you're acting to this guy," certainly our mental reflection should tell us, because in fact that does you even more harm.

The response reaction is kind of an automatic thing. It's almost an adrenalin thing. But what does permanent damage to your character is the mental reflection. The mental reflection goes like this: "If I do not render due retribution to this yellow Mazda, on behalf of all humanity, for the terrible crime that he has committed not only against me but that he will continue to commit against all the dear friends I have in this society, then I am failing in my duty to exercise punishment upon the wrongdoer." That's what does the real damage, isn't it? That's what does the damage.

That feeling that, "This guy has done wrong. If I let him continue to do this unpunished, I, as a sole guardian of morality and security and order in our world, will be overwhelmed by Little Yellow Mazdas sneaking from one lane to the other, throughout the whole world." To do that of course, you

have to begin to feel that you have the right to do it. And that's where the trouble lies, isn't it?

You begin to have the feeling that he did it against you -- that here's someone that is not showing the respect that he should show to a person as fair and just as you are. And you begin to feel a self-righteousness coming up inside you. You can't have that self-righteousness without beginning to feel like God and feel that it's your responsibility and right to keep things in order. And that you're fully justified in doing it because you, yourself, never do that kind of thing.

It's that mental reflection that really should give us pause about what we've just done. It's beginning to move towards sickness, and we should begin to see that. Now loved ones, it's because of that kind of utterly wrong and sinful and sick and mentally unhealthy response that God said to us what He said in the verse we're studying today. So maybe you'd look at it. It's Romans 12:17.

Romans 12:17, "Repay no one evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all." Repay no one evil for evil. The fact is, the guy in the yellow Mazda probably didn't look at you and say, "I hate faces with noses like that. I am going to kill that guy." It was probably just a thoughtless reaction. He was in a hurry to get to work. He wanted to keep moving. It was a thoughtless attitude, but yours wasn't thoughtless. Sure it wasn't.

Yours wasn't thoughtless. His was kind of a thoughtless, careless act -- but you turned it into a personal feud. Yours was a kind of malice of forethought. Yours was with intent to get your own back. As with all vices, it does you more harm than it does your victim. It does us, loved ones, far more harm. That kind of deliberate, paying the other person back, does us more harm than it does them.

There's a doctor, that many of us know, who wrote this book called, "None of These Diseases." He has a paragraph in a chapter which is called, 'The High Cost of Getting Even.' The paragraph runs like this, "When Jesus said forgive seventy times seven, he was thinking not only of our souls, but of saving our bodies from ulcerative colitis, toxic goiters, high blood pressure and scores of other diseases."

The advice of the Great Physician appears to have percolated even into the hard boiled bulletin of a Milwaukee police department, "If selfish people try to take advantage of you, cross them off your list, but don't try to get even. When you try to get even, you hurt yourself more than you hurt the other fellow." That's interesting for a police department, isn't it?

"If selfish people try to take advantage of you, cross them off your list, but don't try to get even. When you try to get even, you hurt yourself more than you hurt the other fellow." Then next paragraph, but one, runs like this, "The famous physiologist, John Hunter, knew what anger could do to his heart. 'The first scoundrel that gets me angry will kill me', he said. Some time later at a medical meeting, a speaker made assertions that incensed Hunter as he stood up and bitterly attacked the speaker. His anger caused such a contraction of the blood vessels in his heart, that he fell dead."

That's why all those little adrenalin crises that you allow to occur in your life are shortening your life. They're not only destroying your emotional peace and your spiritual peace, but they're shortening your life. They're killing you far faster than they're killing the other person who probably doesn't even notice your reaction. Loved ones, if that's the case with such a little

incident as somebody cutting-in in front of you in traffic, what about the family feuds that have gone on for years?

What about those long, long resentments that you have nursed into roots of bitterness deep down in your heart? What about those feelings that you have against certain people? They're eating you away faster than any doctor can measure. What about the very quiet repayments of evil for evil that occur day-by-day when a salesperson treats you a little off-handedly, or somebody on the phone is arrogant or rude to you, or somebody else is sarcastic to you?

Then, what about all the secret payings back of evil for evil that exist in your attitude to other people who you think, probably wrongly, have a wrong attitude to you. And so you feel, "They have a wrong attitude to me, so it's up to me to resist that and to have that kind of attitude to them, too, so that what they give me, they get back from me."

Loved ones, all those little payings back of evil for evil begin to destroy us from the inside. And that's one very, very down-to-earth, pretty selfish reason for obeying God's word in this instance. "Repay no one evil for evil." The moment somebody does something evil against you, forget it. Forget it fast -- because if you once begin to dwell upon it, evil will begin to fill your life with its own power and its own consequences and its own destructive capabilities.

So don't even spend a second, not a second, for your own health's sake, for your own emotional health's sake, for your own physical health's sake --not a moment -- no repaying evil for evil. The guy cuts-in in front of you. Good! Let him cut in. Good! It's cheap! It's cheap. It's a far higher price to pay to try to get even. But there is an even better reason for practicing this Romans 12:17. It's a reason that's given in the history of Joseph, the man with the coat of many colors. His brothers treated him abominably and eventually sold him into slavery from which he eventually arose to be the Governor of Egypt and to end up being their benefactor, in fact.

