

### **There Is No Try, Only Do**

Proverbs 25:21-22

Romans 12:9-21

“We are neither wise enough nor good enough to punish our enemies justly.” So reads a note appended to Romans 12:19 in my study Bible. Today, when so many see “enemies” they want to punish, this point has incredible power. Some see enemies with black skin; others, with white. Some see enemies of the elephant persuasion; others, of the donkey. But we are neither wise nor good enough to punish anybody. No, as the verse itself says, punishment for evil belongs to the Lord and the Lord alone. Let God do God. We have enough to worry about just trying to do us properly.

Romans 12:9-18 reads remarkably like the *Desiderata*, a poem by Terre Haute's own Max Ehrmann. “Let love be genuine,” the Apostle Paul writes. “Neither be cynical about love; for in the face of all aridity and disenchantment, it is as perennial as the grass,” writes Ehrmann. “Never flag in zeal,” Paul writes. “Enjoy your achievements as well as your plans,” writes Ehrmann. “Rejoice in your hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer,” Paul writes. “Nurture strength of spirit to shield you in sudden misfortune. Do not distress yourself with dark imaginings. Many fears are born of fatigue and loneliness,” writes Ehrmann. “If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all,” Paul writes. “As far as possible, without surrender, be on good terms with all persons,” writes Ehrmann.

Great, godly advice all around! By the time these two wrote these words, each

had become an old man. Paul would have been around sixty when he wrote his letter to the Romans, an advanced age at the time. Ehrmann wrote all his poetry late in life; he published none of it before he died. Both of their pieces drip with wisdom, with a deep perspective rarely if ever attained by the young. If we rummage around a little beneath the surface of their work we find a common theme: living wisely is **hard**. It takes effort. It takes strength. It takes the insight and the energy **not** to do things we feel sorely tempted to do.

My friend Matt coached football at the high school our children attended. With a big fire hydrant body, he'd played offensive line at Central Michigan and still looked like he could knock any man on his bottom. Matt told me the hardest part of his job was not lashing out at his players' parents. Early in his career the fathers had been the problem. But by the turn of this century, the moms had gotten just as bad. The things they would yell at him from the stands, where his wife Kim sat. The things they would tell their sons. The things they would do at award banquets and practices. A deeply faithful Christian, Matt knew he was called not to respond in kind. And he did not. But it took a toll on him. When one mom launched a campaign against Kim on social media, it proved the straw that broke his back. He quit coaching. He feared that if he stayed on he might eventually snap and say or do something unforgivable. Taking the high road took too much from him for him to continue.

This sermon carries a title, "There Is No Try, Only Do", inspired by a famous scene in The Empire Strikes Back, Episode V in the Star Wars saga. Master Yoda is

pushing his young protege, Luke Skywalker, to develop the Force within him. Luke has not progressed well. He has lost confidence in his abilities, in his potential. Yoda expresses impatience with his attitude. “Okay,” Luke says, “I’ll try.”

“No!” Yoda responds. “Do or not do. There is no try.” (A momentary pause. Though I am about to exegete a quote from Star Wars I want first to make clear that I am not one of those people who finds deep, existential profundity in those movies—nor, God forbid, Star Trek. And now, having offended half of you, I want to return to the point.) **Of course** living a godly life requires effort. There **is** try. But try is only the means, not the end. **Do** is the end. Yoda wants Skywalker to keep trying until he becomes proficient at using the powers given to him. The Apostle Paul and Max Ehrmann share this wise perspective. Living a meaningful, godly life is hard. Yet the work is not the point. It is the means to the end, to the point, which is becoming the people God called us to be. To do what godly people do.

Or, paradoxically, **not** to do what godly people do **not** do. “Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God,” Paul tells us. “For it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay says the Lord.’” Not taking it out on our perceived enemies is some of the hardest work we must ever do, as my friend Matt the football coach discovered. Yet answering this call empowers us to live wisely. It empowers us to love and honor others. It empowers us to glow in the Spirit, to have a genuine spiritual life. It empowers us to rejoice, to be patient, constant in prayer, generous, sympathetic. In times when angry people **on all sides** seek to inflame and and injure

people they see as hated enemies, answering the call of God gives us the strength to become more like Jesus.

