



Forgiveness: Sending Away Vengeance

God models forgiveness for us by sending away hate (and substituting love), by sending away self-protectiveness (and replacing it with vulnerability), and by sending away vengeance (and in its place doing good). Substituting love for hate makes sense (difficult as it is to do). Replacing self-protectiveness with vulnerability raises more concerns. But sending away vengeance and doing good to one who's wronged us? Nobody wants to do that. It seems so ... unfair.

Being good to someone who's has no interest in being good to us is, to say the least, counter-intuitive. It's one thing to refuse to retaliate; it's quite another to deliberately *help* an enemy. Doing good to our enemies goes against every human instinct we own. It makes us most uncomfortable. It's so unlike us – and so like God.

In the Garden, God Does Good

Cartoonists and scholars alike portray God as angry and vengeful. In their imaginations God scowls with rage as He points an angry finger at Adam and Eve and throws them out of the garden. These interpreters need to read the text more carefully. God responds to Eden's sin with kindnesses that often go unnoticed:

- He covers their newly shameful nakedness.
- He promises a rescuer (Jesus, the seed of the woman) who will defeat evil.
- He makes absolutely sure they can't eat from that "eternal" tree and so live forever in their fallen state. (He's not punishing them when He drives them out of the garden; He's protecting them.)

Rather than cursing them, God carefully provides for their good.

In the Gospels, God Does Good

You might be able to quote John 3:16 (*For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life*), but I'll bet you can't quote the next verse: *For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world should be saved through Him.*

Pay attention to John's words: God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world but to save it. That's amazing news. Rather than cursing us, God carefully provides for *our* good.

In Our Lives, We Send Away Good

We're not very good at following God's example. We want *others* to pay when they wrong us. You hurt me; you inconvenience me; it costs you. If I'm honest, I want someone to suffer when they do no more than beat me to a parking space. (Maybe they'll dent a fender because they're rushing...nothing too severe, mind you, just something appropriately painful.) You do the same. Sometimes you don't even want to give someone the time of day, much less give them a favor or a kind word or an attentive ear to listen for the message behind their wounding words. We each want to retaliate. We want vengeance, human style vengeance. It's our knee-jerk reaction, Instead of sending away vengeance, we send away good.

We balk at sending away vengeance because, as we whine, "It's not fair! – at least not fair to us. And that's true. If we forgive an enemy they *don't* get the pain they deserve. But we forget that when God forgives us we don't get what we deserve. That's not fair either. And how about the cross? That's where Jesus got vengeance *He* didn't deserve. Was that fair? Jesus did speak from the cross, but He never uttered the words "It's not fair."

The Case for Ending Our Vengeance

We need to stop sending away good and start sending away vengeance. I can think of at least four reasons why we must take that step. First because vengeance belongs to God. Second because we're too late. Third because vengeance adds to the cross. Fourth because we're too early.

1. Vengeance Is God's. Paul makes this clear: *Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay," says the Lord.* Deuteronomy 3:25 and Hebrews 10:30 say the same thing: *Vengeance is Mine*. Vengeance belongs to God, not to us. We're not to take His place.
2. We're too late. When we exact vengeance we're repeating what God has already done. Justice has already been satisfied. The price of forgiveness has already been paid, paid in full. When Jesus said "It is finished," He meant it. Justice has even been satisfied for those who don't believe in Jesus – they just haven't yet taken the gift from His hand.
3. We're adding to the cross. Our desire to make people pay stems from our (perhaps unrecognized) belief that Jesus didn't do enough. When Jesus said *It is finished*. He meant it. We might mouth the words, "Yes, I believe Jesus paid the price," but if we're still retaliatory, our words are empty.
4. We're too early. Vengeance is coming. Justice will be satisfied. There will be a judgment day – but only for those who've refused forgiveness. For them that day will indeed hold vengeance.

God's Unique Vengeance

God does vengeance differently than we do. Two differences come to mind:

1. We want the guilty to suffer – God wants the guilty to be free. He wants our freedom so intensely that He suffers in our place. The cross provided the perfect solution and the perfect example of love: justice is satisfied *and* we are free.
2. Vengeance is typically our first thought – it's God's last resort. God is slow to anger (Psalm 145:8), long-suffering and kind (Galatians 5:22). He offers forgiveness, the way out of vengeance. If someone refuses His gift then vengeance is the only way left ... and God weeps over the loss. He longs for all to be in His arms.

While our kind of vengeance has to be discarded, God's kind of vengeance must never be discarded. His vengeance has value: it shows He's not indifferent to wrong. That's important to us. We want a God who cares when we're wronged, not one who doesn't give a whit about what happens in our lives. We want Him to respond to evil. We, in that way, share His heart.

Think what the world would be like if there were no check on wrongdoing. Evil unchecked would literally be hell on earth. God loves us too much to passively observe evil without responding. We react the same way when someone we love has been hurt. We even react that way around strangers. Have you ever flinched when you see a parent demeaning their child in public? Have you wanted to wisely intervene?

Neither we nor God wants evil to run rampant. That must not happen ... and it didn't. God made sure of it on the cross. He'll make sure of it again when this world ends. It's one way God does us good.

A Few Questions

You may not think that you have any ill-feelings towards anyone (particularly if you don't have to interact with them). So let's make it personal. Whom wouldn't you like to see in heaven? Anyone, alive or dead, that you can think of? That's whom you haven't forgiven.

- Would you be willing to abstain from paying them back (even in your fantasies)?
- Would you be willing to act to benefit them?
- What specifically might acting for their benefit look like?

And One More Question

Have you received God's forgiveness for yourself?

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