

Repaying Good for Evil

M. W. Bassford

6-28-09

Introduction.

- A. Most people, even among the Lord's people, are not terribly good at being merciful. We like mercy. We certainly appreciate it when someone has the right to really nail us but chooses to forbear instead. We like it even more when someone we have wronged does something nice back to us. However, we usually have to struggle to do those things. When we've got some villain dead to rights, we're prone to hit him as hard as we can. When someone wrongs us, we'll sometimes wait months or years for the chance to wrong him back.
- B. This, of course, is not a particularly godly attitude. Jesus tells us instead that we are to do good to those who injure us, and pray for those who persecute us. After all, when we were rebels against God, God sent His Son to die in our place so that He could forgive us. If we are truly children of our heavenly Father, we will do the same thing. The principle is easy to grasp, but it's awfully hard to do, and probably the reason why it's hard to do is our own lack of faith. Deep down inside, we don't believe that God can protect us from being hurt in any meaningful way. Deep down inside, we aren't convinced that God is going to avenge us.
- C. That's why it's important for us to look to the stories of God's people in His word, and consider the times when they were merciful and were rewarded for it. One of the best examples we have of this kind of mercy is David. The Israelite king Saul envied David, and sought to kill him for no good reason. David, on the other hand, had every reason to strike back against Saul, simply to preserve his own life. Despite ample motivation, though, David remained true to God's ideal of mercy. Let's look at his example as we learn how to repay good for evil.

I. In the Moment.

- A. When someone has wronged us, and we ought to return them good for their evil, the first thing we need to do is **SPOT THE OPPORTUNITY**. David's opportunity is fairly obvious in 1 Samuel 24:1-3. Saul has pursued David with an army into the wilderness. Saul needed to go, and gas station restrooms were rather thin on the ground back then, so he ducked into a convenient cave to do his business. Sadly for Saul, however, this was the very cave where David and a bunch of heavily armed fugitives were hiding. David had quite literally caught Saul with his pants down, or would have if Saul had been wearing pants.
- B. Our opportunities to do good are usually not quite so dramatic, but providence and chance will work together to produce them for us. It's impossible to predict what form these opportunities might take, so we need to have the right mindset for noticing them. Some people are very devoted to the idea of revenge. Once someone wrongs them, they will wait quietly, for months or even years, just waiting until the moment comes when they can really get the other guy back. That same patience, that same singlemindedness, is the way that we need to think about the people who wrong us, except that our goal isn't to punish them. It's to bless them. If we go through life with this mindset, sooner or later we'll have our chance to repay good for evil.
- C. When that opportunity arises, we need to have the strength to **IGNORE VENGEFUL FRIENDS**. We see some of David's vengeful friends speaking out in 1 Samuel 24:4. It's interesting to note the way that these friends couch the temptation that they're presenting to David. Apparently, at some point in the past, God had given some generic prophecy that David would triumph over his enemies. David's men bring up the prophecy, point to Saul as he's obviously doing his thing, and say, "Hey, look! Time to help Saul into the afterlife!"
- D. Oftentimes, when our enemy wrongs us, we will have friends who are going to quite reasonably urge us to do the wrong thing. Strangely enough, this bad advice will often come from the mouths of good, loving people. For a lot of folks, Christians especially, we feel the wrongs done to those we love more keenly than the wrongs done to us ourselves. These days, if somebody insults me, I'm most likely going to shrug it off, but if somebody insults or is rude to my wife, that really makes me see red. When that happens, and our good spouse or our good sibling or good best friend is crying out for blood, is urging us to take our revenge, we need to recognize that their attachment to us has blinded them to what's right. We need to ignore them.
- E. Instead of being swayed toward vengeance, we need to **STAND ON PRINCIPLE**. David speaks his mind in 1 Samuel 24:6. This is a slightly different situation than ours today. David wasn't somebody who just kind of universally let all his enemies go, because that wasn't something that God expected of the righteous in his time. However, David knew that he was responsible for honoring the Lord's anointed and certainly not attacking them, even when the Lord's anointed in question is Saul, a delusional psychopath whose dearest desire is to kill David. The circumstances are irrelevant. David knew that God didn't want him to harm Saul, so he didn't. His commitment to principle outweighed the apparent advantages of revenge.
- F. Likewise, we have to stand on principle too. Unlike David, we are commanded to love our enemies and do good to them, period. That's what we have to do. No exceptions. Sometimes, folks want to fudge this. They want to say, "I know I'm supposed to do good to all my enemies, but this guy is such a wretch that I can't help but nail him." Not so. We're not just supposed to love the more lovable enemies. We're supposed to love all

of them. Once we start making exceptions to the rule that God has handed down, pretty soon we're not following the rule at all. We're just doing what's right in our own eyes. Let's take a stand on principle instead.

