



This is the third week in this text but so we can be fully anchored in it, I will read it again/

14 Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. 15 Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. 16 Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight.

Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. 18 If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. 19 Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." 20 To the contrary, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head." 21 Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Last Sunday I left you with the story of Chris Carrier and his mercy and love toward the man who abused him and attempted to kill him when he was an innocent ten year old boy. We spent two weeks peering into the depths of the gospel and reminding ourselves why and how the gospel--which saved us--applies to those who have hurt us. We saw the power behind the command to bless those who persecute you--an impossible command without the Father's mercy and the Son's humiliation and sacrifice.

But I left you with a question we all have at times. What about justice? Why was David McAllister not punished for his crimes? And even when such people are arrested, our justice system is flawed. Sometimes innocent people are punished and other times the guilty are free and clear. And the issue of mercy and forgiveness just complicates the problem, doesn't it? If I show mercy to my persecutor and nothing ever happens to him, that seems completely unfair. Aren't I giving in too easily to just let them off the hook? Won't this make Christians into doormats? People can abuse us and walk all over us and our only option is to have mercy on them and bless them? That can sound more like weakness than forgiveness.

A few weeks ago I caught a part of a talk show on Wisconsin Public radio. The topic was *Two Hundred Years Of African American Prayer*. The topic was related to, but not limited to African American slaves showing forgiveness toward their slave owners. One caller really objected to this idea and called to share his thoughts.

The idea, especially what was just said about the, you know, forgiveness of the slaves, ah, praying for the slave masters. That's not selflessness. That's buying into propaganda. You wonder why there's so few slave revolts in this country, that's, that's exactly why. You don't have to worry about slave revolt if you beat your slave down so much that they love you. I'm not just, just blaming religion. I think, you know, religion is used as a crutch to kind of gloss over that, like you've heard before, "Oh isn't that so beautiful, isn't that wonderful?" That's not wonderful. That's, like I said, that's just buying, you know someone who's so beaten down they buy into the propaganda of their owner.¹

You can see what's really troubling him. He is convinced that forgiveness is the same thing as weakness. And sometimes it can be. I can see that it would be possible to use forgiveness and Biblical mercy as a club to beat someone over the head with. This would be a type of subjugation and it's likely that this someone like a slave master would want to do this. Anytime someone is in a position of power over you, there would always be the temptation for subjugation, intentional or otherwise.

This is one reason I never ask anyone to forgive me. Sounds weird, doesn't it? Chuck Swindoll is famous for his threefold apology. he says that some of the most powerful words you can ever use goes like this. "I was wrong. I am sorry. Please forgive me."² Sounds good, doesn't it? Wouldn't you like to hear these words from the people who have caused you harm? It is quite likely that there is genuine repentance in these words, especially the first sentence: I was wrong. This is always the right place to start. How many times have we heard pseudo apologies that sound something like this? "I am sorry if I did anything to offend you?" Politicians use this line all of the time but it is certainly not limited to them. So if you start by saying that you were wrong you are admitting your fault, your sin. And it's always best to be as specific as possible.

Peacemaker's Ministry has an excellent process called the 7 A's of Confession. This ministry is the one who created the Slippery slope I showed you last week.

1. Address everyone involved. (All those whom you affected)
2. Avoid if, but, and maybe. (Do not try to excuse your wrongs)
3. Admit specifically (Both attitudes and actions)
4. Acknowledge the hurt. (Express sorrow for hurting someone)
5. Accept the consequences. (Such as making restitution)
6. Alter your behavior. (Change your attitudes and actions)
7. Ask for forgiveness.

