

The Best Response to Hate

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Date: 26 March 2017

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[0:00] I think it was Confucius that once said, there is one word which may serve as a rule of practice for all one's life. Reciprocity.

Now reciprocity is that principle by which we do to others what they've done to us. And if you look around at life, it's surprising how this principle actually plays out in so many aspects of our lives and relationships, both in small ways and big ways.

We feel obliged to repay people for what they've done to us. So it can happen in a positive way. If you've been invited to a birthday party, you'll feel obliged to return the favor.

I met someone for coffee a few weeks ago and they insisted on shouting. So I said, okay, but the next one's on me. Of course, it can also happen in reverse with negative things.

So you stood me up for lunch. So next time I wouldn't feel bad cancelling on you at the last minute. And this is for the ladies. Your husband never calls to say he's running late from work.

[1:09] So guess what? You're not going to bother telling him either whenever you feel like putting a thousand dollars on the credit card. Now, our Old Testament reading today actually shows how reciprocity underpins its laws as well.

So did you notice when it was read? It's even spelled out explicitly at the end of that reading. Eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn. It's pretty precise, isn't it?

Wound for wound, bruise for bruise. Now, many people think that this means the Bible actually sanctions the idea of getting even with others. But I think if you understand how things worked at the time, what these laws, some of them actually did, was to limit the extent of reprisals.

So instead of taking it to mean that you should take an eye for an eye, what it's saying is that that's all you can do and no more. You see, back then, if, say, another village stole your livestock from your village, what you do is you ride over to theirs, right?

And you take your livestock back. But not only that, afterwards, you burn down their huts as well, just as a show of force to stop them coming back at you. And it still happens today, doesn't it?

[2:23] Like with the Melbourne gangland wars. It probably started with a small incident of conflict between two gangs, and then the tit-for-tat just escalates, doesn't it? And more and more people have got killed.

And I think it's probably stopped for now, but it went on for years, didn't it? So by setting these laws, God was putting limits on how wrongs can be made right.

It was a system which allowed reciprocity to be exercised, but within limits so that disputes can be settled and people can feel that their outcomes are fair.

This is the same with our laws today. Because we see these laws, by and large, as being fair, we're actually comfortable to allow the justice system to sort out those wrongs for us.

We do that rather than resort to our own, taking the law into our own hands. So if, let's say, you're injured at work, because the employer has been negligent, well, we will accept the compensation that's provided by the law.

[3 : 24] We don't go and take revenge on the employer by burning down his plant. However, in contrast, you might look at some other countries where actually there's lawlessness.

And why does that happen? Well, it's because people take law into their own hands when they feel the justice system isn't really fair. So they may riot, they may pillage, whatever they do, they do it because they feel that there's no other way of getting their injustices resolved.

That's their way of getting even, as it were. Now, I've gone at length and talked about this principle of reciprocity because it's the background for Jesus' sermon tonight. Here, what Jesus does is instruct his disciples, that is, those who belong in his kingdom, to actually suspend the operation of reciprocity in their lives.

And so, verse 27 to 31 begins by saying, love your neighbours, love those who mistreat you, love those who curse you, love those who hate you. Don't reciprocate, suspend the operation of reciprocity, don't reciprocate evil for evil.

Now, when Jesus talks about love here, it's not just a show of warm and fuzzy feelings, right? For he says that love is to be shown with action, with words, and with prayer.

[4 : 47] So look with me at the first verse. He says, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. In fact, not only are you not to reciprocate evil for evil, Jesus actually wants us to do the opposite.

That is, to love them. So we see again here, this is Jesus' upside down kingdom in operation again, isn't it, from last week. And I find it, I think, I don't know about you, but I find it really challenging.

It's not easy, is it? Because if, and I wish Jesus had just said, if an enemy comes at you, just walk away. Just ignore them. But that's not what Jesus is saying, is it?

No, he wants us to go that one step further and love them in return. And then in verses 29 and 30, he illustrates how, with three examples.

So, verse 29, if someone slaps you on one cheek, turn to them the other also. If someone takes your coat, do not withhold your shirt from them. Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back.

[6 : 02] Now, I don't think these are random examples. Instead, I believe what Jesus is alluding to are the Old Testament laws, which actually limit reciprocity. So, for instance, with the first example, Jesus may have Exodus chapter 21, verse 18 and 19 in mind, that passage which Marty read earlier.

Stephen, do we have verses? We do have verses. That's good. So, that couple of verses says, if people quarrel and one person hits another with a stone or with their fist, and the victim does not die, but is confined to bed, the one who struck the blow will not be held liable if the other can get up and walk around outside with a staff.