- G. Finally, when we're in that moment of decision, we have to **DO GOOD**. Look at the way this plays out in the story of David and Saul in the cave in 1 Samuel 24:7. David could have killed Saul in the most undignified position imaginable. David, in fact, could have closed his eyes for a moment and waited for one of his men to kill Saul for him. That's all it would have taken. However, even though Saul had clearly done nothing to merit any act of mercy, David kept his men from striking down the tyrant, and Saul went his way oblivious.
- H. Ultimately, folks, this is the important part of returning good for evil. We can have the right mindset and say all the right things, but unless those impulses find their way into merciful action, we've failed. Sometimes, as in the case of David, it might be that our enemy has unwittingly given us the power to squash them, and the good that we're supposed to do is to do nothing. In other times, it might be that he has put himself in a position where he needs help, and we're the ones who can help him. Regardless, we must act to do good.

II. In the Aftermath.

- A. Now that we've reached this point of the story, we might expect it to end there. David hasn't killed Saul even though he could have, so yay David. However, that's not the way that the story plays out. We can learn as much from the way David behaves in the aftermath of the incident as from the incident itself.
- B. The first thing that David does afterward is to **BE RESPECTFUL**. This respect is quite evident in 1 Samuel 24:8. David had obviously already decided that he wanted to parlay the encounter in the cave into some sort of advantage with Saul, but he doesn't come strutting out cockily sneering at Saul for what a doofus he was. Instead, even though Saul is still a murdering psychopath, he treats him with all the honor due a king.
- C. If our repaying of good for evil gives us an opening, we too need to be respectful in the way we address our enemy. It's not uncommon for opportunities to arise in such a situation. After all, if our enemy is thinking rationally at all, and he sees that we had him over a barrel but didn't do anything, that can't help but make him more open to us. If we get a chance to capitalize on that, we can't blow it by assuming a superior attitude. Instead, no matter how unlovable or undeserving they are, we need to approach them with respect.
- D. However, we shouldn't be so respectful and so humble that we do nothing with the opportunity altogether. We need to forthrightly make an **APPEAL FROM RIGHTEOUSNESS**. This is what David does in 1 Samuel 24:9-10. Notice that even though David is being respectful, he is still being quite direct and open about what has just happened. David doesn't act like Saul is treating him fairly. He doesn't act like Saul is just taking in the beauty of the Wilderness of Engedi with 3,000 of his closest friends. Instead, he says, "Saul, you're trying to kill me because people keep telling you I want to kill you, but look, they're obviously lying." He's able to use his good action to prove that the charges that have stirred Saul up against him don't have any merit.
- E. We can often do the same. Most of the time, people aren't our enemies just because. They're our enemies because they believe that we have wronged them in some way, or because they believe we're just looking for the chance to do so. Without that belief, they're not longer our enemy. We need to be straightforward about the evil they're doing to us, but we also need to use the credit that our good deed has built up to prove that we aren't THEIR enemy. After all, true enemies don't do nice, undeserved things for the people they hate. When people see from our actions that we aren't out to get them, they'll view us much more favorably.
- F. We can only have the attitude of being willing to let a harm go unavenged if we're willing to **LET GOD AVENGE**. David clearly believes that God will do this in 1 Samuel 24:12. David's point is that just as he knows Saul is treating him unfairly, so too the Lord knows, and sooner or later, God is going to balance the scales. Because that is so, David is willing to leave the revenge business to God, and to obey Him.
- G. Likewise, friends, we have to be willing to let God be the judge and avenger in our own lives. We have to be willing to say, "I know that sooner or later, God is going to sort this situation out, and the person who has wronged me is going to get what he has coming. Until that day comes, I'm willing to wait." Of course, especially if we're dealing with a Christian who has wronged us, this raises the possibility of forgiveness. What happens if our enemy repents and NEVER gets what he has coming? If that happens, friends, we should rejoice. Who are we to demand God's justice for someone else, if we plead for His mercy for ourselves?
- H. Finally, though, for ourselves, we have to be willing to **FORGIVE**. David's forgiveness is apparent in 1 Samuel 24:16, 21-22. After David gets through with his speech, Saul sees his error, weeps, and repents. In a rare moment of clarity, he acknowledges that God has given David the kingdom after him. To protect his own household in that time, he asks David to swear an oath that David wouldn't exterminate his children, and David, even though Saul has done nothing to earn such a promise, agrees to Saul's wishes.
- I. As disciples of Jesus, we too must be forgiving people. When someone who has wronged us comes to us and repents, we don't have the option of withholding forgiveness. That's an option we gave up when we asked for God's forgiveness for our sins. Sometimes, the unforgiving heart may show itself in something as subtle as moral superiority. We may well look down on our enemy forevermore just because of that bad thing he did once. That's not what God wants. Instead, He wants to see us forgive one another from the heart.

Conclusion. If you're in need of God's forgiveness, He will give it to you gladly this morning if you seek it from Him.