

**“DO NOT BE OVERCOME BY EVIL”**

***Romans 12:1-21***

One of the constants about life in this world is change. Whatever else is happening around us, one of the things we can be most sure about is that things are changing. All around us stuff is happening that means we can no longer rely on the apparent certainties of the past. Scientific discoveries, new ways of looking at the world, technological advances, fresh perspectives on everything from geology to theology, from shopping to shipping. Our culture is changing, our laws are changing, our way of looking at life is changing.

Very often, this is for the good. We take account of new discoveries and new techniques in communication, in medicine, in travel, in production, in entertainment. We have all benefitted from such things in our short lifetimes and our world is a very different, much safer, much more efficient place than it was even half a century ago.

But not all changes are for the good, though. In the overturning of outmoded thinking and behaviour we also find our moral and ethical systems are being transformed. With the amazing march of science and all that it entails, we seem far more interested in the “how” rather than the “why” – we want to do the things that are being introduced around us because we can rather than asking why we want to do them and what effect they might have on the general good of the world.

Of course, all these things happen gradually. Something is discovered or thought up in the academy or laboratory – a new way of thinking, a new approach to education, a new technique in medicine – and it takes time to be tested and to trickle down through the practitioners to the ordinary person in the street. But eventually these new things become part of our way of life and we all find ourselves swept along by stuff we are told is good for us and which everyone else seems to be doing. It’s what we might call “culture creep” – the insidious acceptance of the new without really thinking about whether it’s right or not.

And because so many other people seem to buy into these new ways of thinking, we are reluctant to express our misgivings out of fear of seeming old-fashioned, fuddy-duddy or over-puritanical and judgemental. Even when things are introduced that are initially presented as being for the common good, we don’t like to suggest that it might be the thin end of the wedge, or even (perish the thought!) against what we believe the Bible might have to say on the issue. Take a couple of things that are now pretty much a part of our culture. Back in 1967 David Steele introduced a law to regulate the practice of abortion for the very sensible reason that it would prevent the appalling practices of backstreet abortionists and the loss of life that all that entailed. There were pretty clear safeguards and it was

obvious that Mr Steele was trying to improve things. Many of the safeguards have now been effectively ditched and we are now in a position where we pretty well have abortion on demand and there are even cases (currently actually being prosecuted) of abortion for gender selection.

Or Sunday trading. I remember standing on platforms in the 1980s with trades unionists and religious leaders campaigning against the changes in the law and being told that workers' rights to refuse to work on Sundays would be safeguarded and our way of life would not really be changing. Some of you here this morning will have had first-hand experience of trying to get your shifts changed and many of you here this morning will now be seeing this service as something to do on the way to the supermarket. The centre of Lichfield seems just like any other day today – except the parking's cheaper. It's kind of crept up on us, hasn't it?

As these changes gradually go on around us over years, decades, we find ourselves – as J B Phillips translates v2 of this chapter – being squeezed into the world's mould. Try as we might – and, let's face it, most of us don't even try, which is the point – we're conforming to the pattern of this world's behaviour and attitudes and eventually, as Paul warns against at the end of this chapter, being overcome by evil. Our lives are moving further and further away from the norms set out in Scripture, away from what God seems to want of us. Because it's all happening so gradually and because everyone else seems quite at ease about it all, we hardly notice. It's a bit like the old illustration of the frog in the kettle. Throw a frog into a kettle of boiling water and it will jump out. Put a frog in a kettle and heat it up to boiling and the frog will simply be boiled alive. We're in the kettle, folks, and it's heating up around us. Then we get to the point where we have to make some decisions about what we do as God's people – as we need to start thinking about at our Church Meeting this week – and we've slid so far into the thinking of the world around us that we are left with some pretty big dilemmas.