Now near the end of his father's life, this incident occurred, and some of you I think will remember it. It's in the Old Testament.

Genesis 50:15 "When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, 'It may be that Joseph will hate us and pay us back for all the evil which we did to him.' So they sent a message to Joseph, saying, 'Your father gave this command before he died, "Say to Joseph, Forgive, I pray you, the transgression of your brothers and their sin, because they did evil to you." And now, we pray you, forgive the transgression of the servants of the God of your father.' Joseph wept when they spoke to him. His brothers also came and fell down before him, and said, 'Behold, we are your servants.' But Joseph said to them, 'Fear not, for am I in the place of God? As for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today. So do not fear; I will provide for you and your little ones.' Thus he reassured them and comforted them."

That's it. Don't repay evil for evil because of reality. Reality is, the guy in the little yellow Mazda -- even if he didn't mean it for your evil, God meant it for your good. And so every evil that people do to you, they may intend it for your evil, but God means it for your good. Now if you say to me, "Oh, you mean God sent it?" No, no. "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures. He leadeth me beside still waters."

The Father is always looking after us. He is always sending his good gifts. He wants the best for

us. He is not in the business of sending us evil. No, God doesn't send it, but when it's on its way to you, he uses it. He transforms it and he uses it for your good.

In other words, your character and mind have developed all kinds of weaknesses from the fact that we have not really trusted God. We've trusted everybody else. We've trusted things and people and circumstances and all kinds of other things. There are great weaknesses in our character that have to be changed. God uses the evil that people try to do to us to draw us closer to himself and to change us.

So God is always in the business of filtering the worst things that people do to you through his own hands and using it for your good. Now that's in James, if you haven't read that before.

James 1:2 "Count it all joy, my brethren, when you meet various trials, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing."

In other words, when somebody does something against you, at that moment, God is giving you an opportunity to believe that He is in control. And as you do that, your faith in him grows. So the other guy might mean you evil, but actually it results in you being stronger in your God and more at peace in the fact that he is in control.

Now you may say, "Oh listen, listen. If I don't act, these people will mow me down. If I don't act to resist evil when they do it to me, they'll destroy me." No. No they won't. The Father has his hands like that over you and he watches the evil coming down. If he sees that one big lump that will really crown you, he just pulls with his hands. So he just lets through the little lumps that you can deal with. He lovingly watches you, and he knows what you're able to bear. He only lets through to you what he can use.

If you ever doubt that, you remember the beginning of that old book of Job. It's right at the first chapter of the book of Job, which is one of the most ancient books in the Old Testament. It's interesting just to read the paragraph if you've never read it before.

Job 1:6-12 "Now there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan also came among them. The Lord said to Satan, 'Whence have you come?' Satan answered the Lord, 'From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it.' And the Lord said to Satan, 'Have you considered my servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil?' Then Satan answered the Lord, 'Does Job fear God for nought? Hast thou not put a hedge about him and his house and all that he has, on every side? Thou hast blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. But put forth thy hand now, and touch all that he has, and he will curse thee to thy face.' And the Lord said to Satan, 'Behold, all that he has is in your power; only upon himself do not put forth your hand.' So Satan went forth from the presence of the Lord."

Even evil is under God's power and control. Nothing can happen to you except what God is able to use in your life. Loved ones, the Father does not allow anything to occur to you that you cannot receive without disobeying his word. God doesn't allow any evil to occur to you and me, or anything to happen to us that we can only tackle by disobeying His word.

In other words, there is no situation where we have to repay evil for evil. There is no evil so bad

that God is not in control of it and is not able to use it to change you and to bring you into a closer relationship to Himself. You remember, that famous verse in Corinthians 10:13 "No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your strength, but with the temptation will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it."

In other words, God says to us, "Look my dear children, nothing will be done to you that I cannot use to draw you closer to myself. Nothing will be done to you that will destroy you. I will protect you. You may think you're at the last gasp, but I will not let the last gasp pass. I will defend you. I will save you from death and I will give you the best that I have to give to my children."

So loved ones, why not repay evil for evil? Because the moment you see evil coming to you from another person, you can say, "Can Jesus be far behind?" Because that's what it is. Every evil, every trial is a signal from God that he has a grace of life to give you that is new and that you have not received within yourself before. He has a new place of closeness to himself to bring you into that you have not been in before.

Of course, I know the only people who would be unbelievers here this morning in this truth, would be those who have never suffered. Every one of us who has suffered, or have had bad times in our lives, will testify to that one fact, that that was the most real time in my life. That time I was closer to God than I have ever been before and often, ever been since.

So loved ones, don't stand up and be your own god. Don't start laying out the punishments to people. Don't take it to yourself that you have to defend yourself. No, you don't. If you, like Peter, draw the sword and cut off the ear of the other person, you take yourself out of God's hands as he deals with you.