The last step in the 7 A's is the same as Swindoll's last step--to ask for forgiveness. This is the only step with which I disagree, and here's why. First of all, the Bible commands us to repent but it does not command us to ask for forgiveness. Second, when you ask someone to forgive you, you are putting them on the spot. It can be a form of subtle manipulation. It's a bit like taking

your children who are having an all out brawl, forcefully separating them and commanding, "Now say you're sorry." They're usually not, are they? At least not at that very moment. If you are truly repentant and sorry, that's your only responsibility. Repentance is your job. Forgiveness is the domain of the person that you hurt. Maybe they don't want to forgive you. Maybe they are not ready to forgive you. Maybe they need more time--days or weeks, not only to work it through in their heart and mind, but to see if your repentance is genuine or not.

But the problem is that Christians know they are supposed to forgive. Saying "I forgive you" is like giving the answer of "Jesus" in Sunday School class. Everyone knows it's the right answer but it might not be from the heart. When you ask someone to forgive you immediately after apologizing, this can be a form of manipulation. You may subtly intend it to be or not, but that doesn't matter. The point is that it puts pressure on the other person to respond right then. What are the options presented to the other person when you ask them to forgive you? They could outright say "No." They could say, "Well, let me think about it." These answers seem so un-Christian so the person generally says "Yes" even if they don't mean it or even if they feel pressured to respond this way.

This gets back to the radio caller. He was concerned that forcing forgiveness would be a form of subjugation. And he is right. This is what abusive relationships look like. The abuser often feels badly about what they have done so they apologize for their actions. They may even be tearful and seem so apologetic but then they want you to forgive them and they may even use Christian jargon and "rightness" of forgiveness to put pressure on you. It's a form of subjugation because one person holds the power and the other person is in subjection. But if your repentance is genuine then your part should stop short of asking for forgiveness. You repent and give the other person the freedom to do what God wants them to do in their own time.

Therefore, false forgiveness is subjugating. It is the powerful manipulating the weak. But true forgiveness, even if you are in a position of weakness, is extremely liberating and empowering. There is nothing more freeing than to not be chained by bitterness and unforgiveness.

So I have answered the question about forgiveness turning you into a doormat for your abuser. Just because you forgive someone doesn't mean you're a doormat for them to wipe their feet on. But just because you forgive someone doesn't mean you continue to let them abuse you or harm you. There is such a wide possibility of examples here. Paul and Jesus both use the word persecutor--the person who is actively persecuting you. All of us have probably been persecuted for our faith at some level at some point. Jesus used the word abuser. Luke 6.27-28- *Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.* You might have someone who actually did abuse you. Now if there is true abuse or harm occurring, you need to get out of that situation. Forgiveness never means intentionally allowing yourself to get hurt. No matter how much pressure someone might put on you to forgive them, if they are abusing you in any way, get out of that situation immediately. Yes, you need to work being able to bless that person, to show them mercy, but mercy and love do not require you to enter back into an abusive situation.

So forgiveness is not weakness. Love is not subjugation. But we still haven't answered the question of justice? The first point in our outline gives us the power and purpose to love our enemies.

1. Trust in the gospel to cover your sins.

Thanks to the gospel, there will never be a hurt caused to us that we do not have the mercy to cover. God's mercy is infinite and since we have that available to us, even a 10,000 talent hurt is not too great to cover. Again, this is the purpose to love our enemies--because God first loved us--and the power to love our enemies-supernatural power through Christ.

The first point gives us power and purpose and the second point gives us satisfaction.

2. Trust in the wrath of God for justice.

This truth is anchored in verse 19. *Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord."* The first thing this verse does is tells us that there will be justice and justice brings satisfaction. When justice prevails we can be at peace. If a criminal gets off on a legal technicality, justice is perverted and no one is satisfied. We are left feeling hollow and dissatisfied at such travesties of justice, especially if we had been personally involved. But true justice is right, fair and good. True justice brings satisfaction that all is right in the world.

But just as love and mercy can sound like weakness--and they can be if not understood rightly--so can justice sound like vengeance and hatred. We know full well that most examples of vengeance are hateful. As a matter of fact, the word vengeance is always used in this negative sense. In our flesh, vengeance and revenge spring from a wicked fountain.