When Jesus uses that example, I think he's alluding to a law such as this. And then, possibly with the second and third, consider Exodus chapter 22, verse 25 and 27, which says, if you lend money to one of my people among you who is needy, do not treat it like a business deal.

Charge no interest. If you take your neighbor's cloak as a pledge, return it by sunset, because that cloak is the only covering your neighbor has. What else can they sleep in when they cry out to me?

I will hear, for I am compassionate. So, just a little background here. In the Old Testament, if you lend something out, like a cow or an axe or something like that, you're entitled to ask for something as a pledge.

[7:21] Not different to now as well, asking for security. Something you held on to until the loan was returned. But if you were poor, then all you had was a cloak to give as a pledge. And this law stipulates that if that's what you've pledged, then it was to be returned to you by sundown regardless, because it wasn't compassionate to leave someone with nothing warm to sleep in. So, I think the people listening to Jesus would have been familiar with these laws and they would have heard Jesus saying that even though the law allowed for these things, for reciprocity, as a disciple of Jesus, you'd waive your right to it. So, not only would you not sue for your injury, as it says in that reading in the Old Testament, you'd offer the other cheek figuratively as well. Not only would you not demand your coat back, which is your right, you'd offer the shirt too. And what's more, you'd do it even with your enemy. It's not just with people that you liked, but with people that hated you as well. And this sort of grace would have been in marked contrast to the Pharisees who would have been taught or would have taught everyone else that the letter of the law was to be strictly applied.

[8:42] So, Jesus summarizes this in verse 31, which many people call the golden rule. Do to others as you would have them do to you. Now, notice that even though the words sound like the law of reciprocity, it actually isn't. Jesus says we are to do to others what we'd like them to do for us, not what they've done for us. Know this difference? What we'd like them to do, not what they've already done. And in the case of our enemies, what they've done to us is actually the opposite of what we'd like them to do to us, isn't it? We would like fairness, but they've mistreated us. We would like, we would expect goodwill, but we get curses instead. But even so, Jesus asks us to treat them like we'd like to be treated. Essentially, what Jesus is saying is we're to love our neighbors as ourselves, love our enemies, sorry, as ourselves. We know about love our neighbors, but Jesus here is saying we are to love our enemies as ourselves.

[9:52] So, let me just pause for a moment and think how we can apply this as individuals. So, consider this. Who might be your enemies in life? Who might be your enemies in life? For some, it's really easy. It's that bully at work or that boss who always puts you down or that clique at school that keeps excluding you from their social circle. But for others, it may be harder to answer. Sometimes, our enemies are within our circle of friends. That's why we get the term frenemy, which we've talked about just now. a friend who nevertheless might gossip and backstep you or a colleague who hangs out with you, but you know all the time that he or she is undermining you because he or she wants to get ahead. And sadly, for some of us, our enemies might actually, our so-called enemies might actually be people in our family or people we minister with as part of the church. They've really hurt us in some way. They've betrayed us. They've mistreated us. They've been abusive towards us. Well, this is a difficult question to consider, isn't it, if that's the case?

[11:10] But if we are to follow Jesus, then we need to consider this. Even though they've hurt us, even though they've mistreated, how can we then do good to them, bless them, and pray for them? Have a think. In spite of the hurt that you've suffered, what could you do to be good to them, to bless them, to pray for them? Now, let me just say here that we need to be careful how we apply Jesus' teaching here.

He doesn't mean that when we turn the other cheek, that, for example, we remain in abusive relationships, for example, or if we're being exploited by our employer, that we suffer in silence.

That's because if, as I say, Jesus is using these Old Testament examples, Old Testament laws as examples, then actually each of those laws, as you would have gathered, was given in a certain context.

So, for example, I think the turning of the other cheek was actually given in a context which presumed that there was a quarrel in the street and there's a one-off thing between two people of similar standing. Jesus used that to illustrate a principle.

[12:24] He's not using that to prescribe specific actions. And the principle which Jesus was promoting, which I think is actually more important than obeying specific laws, is actually to obey the principle underlying it.

The principle Jesus was promoting is to forgo what we're entitled to by law. We forgo it in order to show love and grace to our enemies. And so, where there's physical abuse or emotional harm, it may be wise and right to actually remove ourselves from that harm.

But Jesus' principle still applies. How can we still be gracious to someone who's hurt us? Will we pray for their well-being?

Will we choose to bless them rather than curse them? Will we choose not to retaliate even though we can and be vindictive? Further, I want to say that if you're actually a person in authority, let's say you're a teacher in a class or you're a parent or a police officer, then you would actually apply Jesus' words differently.

Because as someone in authority, God has actually given you the responsibility to bear the sword as it says in Romans 13. So your job, first and foremost, is to enforce the law and uphold justice and fairness.

