

HOW TO
OVERCOME
evil

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A Practical Exposition
Of Romans 12:14–21

JAY E. ADAMS

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Preface

I HAVE NOT PREVIOUSLY discussed this extremely important issue in any of my writings. It is new territory. However, the following material, consisting largely of a practical exposition of the latter portion of Romans 12, is not new to our counseling practice. The sort of biblical instruction given in this book has been used over the years to help many persons who find themselves in hand-to-hand combat with evil.

It is my hope that this book will find widespread usage among Christians in general and particularly will be used as assigned reading for counselees who are struggling with the problems to which it is addressed. I believe that counselors everywhere will find it to be an important adjunct to their counseling ministry. I have kept it small and brief for this reason.

Because so many Christians are defeated precisely at the point of their response to attacks on them by evil persons, and because I know of no handbook written in simple style, yet faithful to the

Scriptures, to which they can be directed for guidance and strength, I hope that in some measure by the publication of this book to meet that need. The book is concerned not only with *what* a Christian must do to overcome evil but—like the passage on which it is based—*how* to do so.

Jay E. Adams, 1977
Dean of the Institute of Pastoral Studies
The Christian Counseling & Educational
Foundation

Introduction

“HE CAN’T DO THAT to me! I’ll fix him; I know just how to get even. First I’ll. . .” Such words not infrequently fall from the lips of Christians, and not only from those who are immature and disobedient. Any Christian who reads his Bible knows that they are wrong. But how many—even among the more mature Christians—know what to do about the attitudes behind those words? How many know what the Christian attitude should be? And how do you develop it?

When somebody wrongs me, should I retaliate in any way at all? Am I to be totally passive? Is that what turning the other cheek means? How do I handle my feelings if I am hurt or angry? And, what about my immediate reactions? Sometimes I lash out and fight back (at least with words) before I have even had time to think about what I am doing. I seem to be a creature of habit, and my habits are so hard to break. I have good intentions of doing otherwise, but my practice so often fails to measure up to them. I’m defeated more often than

not in my battle with evil. Isn't there some way that I can learn at least to stand my ground? Or, am I doomed for the rest of my earthly life to failure? I try to control my tongue but it isn't easy. And, even when I don't say the wrong things I know what I am thinking . . . and I know that isn't right. But one of my biggest problems is to know what is right. Where can I find that out, and when I do, will I be able to do it? That's my problem in a nutshell. Are you puzzled by such questions?

It is possible, of course, that you have discovered God's answers to these questions and that you are successfully following them in your everyday activities. You have learned how to respond properly to your unsaved mother-in-law when she criticizes your cooking or tells a friend that you weren't good enough to marry her son. It may be that you no longer have trouble handling your attitudes toward the boss when he fails to recognize your extra efforts and instead finds fault with you and blames you for what others have done. Once you didn't say much about it (you couldn't afford to lose your job) but you certainly thought all sorts of hard things against him. And at times—unthinkable as it may seem—you have caught yourself praying (praying, I said) that God would remove him from his job, or even once or twice that He would

remove him from the earth. More than once you have said (under your breath) “damn him.” And you knew these subvocal thoughts and words were wrong and regretted it. Perhaps, in the very midst of this struggle, you have discovered God’s answer, and through repentance and the prayerful application of the Bible to your work situation you have found the way to overcome these sins. The Holy Spirit has not only changed you by removing these attitudes, but He has helped you to replace them with biblical thoughts and words that have made you the victor over evil. In fact, your changed attitudes have brought about new conditions that have led to several recent opportunities to witness to your boss.

If you are winning the battle with evil, then you probably don’t need this book. You are one of the few who, in our time, is able to grapple successfully with the enemy. Thank God, keep up the struggle, and show others how to do so too.