We need constantly to be establishing our priorities as individuals and as a church. Are we truly following the Kingly Messiah whose teaching we have been following in Matthew's Gospel? How might Jesus be looking at our society today? What about the ideas and aspirations that seem to underpin our lives? What about our own lifestyle choices as people who claim to have Scripture as our overriding authority? Are we unwittingly allowing ourselves to be "*overcome by evil*"?

Now you may object that human beings have always had the propensity to do evil, to sin – after all, Paul tells us in chapter 3 of this letter that everyone has sinned and fallen short of the glory that we should be reflecting as people made in God's image. Look through history and there is ample evidence that we are no more nor less evil than our ancestors. That's very true. But for centuries that propensity for evil has been held in check to some extent by consensus about what is unacceptable, by the laws we pass for

ourselves and by the parameters that have been set by governments both good and bad. I would suggest that that is now crumbling around us.

A culture that has for centuries tried to build its laws around a Judaeo-Christian consensus about what is good for us, based on the teaching of the Bible, is now discarding all that in the name of the buzz words of the last few generations – individual freedom, privatisation of belief and behaviour, competition inspired by social Darwinism. Despite the outward attempts by various governments to re-engage with community life, everything is being done to fragment those communities and ensure that every man and woman can do as they please, so long as it doesn't do too much damage to those around them.

Just pause for a moment and think about what you see in the world around you today. Look at the overt sexualisation of our culture – the images, the television programmes, the articles, the easy access to it all via the Internet. Sex has been commodified and the old safeguards – or taboos, if that's what you prefer – have disappeared in the name of individual freedom to choose what we want to see and experience. Pornography is big business, which means it is sacrosanct in many circles. We are all exposed to aspects of it whenever we open a newspaper or magazine or log on to the Internet. It is numbing our critical abilities, anaesthetising our moral feeling, becoming just another aspect of our entertainment and enjoyment. And what is it doing to our children? How is it affecting their – and our – attitudes to the opposite sex – and, indeed, to sex in general? And what about our easy acceptance of practices and preferences which seem, on the face of it, to be against the teaching of the Bible – cohabitation, serial monogamy, homosexual and heterosexual promiscuity, blurred gender distinctions, partner-swapping, prostitution and the rest? It doesn't hurt anyone, so why make a fuss?

Look at our use of language. Blasphemy and swearing are commonplace. Some common swear words are used pretty well as punctuation by many people – including some Christians. Now I know there are all kinds of things that could be said about changes in language and the modification of vocabulary – you don't need to tell me about that – but how does it all square with what we read in the Bible about not using God's name in vain and avoiding obscene talk? *“But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God's holy people.<sup>4</sup> Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving”* (Ephesians 5:3,4) *“But now you must also rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips”* (Colossians 3:8). What does our use of language say about our attitudes to others? Somehow we don't put that kind of thing up there with the big sins, do we?

Neither do we view gossip and all that kind of stuff as wrong, despite the clear commands against it in the Bible – look at *Romans 1:29* (“*They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips*”), *2 Corinthians 12:20* (“*For I am afraid that when I come I may not find you as I want you to be, and you may not find me as you want me to be. I fear that there may be discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, slander, gossip, arrogance and disorder.*”), *1 Timothy 5:13* (“*Besides, they get into the habit of being idle and going about from house to house. And not only do they become idlers, but also busybodies who talk nonsense, saying things they ought not to.*”). What a gift to gossips is the Internet! FaceBook, Twitter, Instagram – all those apps that allow you to stalk other people, to look at what they’re doing and saying, and then pass it on to other people. You don’t even need to huddle in the corner at the office or at the school gate or over coffee after the service. But we’ve just got used to it – it’s part of what we do, our way of life.

Violence is on the increase – domestic, sexual, casual. It’s fed by what we see on television, at the cinema, on our DVD players and laptops. And we loudly proclaim the right of people to watch what they want, otherwise it’s censorship, and we don’t want that. After all, watching that kind of thing isn’t harming anyone. But it has been shown that such stuff has an effect on the brain. Once again, if you’re constantly looking at violence on the screen or reading about it in your books and on your Kindles, it’s seeping into your brain and you are being overcome by evil.