[13:40] It's not your role to turn the other cheek for the victim without their consent because it's not your cheek to turn, as it were. Because if you do that, what you've done is that you've ignored the injustice that is done to the victim.

You may be doing it thinking you're turning the other cheek, but actually you've deepened the injustice that is being done to the victim. He or she hasn't just suffered under the hands of the abuser, you've added to that by not upholding justice for them.

But if on the other hand you uphold the law, you show fairness, you show justice, you give room for the victim to show grace. So, let me give you an example.

Take a family situation. One sibling has hurt another and you're the parent. But if you're as the parent, you just let the culprit go free without punishment and then you turn to the one who is wrong, you know, just turn the other cheek, don't worry about it, then what you've just done is that you've committed an injustice.

You've said to the child that justice doesn't matter. Instead, as a parent, your role is to be just, isn't it? On behalf of the wrong party, particularly. And then, after you've exercised justice, be it punishment or whatever, then you encourage the one who's hurt to show grace.

[15:07] You cannot, as one in authority, force the victim or they might end up despairing or being resentful. They have to be the ones to show grace of their own free will.

One example of this was seen this week with the terrorist attack, sadly, at the UK Parliament. We all know that the plainclothes policeman that was there, he shot the terrorist in the chest, didn't he?

And he had to do it, didn't he? He had to uphold the law. He had to stop further violence from happening. Otherwise, this person would have kept on killing.

To allow him to do that would have been a misguided attempt at grace. But immediately after what happened, after the shooting, what did we find?

We found that the paramedics were frantically trying to save this man's life, even though he didn't deserve it. They were showing grace after justice has been upheld as far as they can at the time.

[16:14] Of course, they eventually failed to save the man, but that's beside the point. On the other hand, if we are the ones who are personally hurt, though, then Jesus' words do apply to us.

We are to love our enemies somehow. We are to find a way to do good and bless them even though they have taken, even though they've really hurt us.

It's a very tall order, isn't it? But in the remaining verses, I think Jesus gives us the motivation for it. So from 32, verse 32 onwards, we understand that we get the answer to the question, why are we to love our neighbors?

Why are we to love our neighbors? Because we belong in Jesus' kingdom and since we do, we are to be like him. We are to be like his father in heaven who is also our father.

Now in verses 32 to 34, Jesus says that if all we do is reciprocate, that is practice the principle of reciprocity, then there's nothing that separates us from sinners.

[17:26] So look with me, if you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners love those who love that. And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you?

Even sinners do that. And if you lend and expect repayment, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners expecting to be repaid in full. It's pretty clear, isn't it?

The phrase that keeps repeating itself is this, even the sinners do it. Even the sinners do it. So what credit is there to you. And by and large, the world turns on self-interest, isn't it?

We love those who love us and we do good to those who do good to us. It's what humans by nature do. We're driven by self-interest. We know that that's how benefit comes from doing good.

But as Jesus says, there's no credit to doing that. Why? Because we've already been rewarded in that return favor. If we do good to others and the good is being done to us, it's, as it were, the credit has been passed over and the account has been settled.

[18:31] By contrast, if we love our neighbors, Jesus continues to say in verse 35, and do good to them and lend to them, knowing that we won't get anything back, or worse, knowing that we will be abused for it, then your reward will be great.

You will be children of the Most High because He's kind to the ungrateful and wicked, and therefore be merciful just as your Father is merciful.

Here, then, is why Jesus calls His disciples to love our neighbors. Last week, if you were here, Jesus said, great is our reward in heaven when we face persecution. Well, similar this week, great is our reward when we love our enemies, for we will be children of the Most High.

If you've read the early part of Luke from chapter 1, Jesus Himself is revealed as the Son of the Most High in chapter 1. Then John the Baptist in Luke chapter 1 was declared the prophet of the Most High.

But here, those who love their enemies become children of the Most High. What a great honor. We're children of the Most High.

[19:42] We follow in the line of Jesus. We follow in the line of John the Baptist. Now, of course, as Jesus' disciples, there is, in one sense, the fact that we're already children of God, right, when we belong to His kingdom. But here, the reward, I think, is the validation that comes from loving our enemies, the validation that shows that our character is like God's.

Kindness to the wicked and ungrateful, mercy to those who don't deserve it. Friends, whenever we struggle to love our enemies, we need to remind ourselves that this is exactly what God is like.

This is exactly how He treats His enemies. Now, who are God's enemies? Well, Paul says in Romans chapter 5 that we are. That while we were God's enemies, He reconciled Himself to us through the death of His Son.

