

2017-02-19

Show Love in Return for Abuse

Matthew 5:38-42

Epiphany 7(A)

"You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you." (NIV84)

No one can play a basketball game without Isaac Newton's third law of motion. Or we should say, Isaac Newton's third law of motion accurately describes what happens when a basketball bounces. Newton wrote, "For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction." When I bounce this ball, the ball pushes down on the floor and the floor pushes back up on the ball. The amount of the force is the same but in the opposite direction. That's why the ball bounces back to my hand.

When Isaac Newton wrote this summary of one of God's laws in the natural world, do you think he realized he was also writing a summary of one of God's civil laws for society? "Equal and opposite reaction" is really the same thing as "eye for eye and tooth for tooth." God gave this law as part of his civil governance in the Old Covenant with Israel. God himself was the government for the people of Israel. He ruled them directly and set up the societal laws for punishing crimes. "Eye for eye and tooth for tooth" was a law of deterrence, meant to curb the coarse outbreaks of sin and keep order in society. It means the punishment should fit the crime.

But don't we prefer to understand this law as one of retribution, as a formula for taking personal revenge? Our gut reaction is to get even with a person who has hurt us. We read this law as "abuse for abuse." When the ball hits the floor, the floor hits the ball right back. If someone has gossiped about us, how often

do we respond by saying something bad about him or her? If someone dings our car door in a parking lot, how often do we feel the urge to ding their door right back? If a spouse looks at pornography on the internet, how often does the other spouse feel justified in doing the same? We might think, "They deserve it. After all, even God said 'Eye for eye and tooth for tooth.' If they don't like how it feels, they shouldn't have done that thing in the first place."

But we can't always get retribution, so sometimes we settle for making some substitutions. If we get rear-ended in the car and have some whiplash effects, we can't give the other driver whiplash in return. So we'll sue for some money instead—and not just enough to get the doctors' bills paid; we want a little cash in our pocket afterwards too. Sometimes we take our revenge on someone else entirely. If a company has hurt us financially and we can't get it back from them, maybe we can find a way to pass the hurt on to the IRS and take it out of our taxes. If a boss offends us, it's unlikely that we can get back at him or her, so maybe we go home and pass it on to our spouse or kids. If the pastor says something we don't like, maybe we think we can show him how wrong he is by not showing up anymore.

Indeed, we want retribution—but God claims that retribution is for him alone. In Deuteronomy 32:35 God says, "*Vengeance belongs to me; I will repay.*" God is serious about eye for eye and tooth for tooth. He intends for the seriousness of the punishment to fit the seriousness of the crime. But that's bad news for us because our crimes have been very serious and God is keeping track. The retribution that we deserve is all building up until the terrible day when God will repay it against us.

As true God, Jesus desires perfect retribution—equal and opposite punishment that fits the seriousness of the crime. Jesus kept this law of "eye for eye and tooth for tooth," but in the New Covenant with us as his brothers and sisters he changed the objects of the law. Instead of our eye in return for the eye we poked and our tooth in return for the tooth we knocked out, he substitutes his own eye in exchange for our eye and his own tooth in exchange for ours. He satisfied retribution through substitution of himself. He took responsibility for

all of our unpaid damages. He showed us his love in return for our abuses.

God's vengeance for all of our accumulated crimes landed on Jesus—and not just our crimes, but the crimes of the whole world. The seriousness of the punishment against Jesus must fit the seriousness of that much crime. The only punishment sufficient was the death of the God-man. Our punishment killed Jesus, and he saved us. Isaiah wrote, "*He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed*" (Isaiah 53:5).

But St. Peter proclaimed in his Pentecost sermon, "*God raised [Jesus] from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on [Jesus]!*" (Acts 2:24). Today we have a risen and ascended Lord and Savior and we are freed from the terror of a coming punishment to fit our crimes. Jesus is alive and living in our hearts. He causes everything to work together for our good (Romans 8:28), even when we are abused by others. Because Jesus is concerned about our welfare, we don't have to worry for our own good, but can focus on the good of others (1 Corinthians 10:24).

And that is just what Jesus tells us in this portion of his Sermon on the Mount that we read today. Jesus expanded this civil law that curbed the sin of society into a moral law that guides all people of all time in Christian living. Jesus tells his people, "*Do not resist an evil person*" (v.39). He does not want us focused on revenge, because that blocks reception of the gospel message that he wants us to share. Instead, he wants us to look for a way to respond to insult and injury that shows Christian love for others and glorifies God.

Along with all other laws, Jesus kept this one perfectly during his life too. He never sought revenge as we so often do. When he was betrayed by Judas Iscariot in the Garden of Gethsemane, the disciples wanted to fight back. But Jesus showed perfect love and healed the wounded ear of the high priest's servant. Rather than cursing the people who mocked him while hanging on the cross, he prayed, "*Father, forgive them*" (Luke 23:34). He showed them love in

return for their abuse.

Jesus wants us to find ways of showing love in return for abuse, just as he did. In his sermon he gave several examples. For example, one loving response to an insulting slap in the face is to simply endure it. A loving response to an abusive lawsuit is to settle it quickly without contesting the matter. A loving response to being forced to do someone else's work is to help them twice as much.

Roman soldiers were allowed to force a civilian to carry their gear for one mile. Jesus carried the load of living a perfect life on our behalf for not just one mile, but for all the miles of his life. Today he continues to go with us through all the remaining miles of our lives to strengthen us to endure abuse and show love. When we are injured and then injured again, Baptism washes the wound clean and salves the hurt. When we are forced to carry someone else's burden, the Lord's Supper gives us the strength to carry it twice as far. These are the tools Jesus has provided to accomplish what he commanded.

"Eye for eye and tooth for tooth" is divine justice. Isaac Newton got it right when he wrote "For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction." But the opposite reaction for our sin landed on Jesus rather than on us. He did not resist us evil people but showed us his love in return for our abuse. Let us abandon revenge and show love in return for abuse instead. And then, as St. Peter wrote, "*Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks us to give the reason for the hope that we have*" (1 Peter 3:15). AMEN.