What about greed (which is “*idolatry*”, according to Paul in *Colossians 3:5*), covetousness, gluttony, excess – evils fed by advertising and facilitated by easy credit. Again, we will staunchly uphold our right to do what we want with our money – after all, we earned it and it’s up to us how we spend it. That’s not quite how the Bible sees it.

We could go on and on – but it wouldn’t really add anything to what’s already been said. (Plus, I’d just be sounding more and more like the grumpy old man you all think I am anyway.) The point is, these are not the values of the Kingdom. This is not what the Kingly Messiah expects of his followers. We need to stand against things which are clearly at odds with the message of the Bible and not allow ourselves to be overcome by evil. Alas! Such values have already infected our churches. As Christians we have accommodated ourselves so cosily to the culture around us that we are pretty well indistinguishable from it all. We might read the Bible and pray. We might get together on Sunday mornings on the way to the shops. We might gossip about each other rather than our neighbours. But we’re not really that different from the rest of our society. We have been squeezed into the mould of the world. We are conforming to the pattern of this world.

Now Paul obviously realised that that was a real danger for the Christians in the cosmopolitan, modern-thinking, trend-setting city of Rome when he wrote this letter. He knew that they – like us – were already on that slippery slope. That’s why he gives them this wake-up call – “*Do not conform **any longer** to the pattern of this world.*” And he doesn’t simply tell them to change their behaviour, to try a bit harder, to look at what they’re doing. He tells them to change the way they think about it all – “*be transformed **by the renewing of our mind.***” I know I bang on about it a lot, but I make no apology for it because it is the single most important thing for us as followers of Jesus – and probably the thing many of us find the most difficult. Sort out your attitudes! Think about it. Read the Bible and apply it. And – for those of you who still have them – help your children to form the right attitudes. Help them to resist peer pressure – which you can’t do if you are not thinking carefully about all this. Give them some moral guidance. Point them to the words of Jesus, to the teaching of the Bible.

What is going on here – and I am not given to hyperbole – is a spiritual battle for the hearts and minds of our generation. The foundation has been laid by the non-Christian, anti-Christian thinking of several decades. The voice of the tempter whispers in our ear – through newspaper columns and TV correspondents and legislators and politicians – that you cannot resist it: everyone is doing it: you’re just being old-fashioned, bigoted, something-or-other-phobic. The point is – and it is a point Paul is making in a culture that has so many similarities to our own – that you *can* resist, you *must* resist.

As we’ve already said, we’ve become too cosy with the evil around us. It has almost overcome us and we need a transformation in our thinking, in our own lives. Paul says here, “*Hate what is evil; cling to what is good.*” And in his First Letter John writes, “*Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, love for the Father is not in them. For everything in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but whoever does the will of God lives forever*” (1 John 2:15-17).

Now this isn’t a time for hand-wringing or a call to protest. They have their place. But until we have extricated ourselves from the web of evil into which we’ve allowed ourselves to be drawn, our first priority must be to sort out our own thinking, our own attitudes. It’s time to live out the values of the Kingdom, even though that will almost certainly bring us into conflict with the society around us. We’ll need to support each other in that, to be accountable to one another. We’ll need to stand with those who are most keenly feeling the struggle to follow the way of the Kingly Messiah in a world which doesn’t even acknowledge his existence, let alone the validity of his teaching. We need to be more confident in our faith and to recognise that it is not a set of arbitrary rules and regulations, but God’s blueprint for a well-ordered society of fulfilled and faithful people.