There is no try, only do. The end result is the point. Becoming more Christlike is the point. Yes, doing takes trying. But Paul gives us an absolute standard. Either we clear the bar or we do not. We do not get participation trophies. By the grace of God we do not get rewarded according to our efforts. Because as Paul points out a few chapters back, all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. In grateful response to the forgiveness granted us we **do**. We overcome evil with good. Today, our nation and all creation desperately need more people to do this very thing.

Before I start on my next point, permit me to state that I draw a distinction between protesters expressing their legitimate grief over the treatment of people of color in America; and radical rioters using the moment as cover to rampage for their horrible agenda. The other night, as the Republican national convention ended, a number of people who'd been invited inside the White House—including several who had spoken during that evening's program—walked out into the streets of Washington D.C. As they came out the mobs surrounded them. They screamed in their faces, sometimes using bullhorns. They pushed and slapped them, on more than one occasion knocking their “enemies” to the pavement. One moblet stole an elderly man's walker. There he stood in the center of F St., urgently needing somehow to get out of there. The mob would not allow him passage. I would bet a month's salary the young protesters who threatened this couple had no idea who they were. I had to look

it up; it took a bit for me to learn their names and when I did, I still did not recognize them. ***No cause, no protest makes this acceptable. God does not honor this brand of vengeance.***

Three days before, a young man named Kyle Rittenhouse, from the polar opposite end of the political spectrum as those mobs, drove from suburban Chicago to Kenosha, Wisconsin. He spent a few hours helping to scrub graffiti from buildings vandalized in the previous two days' rioting there. Then he wandered the streets alone, without connection to either the home- and business-owners in the war zone nor to any of the groups organizing to resume the protests later that night. Eventually he joined a group of armed men standing in front of one business. He'd brought along his own semi-automatic rifle. He did not know the names of any of the men, nor of the business in front of which they stood.

When the protesters wisely just kept moving once they reached that stretch of sidewalk, the young man grew bored and resumed wandering. Eventually a young white guy alone with his gun drew the attention of the protesters. One man tackled him from behind. Another hit him with his skateboard. (If that strikes you as funny, understand that skateboards today are four feet long and made of hardwood.) Somehow a third man, armed himself, got involved. Rittenhouse started firing. He killed the first two and blew away a significant portion of the armed man's upper arm. ***No counter-cause, no counter-protest makes this acceptable. God does not honor this brand of vengeance.***

The time has come for this preacher to come clean. I find myself trapped in the middle, stuck between two enraged groups stoking their passions on social media and broadcast radio and television. People I have known for 45 years, people who have always been thoughtful and sweet, raise their voices and wave their arms while calling the other side names my salty grandfather would not have uttered in polite company. My reading of the Bible, my theological training and my prayers make it impossible for me to support either side. The people in the streets of D.C. and Kenosha are extreme examples. ***But they represent what we are in the process of becoming as a nation and I can no longer remain silent. A pox on ALL their houses.***

The Holy Spirit of God is speaking to us. I hear it calling us to have the strength to be grownups. I hear it calling us to have the maturity to listen to people with whom we disagree. I hear it calling us to let God do God. Let God judge others. Let God guide our own thinking and feelings. I see real evil at work in our world today. We can and must fight it. But how? We must permit God to take care of separating the sheep from the goats. Meanwhile, let us do us. In the words of Julia Jackson, mother of Jacob Blake, the man shot seven times in the back by Kenosha police, "We really just need your prayers...I am asking and encouraging everyone in Wisconsin and abroad to take a moment and examine your heart...do Jacob justice on this level and examine your heart. We need healing." We need healing, not revenge. Let us find the spiritual strength to become more Christlike. Do not be overcome with evil, but overcome evil with good. Find the strength to become a part of the healing.