But I want you to know that asking for justice is a good request. I would even say that it's a question that God wants us to ask because he is gracious enough to answer it for us. Even when we seek revenge out of evil motives God understands that there is a kernel of truth even in our worst motives. If you can remove the hatred from our seeking for revenge it would be a good thing. God knows that we seek it which is why he has give us this promise: *Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.* If vengeance itself were wrong, then God could not have offered this promise. With God, vengeance is holy vengeance. For the Lord, justice is always pure, hatred is always right. It is possible for us to be angry and not sin because Ephesians 4:26 tells us that it is possible. It is possible for people to seek vengeance and not sin, but that is limited to the governing authorities. Romans 13:4 says, *For he [the governing authorities] is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer.* We will unpack justice, vengeance and the governing authorities when we get to chapter thirteen but for most of us, most of the time, vengeance and revenge spring from wicked motives.

But for God, vengeance and wrath are part of his very being. Here's a quick sampling of verses.

Deuteronomy 32:43--"He avenges the blood of his children and takes vengeance on his adversaries."

Isaiah 59:17-“He put on righteousness as a breastplate, and a helmet of salvation on his head; he put on garments of vengeance for clothing, and wrapped himself in zeal as a cloak.”

Nahum 1:2-“The Lord is a jealous and avenging God; the Lord is avenging and wrathful; the Lord takes vengeance on his adversaries and keeps wrath for his enemies.”

There are several principles happening here.

1. Vengeance is God's domain. How much more clear can it be when God said, "Vengeance is mine."? The domain of vengeance belongs exclusively to God. It is not ours to take. All of our kids play or have played basketball on local teams so our family, and many of yours, are in the heart of the basketball season. Players routinely get fouled by the officials. It's just part of the game. But do you know when coaches tend to get into trouble? They get into the most trouble when they attempt to enter the domain of the referee. It starts by telling the refs they made the wrong call. I like how our varsity coach does it. He'll question to ref and then in a controlled voice say, "That was the wrong call." I actually don't know what the rules state on this sort of thing but the refs seem to tolerate a certain amount of it. If a coach can remain fairly calm, I think it is his right to question the ref in a respectful manner. But coaches who get completely out of control are really painful to watch. Once they start yelling at the ref they are walking on thin ice.

Dave Hart told me about Ethan's coach back in Kentucky how in every game he went nuts and many of those games he was actually thrown out of the game by the officials. That's pretty bad when a Christian coach from a Christian basketball team repeatedly get thrown out of the game. But the bottom line issue is that the coach forcefully entered into the domain of the referee. Have you ever seen [this crazy play](#) before? (Basketball player accidentally passes the ball to his coach on the sidelines who quickly passes it back to another player.) It would be just as crazy if the referee started dribbling the ball down the court, or if the referee tried to coach the players on the sideline. In order for any sporting event to work properly, the players have their domain the coaches have their domain and the officials have their domain. As long as you stay within your domain things work fine but as soon as you slip into someone's else domain there is chaos. So it is with vengeance. It is not our domain. It is not our right to exercise and carry forth. It belongs to God alone.

2. God's wrath is the means by which his vengeance is carried out.

At first glance, that's not a very comforting sentence, is it? We typically don't even like to hear about the wrath of God and now in a single sentence I have linked the two together!

Paul instructed us to "leave it to the wrath of God." Wrath is God's form of justice. I would encourage you to rethink the word vengeance. As I said before, since we always use it in a negative meaning, it is hard for us to think about God being vengeful. But vengeance truly is his form of justice and his wrath is the means by which he carries out his justice.

Think about the justice system. I realize that every human justice system is broken in some way. They are all flawed and make plenty of mistakes, but the intention is that when true justice is carried out, there is always a punishment, right? What if a drug dealer was sentenced to five years in prison but then the judge allowed him to walk immediately back onto the streets? I think we would all agree that the fact that he declared him to be guilty would be meaningless unless

the prison sentence was both enacted *and* carried forth as stated. So it is with God. If God is to be just, then sin must be punished. Vengeance is his justice system, if you will, and his wrath is the prison sentence. It is the means by which he carries out his vengeance.