And to help us in that, over the next couple of months, we'll be looking at some of the issues that we need to think about, grappling with the ways in which we allow our attitudes to be formed and seeking ways in which God can lead us forward as his people. In the meantime, read the Bible, think hard, pray hard, get hold of some reading that might help you, talk about the issues at your housegroups. *“Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”* And to help you in that, *“be transformed by the renewing of your mind.”*

**"DO NOT BE OVERCOME BY EVIL"**  
***Romans 12:1-21***

Whatever else is happening around us, one of the things we can be most sure about is that things are changing. As these changes gradually go on around us over years, decades, we find ourselves being squeezed into the world's mould. Try as we might – and, let's face it, most of us don't even try, which is the point – we're conforming to the pattern of this world's behaviour and attitudes and eventually, as Paul warns against at the end of this chapter, being overcome by evil. Our lives are moving further and further away from the norms set out in Scripture, away from what God seems to want of us. Because it's all happening so gradually and because everyone else seems quite at ease about it all, we hardly notice.

We need constantly to be establishing our priorities as individuals and as a church. Are we truly following the Kingly Messiah whose teaching we have been following in Matthew's Gospel? How might Jesus be looking at our society today? What about the ideas and aspirations that seem to underpin our lives? What about our own lifestyle choices as people who claim to have Scripture as our overriding authority? Are we unwittingly allowing ourselves to be *"overcome by evil"*?

Human beings have always had the propensity to do evil, to sin – after all, Paul tells us in chapter 3 of this letter that everyone has sinned and fallen short of the glory that we should be reflecting as people made in God's image. Look through history and there is ample evidence that we are no more nor less evil than our ancestors. That's very true. But for centuries that propensity for evil has been held in check to some extent by consensus about what is unacceptable, by the laws we pass for ourselves and by the parameters that have been set by governments both good and bad. I would suggest that that is now crumbling around us. A culture that has for centuries tried to build its laws around a Judaeo-Christian consensus about what is good for us, based on the teaching of the Bible, is now discarding all that in the name of the buzz words of the last few generations – individual freedom, privatisation of belief and behaviour, competition inspired by social Darwinism.

Just pause for a moment and think about what you see in the world around you today. Look at the overt sexualisation of our culture. Look at our use of language. (Read *Ephesians 5:3,4* or *Colossians 3:8*). Neither do we view gossip and all that kind of stuff as wrong, despite the clear commands against it in the Bible – look at *Romans 1:29*, *2 Corinthians 12:20*, *1 Timothy 5:13*. Violence is on the increase – domestic, sexual, casual. What about greed (which is *"idolatry"*, according to Paul in *Colossians 3:5*), covetousness, gluttony, excess – evils fed by advertising and facilitated by easy credit. We could go on and on – but it wouldn't really add anything to what's already been said. As Christians we have accommodated ourselves so cosily to the culture around us that we are pretty well indistinguishable from it all. We are conforming to the pattern of this world.

Paul gives us this wake-up call – *"Do not conform **any longer** to the pattern of this world."* And he doesn't simply tell us to change our behaviour, to try a bit harder, to look at what we're doing. He tells us to change the way we think about it all – *"be transformed **by the renewing of our mind.**"* We are engaged in a spiritual battle for the hearts and minds of our generation. The foundation has been laid by the non-Christian, anti-Christian thinking of several decades. The voice of the tempter whispers in our ear – through newspaper columns and TV correspondents and legislators and politicians – that you cannot resist it: everyone is doing it: you're just being old-fashioned, bigoted, something-or-other-phobic. The point is – and it is a point Paul is making in a culture that has so many similarities to our own – that you **can** resist, you **must** resist. Look at *Romans 12:9*, *1 John 2:15-17*. It's time to live out the values of the Kingdom, even though that will almost certainly bring us into conflict with the society around us.

### **Questions for discussion**

1. What do you understand by being *"conformed to this world"*? In what ways does that show itself? In what ways are Christians conformed to this world?
2. What does Paul mean by *"the renewing of your mind"*? How does that happen?
3. Why is the mind so important? Why has Christianity often tried to discourage thinking about faith?
4. In what ways can Christians show that they have different attitudes from those around them who are not Christians?

5. Has anything stuck in your mind about this study/sermon? What? Why? What are you going to do about it?