

November 14, 2021
Do Good to Each Other
1 Thessalonians 5:14-18, Luke 15:11-32

When Paul and Silas were in the Greek city of Thessalonica, some of the people opposed to them rounded up some “bad characters,” formed a mob, and started a riot. Other Christians, Jason and his friends, were dragged from their homes and accused of treason against Caesar and the Empire. Paul and Silas slipped away in the night ... Thessalonica is a tough, tough town in which to follow Jesus ...

Paul, writing later to encourage the followers of Jesus in Thessalonica, writes, *“Brothers and sisters, we urge you to ... encourage those who are timid. Take tender care of those who are weak. Be patient with everyone. See that no one pays back evil for evil, but always try to DO GOOD TO EACH OTHER and to all people (literally “pursue the good of each other”; some translations say “be kind”). Always be joyful. Never stop praying. Be thankful in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you who belong to Christ Jesus”* (1 Thessalonians 5:14-18).

That’s a tough order anywhere, let alone in Thessalonica. Those phrases are surprising ...

- In the face of fierce opposition, encourage the timid.
- Be patient with ... EVERYONE.
- See that NO ONE pays back evil for evil, but ALWAYS try to DO GOOD TO EACH OTHER and to ALL people.
- Even in the midst of pain and suffering, ALWAYS be joyful.
- Even when you’re discouraged, NEVER stop praying.
- When you are tired, fed up, and grumpy, be thankful in ALL circumstances ...

Each of these is a sermon in itself. Today we’ll focus on 5:15: *“See that no one pays back evil for evil, but always try to DO GOOD TO EACH OTHER and to all people.”*

A Case Study (Luke 15:11-32) – SCRIPTURE VIDEO

Jesus tells a story we’ve all heard many times, a parable about a father and two sons. The miscreant son does everything wrong. We can recognize that he “sins” in many ways:

- Demanding his share of the estate while his father still lived (potentially putting his father in hardship and equivalent to saying, “I wish you were dead”)
- Rejecting his family and faith by going to a far-off land with different gods
- Squandering his inheritance
- Amoral living
- Caring for pigs (“unclean” animals in Jewish culture)

Eventually he returns to his father (and brother). He expects nothing; it would be enough just to be hired back as a servant, have clothes to wear, and a roof over his head.

How does the father react? He welcomes the son back with open arms, a forgiving heart, and a new beginning. Would you have done that? Let's evaluate his actions in terms of 1 Thessalonians 5:14-18:

- Is he encouraging? Yes.
- Is he patient? Yes.
- Does he pay back evil for evil, or does he do good? Good. Kind.
- Is he joyful? Absolutely.
- Do you get the sense he ever stopped praying for this boy? No, never.
- Is he thankful? Completely.

Now look at the older brother's reaction:

- Is he encouraging of his brother? No.
- Is he patient with him? No.
- Does he want to pay back evil for evil, to do good? Evil for evil.
- Is he joyful about the prodigal's return? Not at all.
- Do you get the sense he stopped praying for this boy? Totally.
- Is he thankful for his return? Not in the slightest.

What is Jesus' parable about? It's a parable about our heavenly Father's love for each of us.

- **Some of us are like the younger son.** We have had times when we rejected God. We allowed other passions to seduce us. We made a mess of our lives. Some of us, in desperation, have come back to God, pleading for mercy. What did we find? God is running to meet us. Eager to welcome us home. Restoring us to right relationship with Himself, as His sons and daughters, princes and princesses in His Kingdom.
- **Some of us are like the older son.** We have never NOT been with God. We have kept the faith. We have always believed. Hopefully we've even stayed in the household, the community of the faithful, the church. But we've lost our passion for our Father. We've lost some of our compassion for other people. We've lost our joy. We've lost our grace and mercy. We're not loving people anymore. We're not forgiving people anymore. In fact, we're rather ... well ... not nice people. When we come to God, what do we find? We find a God who says, to us, "*Dear son, you have always stayed by me, and everything I have is yours.*" God still loves us – He will always love us – today and every day. But He wants us to rediscover our first love.