And the whole thing is perfectly just and fair because God is perfectly just and fair. If you are tempted to doubt that or think that God's wrath is somehow unfair let me remind you that vengeance and wrath is why there is a cross. John 3:36 states, *Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.* It's a terrible thing to have the wrath of God remain on you to come to rest upon you, but this is the state of every unbeliever. From the perspective of the unbeliever, it is a horrible thing for the wrath of God to rest upon you but the one who places his faith in Christ is free from wrath. But what happened to it? Where did it go? Did it float away like dust in the wind? The Great Exchange reminds us what happened to God's wrath. The wrath of God fell with full force upon the Son at Calvary. Christ is our propitiation by which the wrath of the Father is fully satisfied. The believer is free from the wrath of God because Christ took it for us.

As I said, vengeance is why there is a cross. Bu this is precisely why vengeance is God's domain and not ours. How is God's vengeance carried out? God's vengeance is carried out by means of his wrath. Therefore, vengeance, what we usually call revenge, has to do not just with earthly punishment but with eternal punishment. Can you decide who should go to hell and who should not? Are you capable of handling true vengeance? Do you have the wisdom and the insight to know who should receive God's vengeance and who will not? Then seek not revenge! It is understandable that you are hurt when others sin against you but not a one of us is capable of handling vengeance.

3. God promises that he will have his vengeance.

God said, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay." Do you see, this is a promise? God is promising that he will pay this debt. Vengeance cannot go unpaid and unsatisfied. God will repay the vengeance. Ultimate justice will be served

Herein lies the comfort for the hurts, offenses and sins against us. For the person who has hurt us, even if our human justice system is broken and flawed, even if men like David McAllister never spend a day in person for the heinous crimes they committed, God's justice system will prevail. There is not a single crime nor one lone sin that will drift away into the mist. All of them will be paid. Each of them will be satisfied by the wrath of God. This is why Paul said, "leave it to the wrath of God." In other words, leave it alone. The person who hurt you will be repaid. This is a promise. "Vengeance is mine, I will repay" says the Lord. That is as sure as any promise in all of Scripture.

But since David McAllister trusted Christ alone for his salvation, what happened to God's wrath? Christ took it, didn't he? Vengeance is why there is a cross. And that may trouble some of you. How is it fair that someone like David McAllister not only didn't serve a single day in prison but he also escaped God's wrath? That doesn't seem fair, does it? And you are right. It isn't fair but you and I aren't the ones who are being harmed in all of this. It's not fair--for Jesus. But wait a minute? Did Jesus deserve the wrath of the Father? We must agree that he did. He didn't earn it through actually sinning like you and I do. But when he exchanged our sin and took it upon

himself, at that point he actually deserved the wrath of God. If you say he didn't then you completely miss the significance of the cross. Of course he did not deserve our sin. It wasn't fair to Jesus that he took your sin and my sin. That's the greatest injustice in the universe--that the sinless Savior took our sin upon him. He didn't deserve that, but once he did, he deserved God's wrath.

4. Mercy and blessing is our responsibility but God's responsibility is vengeance. Bless those who curse you. Why? because you have been infinitely blessed by God's mercy. Never avenge yourselves. Why? Because vengeance is God's domain where he dispenses justice. To play with justice is to play God. To avenge yourself is to replace God, to eclipse God.

This intersection of God's mercy and God's vengeance is stunning. We get mercy, which we did not deserve. Not only can we show mercy because we have been given mercy but also because of God's vengeance. We show mercy and God takes care of rest.

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January 11, 2015

¹ <http://onpoint.wbur.org/2014/12/15/two-hundred-years-of-african-american-prayer>

² Chuck Swindoll, *Strike the Original Match*, Zondervan: Grand Rapids, © 1993, p. 99.