But perhaps you are like so many—defeated, dismal, and despairing. You have tried and tried and failed and failed. And perhaps you have concluded, “I’m just not the apostle Paul. He could win the war with evil and say he had fought the good fight successfully; I can’t and I haven’t and I don’t see how I ever will.” If that’s how it is with you, then

my friend, this book is for you. You have the same resources to draw on that Paul had. God hasn't changed. Your problem may be that you have tried the wrong things, or tried the right things wrongly. But there is a right way, and a right way to walk in it. Take heart! Cheer up! God hasn't failed you. Read and do what follows and—like many others who have discovered God's way and how to walk in it—you too can overcome evil.

CHAPTER 1

Are You a Winner?

“A WINNER? Me, a winner? You’ve gotta be kidding? I’m a born loser. I couldn’t win a game of checkers against a blindfolded opponent with two hands tied behind his back if I started with a board full of kings! That’s rich, think of it! Me a winner! Ha!”

But you can be, in spite of what you have just said. Indeed, if you have trusted Jesus Christ as your Savior, you have no other option. He says you *may* be a winner, insists that you *must* be a winner, and (indeed) *commands* you to be a winner. You have no choice.

Let me assure you at the outset, however, that you will never become a winner so long as you continue to tell yourself that it is impossible. We use language for two purposes: to talk to others and *to talk to ourselves*. We may not convince others too often, but when we talk to ourselves

we are usually most persuasive! People who say such non-Christian things as “I’m a born loser” first convince themselves that it is true, then live like it. It is a sin for Christians to use language so loosely. The fact is that if you have been born again, you are literally a born winner! Christ calls Christians “overcomers” (lit. “winners”) and then tells them: “He who overcomes, I will grant to him to sit down with Me on My throne, as I also overcame, and sat down with My Father on His throne” (Rev. 3:21 NASV). Indeed, you have been “born again to a living hope . . . an imperishable and undefiled inheritance [that won’t] fade away [and is] reserved in heaven for you who are protected by the power of God” (1 Peter 1:3–5 NASV). That is the description of a born *winner*! Get rid of such sinful clichés; let’s think scripturally together for a while and you may see things quite differently a lot sooner than you think.

To begin with, let’s try to understand something about a number of Paul’s letters. Frequently, Paul divides his letters into two main parts: a doctrinal section followed by a practical one. In the book of Ephesians, for example, the first three chapters deal with God’s eternal, sovereign plan of salvation. Then, in the last three chapters,

Paul takes up the practical implications of what he has just said for Christian living. In effect, he says, “On the basis of these great truths let me tell you how to walk as a Christian.” The two sections are not separate but are hinged together with a “therefore.”

The same is true of the book of Romans. Chapters 1–11 deal with man’s sin, God’s salvation, the sanctification of the believer, and the calling of the gentiles into God’s covenant community. Then, in chapter 12, Paul says, “I urge you therefore brethren, by the mercies of God (i.e., “I base this appeal on the grace of God in saving you as I have shown in the previous section of my letter”) to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice.” As they previously had presented the members of their bodies to sin to serve sin’s purposes (6:13, 19), now, having been saved by God’s mercy, they were to present their bodies for God’s righteous service. The rest of chapter 12 and the chapters that follow explain how this may be done in actual day-by-day living.

In chapter 12, Paul stresses the need for making a sober evaluation and a proper use of the Holy Spirit’s differing gifts to honor God and bless His church; then, the chapter concludes with these words:

Bless those who persecute you; bless and curse not.

Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep.

Be of the same mind toward one another; do not be haughty in mind, but associate with the lowly.

Do not be wise in your own estimation.

Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men.

If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men.

Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God for it is written "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay, says the Lord.

But if your enemy is hungry, feed him, and if he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in so doing you will heap burning coals upon his head."

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. (Rom. 12:14–21, NASV)

We will be studying these verses in depth, because in them lie the answers to most of the questions that can be asked about overcoming evil. I hope that when we are through, its principles will be etched into your thinking and your daily living will be thoroughly marinated in them.