Whether we are the younger son, coming back to God and being welcomed with open arms, or whether we are the older son whom God loves faithfully day in and day out, we are called to live out the same love God shows to us. We are to

- Be encouraging.
- Be patient.
- Not pay back evil for evil but do good to each other and to ALL people.
- Be joyful.
- Never stop praying for the people around us.

- Be genuinely thankful in all circumstances.

Seriously?

Are we really supposed to live like this? Let's look at a couple of other Scriptures:

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, "You have heard the law that says, 'Love your neighbor' and hate your enemy. But I say, love your enemies! Pray for those who persecute you! In that way, you will be acting as true children of your Father in heaven. For he gives his sunlight to both the evil and the good, and he sends rain on the just and the unjust alike. If you love only those who love you, what reward is there for that? Even corrupt tax collectors do that much. If you are kind only to your friends, how are you different from anyone else? Even pagans do that. But you are to be perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect" (Matthew 5: 43-48).

Paul writes to the church in Rome – believers living in the heart of all the corruption, evil, power, and persecution that was the Roman Empire – "Don't just pretend to love others. Really love them. Hate what is wrong. Hold tightly to what is good. Love each other with genuine affection, and take delight in honoring each other. Never be lazy, but work hard and serve the Lord enthusiastically. Rejoice in our confident hope. Be patient in trouble, and keep on praying. When God's people are in need, be ready to help them. Always be eager to practice hospitality.

"Bless those who persecute you. Don't curse them; pray that God will bless them. Be happy with those who are happy, and weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with each other. Don't be too proud to enjoy the company of ordinary people. And don't think you know it all!

"Never pay back evil with more evil. Do things in such a way that everyone can see you are honorable. Do all that you can to live in peace with everyone.

"Dear friends, never take revenge. Leave that to the righteous anger of God ... Don't let evil conquer you, but conquer evil by doing good" (Romans 12:9-21).

Peter, writing to believers facing intense persecution for their faith, says, "All of you should be of one mind. Sympathize with each other. Love each other as brothers and sisters. Be tenderhearted and keep a humble attitude. Don't repay evil for evil. Don't retaliate with insults when people insult you. Instead, pay them back with a blessing. That is what God has called you to do, and he will grant you his blessing" (1 Peter 3:8-9).

Finally, let's come back to Jesus again. Jesus is the ultimate example of Someone who not only talked the talk, but walked the walk. He was unfairly sentenced to death in two rigged trials. He was brutally beaten and abused. He was mercilessly – horrifically – nailed to a cross. During His suffering and agony, Jesus prays, *"Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing"* (Luke 23:41). Jesus models NOT paying back evil for evil, but always trying to DO GOOD TO EACH OTHER and to all people.

"You have heard the law that says, 'Love your neighbor' and hate your enemy. But I say, love your enemies! Pray for those who persecute you!" Was Jesus serious about this? Really? Jesus Himself practices that principle to the ultimate end.

So where does this leave us in 2021?

"Brothers and sisters, we urge you to ... encourage those who are timid. Take tender care of those who are weak. Be patient with everyone. See that no one pays back evil for evil, but always try to DO GOOD TO EACH OTHER and to all people. Always be joyful. Never stop praying. Be thankful in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you who belong to Christ Jesus" (1 Thessalonians 5:14-18).

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This is NOT easy. Sometimes, as I reflect on Scripture, I can figure out how I can actually do this. This week, I need to spend some time in the Parable of the Prodigal Son(s).

- **In what ways am I like the younger son?** Where have I gone off track? What do I need to confess to God? God welcomes me back with open arms.
- **In what ways am I like the older son?** Am I impatient with people? Do I want people to get what they deserve? Have I lost my joy? Am I grouchy? Am I afraid? Do I just take the Father for granted, and not actually pray anymore? Do I grumble and complain about lots of things? Am I not very thankful in any circumstances? What do I need to confess to God? God welcomes me back with open arms, too.

I need to ask myself:

- Who can I encourage? How will I do that ...?
- Who do I need to be patient with? How do I do that ...?
- When I am tempted to pay back evil for evil, how can I always try to DO GOOD to other people. What does that look like?
- How can I be more joyful?
- How can I pray more, in every situation I face?
- How can I be thankful in ALL circumstances ...?

Lord, help me to be more like Jesus ...