So just think what would become of us if God had only loved those who love Him. If God wasn't merciful or responded to wickedness and ingratitude, not with kindness but justice, what would become of us if God was not gracious?

Well, He would have never sent Jesus, would He? Jesus would not have died for us. He would not have laid down His life for the ungodly. We would not have eternal life. But even more than that, we would not even be alive.

[21:09] Because God would not make the sun to shine, nor the rain to fall. We would have no food or shelter. All these things and more come from God.

God, as it is, loves even those who now don't know Him, who now still continue to reject Him, doesn't He? There are those who have heard about Jesus and still continue to refuse to follow Him.

And yet, God still loves them. He withholds His judgment on them, waiting patiently for them to come back to Him, for them to repent, for them to have faith in Him.

Friends, might that be you tonight? Have you so far been resisting God's love for you? Then this is your opportunity, I think, to turn back to Him, to come and be a disciple of Jesus.

And you can do that right now by praying and thanking Him for His love, for loving you as His enemy and asking Him to forgive you in Christ Jesus. But for the rest of us, I want to conclude by applying this passage not just to us as individuals but to us as a church.

[22:26] You see, we're not to love our enemies just as individuals. I think God calls us to love as a church as well. And increasingly, I think it's getting more common to be rejected and attacked as a church, to be criticized for what we believe in, to be slandered for insisting that Jesus is the only way to God.

All sorts of labels get put on us as Christians and sometimes they might even be our friends and colleagues and family members. But as a church, we are to keep loving them, love those who hate us, pray for them, pray that they will see the truth about Jesus.

It's so easy to retaliate when we are criticized but no, God wants us to bless them even when they curse us. So yes, we need to keep graciously speaking the truth but by word and by deed, we want to keep showing them love as well.

Five or six years ago, as part of preparing to be ordained, I had to do a hospital placement to be trained in pastoral care. So it was 200 hours, that's a lot of hours but in addition to doing the rounds and talking to patients, some of whom were facing death, we had to gather as a class each week and take turns to prepare a reflection of our own experience.

We had to share our thoughts and feelings about our patient encounters and then after that, the others in the class would take turns to critique our reflection. Now, it was frankly quite an emotionally draining exercise because you had to be vulnerable, right?

[24:06] If you weren't, if you offered some shallow reflection, then they'll start saying you weren't willing to confront some deep dark secrets in your life or something like that. So you had to be vulnerable, you had to actually show what you believed and what you thought and I was the only one in the class who openly believed in the authority of scripture and that Jesus was the only way to salvation.

And so one time, I remember it was my turn and I was sharing about the sadness of speaking to patients who I knew were lost and they were close to death. And then afterwards, one person shared that she actually thought those views were offensive and that she had grave fears for the harm that I would be inflicting on my innocent church members when I was ordained.

So that's you, by the way. once I became a pastor. Now when I read that, I was, you know, to be frank, I was shaken really. This otherwise friendly and gentle lady really hated my guts.

And reading her views changed my view of her. Now in the weeks that followed, I had the chance to return the favor because, you know, we all take turns to critique each other. So I was really tempted to be brutal on her, you know, to criticize her bad theology, to name all her hang-ups, which she clearly had because, you know, she had a Catholic upbringing.

But thankfully, part of the requirement was that we had to say one affirming thing about the person before we could criticize them. And so I ended up having to bless her and affirm her instead.

[25 : 44] Now I was trying not to be hypocritical, so it took me a while to think of positive things that I could say which was true of her. But I did it anyway.

Now did I feel like doing it at the time? No. Was I angry at her still for dismissing, you know, what was really my calling in life, you know, to share the gospel, to teach the Bible? Yes.

And yet Jesus tells us, tells me, to love our enemies anyway. To do it even when we don't feel like it. To do it because we realize that we ourselves have benefited immensely from a God who loved his enemies, who loves his enemies, who sent his son to die because of that.

We owe our very lives to God because of this very character of his. And so having been saved, we need to be children of the Most High, don't you think?

And who knows? God may use our love for our enemies to point the way to that greater love. When people see us loving our enemies, we pray that they may see God's love for them.

[26 : 56] The one who loved his enemies most. And who knows? They may turn to Christ and find eternal life in it. So let's pray that God will help us to do that.

Father, it is probably easy to say love our enemies and very hard to do. It may even be easier to say we will do it, but at the time when all the hurt is being experienced, all the emotions are being felt, to actually tell ourselves that we want to be like children, we want to be children of the Most High, like our Father in Heaven.

So give us that grace to do that. Empower us by your Spirit. Help us to keep remembering how much you loved your enemies, how much Jesus loved his enemies, how much you loved us, and therefore we have life because of that.

We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.