

Biblical Reflection 9: “Overcome Evil with Good”

April 13, 2021

When the Apostle Peter wrote to the small Christian minority living in Asia Minor in the first century, I don't think most of them were suffering as much as the Burmese people are right now. Yet some were being mistreated and physically persecuted for their faith. Then, a few years later, in Rome, some Christians were actually burned to death in Nero's gardens, and others were sent to be killed by wild animals in the Coliseum.

Peter said many things to encourage suffering Christians that you would expect, but some of what he said was actually quite surprising. For example:

“Beloved, I urge you as aliens and exiles to abstain from the desires of the flesh that wage war against the soul. Conduct yourselves honorably among the Gentiles [pagans], so that, though they malign you as evildoers, they may see your honorable deeds and glorify God when he comes to judge.” (1 Peter 2:11-12, NRSV).

There is so much in these verses that seems to apply to the current crisis in Myanmar.

1. Our battle is not just against evil human forces. There is also evil within each of us, in our sinful “flesh,” which is “waging war” against our souls. Consequently, we must be on our guard, not only against those who want to harm us, but also against our own instincts and impulses that run contrary to the will of God. Every time we allow our sinful flesh to direct our behavior, we are losing the battle. We are destroying ourselves.
2. Instead, in contrast to the evil behavior of our enemies, we are called to respond by doing good. We may be falsely accused and unfairly treated at times, but God expects us to act honorably in response. By doing good deeds, we are being good witnesses to our faith and to our God.

Likewise, Paul spells out what it means for Christians to live by love in the midst of adversity and suffering in his letter to the Romans:

“Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good... Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer... Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep... Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” ...Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (from Rom. 12:9-21).

These are powerful verses. This is not how most people think. It's not the way of the world. It's certainly not my natural inclination. When someone hurts me or someone I care about, I want to strike back. Some days I feel so angry, I don't want to pray or be patient or live peaceably, and I cannot possibly bless my enemy. I want to attack. I want vengeance.



But this kind of response is not Spirit-led. It does not bring glory to God. It does not help. It actually hurts me and makes the situation worse. No, the Christian response to evil is not to do evil, but to do good. A Spirit-led follower of Christ will show people the true nature of God by our faith, hope, and love.

God is just. Just as we put our hope in God for deliverance, so we must trust that one day God will avenge our mistreatment. In the meantime, by reflecting the love and light Christ in all we do, instead of being destroyed by evil, we will overcome it.

With Christ's love,
Dr. Tim ဦးထင်ကျော်