You take yourself out of the thing that he is doing in your life the moment you cease to have faith in him because someone has done something against you. And you rise up and say, "Well, Christianity is all right as far as it goes, but this requires good common sense." The moment you do that, you take yourself out of God's dealings with you and actually, you also take yourself out of his protection.

It's the same with an attorney. He can only look after your case as long as you leave it with him. But if you leave your case with him, and then you come back the next day and say, "No. I want to defend myself." And then you say the next day, "No. You take it." Then, "No. I want to defend myself." Eventually, he washes his hands of you and he says, "No. I can only take this case if you put it completely in my hands." It's the same with God.

Either defend yourself as well as you can against the other three and a half billion of us, or trust God. But that's the lie. That's the lie of it. The dumb thing is we can see the foolishness of it here this morning, but get out there on the freeway, and we kind of think, "Yeah, we'll take the world on. It's only that little yellow Mazda today. But tomorrow -- a Mercedes?"

But loved ones, no repaying evil for evil. Leave the wee soul in the hands of God. To you then, every little guy who cuts-in in front of you in the traffic, every person who puts you down in front of other people, every person who does the dirty on you in business, is simply a sign to you that God has a grace of life to give you as you put your faith again in him to overcome the disadvantages that this will bring you. That's the other reason and the main reason. That's the main reason for

repaying nothing but kindness.

It's in 2 Corinthians, loved ones, if you like to look at it.

2 Corinthians 5:19, "In Christ, God was reconciling the world to Himself." That is, God was taking all the things in the world that are able to destroy His purpose for all our lives and He destroyed them. That's how He reconciled the world to Himself. He destroyed all in it that is able to frustrate His purpose for your life and mine. There's another verse in Colossians that says, "He disarmed in Jesus' death and resurrection the principalities and powers".

In other words, you're right. Even if the little guy in the yellow Mazda did it thoughtlessly, there are little forces that come from him, psychic forces, mental forces, emotional forces, spiritual forces, at times physical forces that come against your life. Even in a thoughtless action, and much more so, when somebody who intends to do you evil in the office or in your career, there are forces that they send out towards you.

What God says is, "I took the sting out of those forces. In Christ Jesus, my Son, I disarmed those principalities and powers. They can't hurt you. They'll still come to you and the other person will wonder why your career has gone on despite the fact that you haven't defended yourself. Yet, the person will wonder, how it is your life seems to be prospering in spite of the fact that he has done everything to undermine you?"

"It's because I have taken the sting out of those forces. I have disarmed those principalities and powers. I have destroyed those world forces that people set in motion when they do evil against you. They can't affect you. I'll either arrange it that even if you're late for work, it will be all right in the office. Things will have so worked around that no one will notice you're late. Or if you are late, I will so arrange your prosperity in your job that that will be lived out and compensated for by your later performance. Or I will open a gap in the traffic further up the highway that will enable you to make up the time. But, I have disarmed the power of anybody to actually do you evil. In other words, put your trust in me and not in people and their attempts to hurt you."

Why repay no one evil for evil? Because that wee soul can't do you any harm. They can't do you anything that our dear Father won't let them do, and he wants only the best for you. That's why he says, "But take thought for what is noble in the sight of all."

In other words, regard the thing as not even having happened. And then think whatsoever things are true and lovely and of good report. Think on those things so that the other person will see that you really do believe that all will be well because of God's triumph in Jesus. And that all things have been redeemed by God. And I have no need to defend myself because I have a Father in heaven who looks after me. And that's why we should repay no one evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. And in fact, return good for evil.

So loved ones, would you start doing it? It's a pretty down-to-earth practical thing. Will you begin to live that way? Will you? Will you start living like that? Start lying right back, taking that foot right off that accelerator, putting that sword right back in the sheath, and just saying, "Father, thank you Lord. I give you thanks for what's just happened. I thank you, Father, that you are going to compensate for that in some way, and I am looking forward to finding that out. And Lord, I ask you to bless that dear guy, and give him the same peace and confidence that you are in charge of his life that I have."

Let us pray.

Dear Father, we see that it is not a hard directive that you have given us. It coincides with reality -- with the actual reality of the situation that it is just true that we repay no one evil for evil -- but we take thought for what is noble in the sight of all men. So Father, we thank you that we can let our defences down. We can get the iron out of our souls and we can let this guard down. We can relax and stop scrambling to get to the top of the heap. We can stop trying to keep the others from undermining us. We can stop trying to prove ourselves. We can stop trying to run the world and try to keep it all right. We can relax into that delightful life of the children of God who have a loving Father who filters every evil through His own hands before He lets a little through to us. Lord, thank you.

We pray for each other, My Father, this week. And pray for each other tomorrow morning in all the various situations that we'll find ourselves in. Dear Holy Spirit, I would ask you to bring to my brothers and sisters the truth of these moments -- at the very moment when they need them -- that they may have a week of peace and rest and freedom from strain. And that we may grow younger this week instead of older because of our relaxation in your hands. We ask this in your name.

Now, the grace of our Lord Jesus and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with each one of us, now and throughout this week. Amen.