

No Good Deed Goes Unpunished

6th in a series on Peter's Principles

1 Peter 3: 13-17

05-24-2009 Sam Jones Memorial United Methodist Church

Introduction

New parents eagerly anticipate their infant's **first word**. Babbling attempts slowly become discernable syllables. Soon the child progresses to saying "da-da," "ma-ma" and other words that only a parent can understand.

But do you know the first SENTENCE most children learn to say? It consists of three simple words: "**It's not fair!**"

This is one of THE most popular phrases of childhood; and it continues to enjoy heavy use into adolescence. Over the years, children learn to say the sentence with increasing amounts of emotion. Add a dash of whine and a dollop of attitude, and the three words can become truly annoying!

I. Living in a Fair World

Children are born with an innate sense of **fairness**. It is not a learned lesson but an instinctive attitude. Even toddlers understand the difference between "fair" and "unfair." If you don't believe me, then try this simple experiment: Divide a candy bar between two children and give one a bigger piece!

The attitude is deeply ingrained into children by kindergarten. Four year olds BELIEVE in fairness. Everyone should be treated equally. Those who break the rules should be punished. Those who keep the rules should be rewarded. And woe be it unto the adult who attempts to CHANGE the rules mid-course.

Despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary, a faith in fairness continues into adulthood. We persist in the stubborn belief that fairness exists in the world. We expect to be treated equitably and resent special consideration of others. Everyone should compete on an equal playing field. Young people talk about the concept of "karma." You reap what you sow. What goes around, comes around. Tit for tat, quid pro quo. You get what you pay for.

Certain portions of Scripture seem to support this perspective. The Old Testament book of **Deuteronomy** teaches a theology of **divine retribution**. In such a worldview, God punishes sin and rewards righteousness. The evil suffer and the righteous flourish.

This is a **vending machine theology**. Put in your coins and get what you paid for. Do bad, get bad. Do good, get good. Even if we didn't always like what we received, such a system would at least make some sort of sense.

II. Living in an Unfair World

There is only one problem—experience teaches us a different lesson. We do NOT live in a fair world. We put our money in the vending machine and nothing comes out; or we get something that we didn't want or pay for.

Here in the real world it rains on the just and the unjust alike. Bad things happen to good people, and good things happen to bad people. Murphy's Law rules the world: *If anything can go wrong, it will go wrong*. Stuff happens. Life's bad—and then you die. It's just one thing after another. *C'est la vie*—that's life!

Occasionally one of my beloved offspring feels the need to declare, "It's not fair." I typically answer in one of two ways depending upon my mood. My first response is to say, "The fair only comes to town in September!" They LOVE to hear me say this. The second response is more honest and direct: "Life's not fair—get used to it!"

We learn these lessons in the school of hard knocks. Despite our experience in an unfair world, however, we still act surprised when something bad happens to US. *Especially* when we feel like it was unmerited and undeserved. And frankly, I don't recall the last time that I deserved something bad to happen to ME! We find that familiar childhood lament coming out of our adult mouths, "It's not fair!"

And it is even WORSE when we suffer for doing something good. We try to do the right thing and get wronged. Our blessings are met with curses. Our good deeds result in bad consequences. We turn the other cheek, and it gets slapped, too. Although the title of the sermon sounds quite cynical, there are times when it seems that no good deed goes unpunished.

In our litigious society in which everyone is a victim, legislatures have even been forced to enact **Good Samaritan Laws** that protect people who try to help others. The legislation grew out of actual cases where victims sued the very people who tried to assist them. If Jesus told *The Parable of the Good Samaritan* in 21st century America, then the beaten man would hire a lawyer and sue the Samaritan who saved him!

It's NOT fair; and our Scripture lesson today recognizes this grim reality. 1 Peter 3:13 begins by asking, "*Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do good?*" But Peter also has his feet firmly planted in the fallen world. He goes on to say, "*It is better, if it is God's will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil.*"

Our faith does not protect us from the bumps, scars, and stitches of living in a fallen world. In fact, our Christian faith will sometimes lead us into harm's way in order to declare the gospel of Jesus Christ through words and deeds. We should not be surprised if we sometimes suffer for doing good. Regardless of the results, God's people should still be "*eager to do good.*"

III. Good for Goodness' Sake

However, this can be a challenging principle to incorporate in daily life. It is human nature to learn from our experience. Psychologists understand the power of **behavior modification** through positive and negative reinforcement. We tend to do the things that reward us and avoid the things that punish us. When we receive evil for good, then we are tempted to quit doing good. We tend to become jaded, cynical, and hard-hearted. Our souls grow calloused.

It is easy to become **cynical** in the ministry. For example, we often have people contact the church office seeking assistance. Some of the requests are legitimate and heart-rending. Other requests, however, come from people who work the system to their advantage. It can be difficult to discern between the two.

During my time in Cartersville, I recall two cases in particular. In April 2006, I received an email from a man named “Mark” who said he had been attending our church but hadn’t joined yet. He had lost his job due to a merger but had finally found another job. However, he wouldn’t get paid until the following week and needed \$200 for his family to make ends meet. I began searching for some ways to help him.

I was speaking with a fellow Methodist minister in Gwinnett County and somehow we got to talking about folk we were helping. He mentioned this guy named “Mark” who had been laid off due to a merger and needed assistance. I began figuring the odds of two different “Marks” in the exact same situation asking for assistance from a church. I started doing further research, and apparently Mark attended most of the churches in Cartersville and a fair number in the metro Atlanta area as well!

More recently we had someone come by the church office with a heart-wrenching story about his college age daughter who was on a mission trip in Africa. She had been robbed of all her money and could not leave the country. Would our church help? When we looked into his story, it turned out his daughter was not stranded in Africa. In fact, it turned out he didn’t have a daughter!

To quote the old proverb, “*Once burned, twice shy.*” Once you have been burned a few times by situations like these, then it is easy to become not only cautious but also cynical. It becomes easier to turn down the next request for assistance—even if it might be legitimate.

The Broadway musical, *Wicked*, is a prequel to *The Wizard of Oz*. It tells the story of how *The Wicked Witch of the West* became so wicked. She was originally named Elphaba. She began life as a hopeful, loving person. A series of events, however, changed her life’s course. During a pivotal moment in the play, Elphaba sings a song entitled “*No Good Deed.*”

*No good deed goes unpunished.
No act of charity goes unresented.
No good deed goes unpunished.
That’s my new creed.
My road of good intentions
Led where such roads always lead.
No good deed goes unpunished!*

Over time this is an easy attitude to cultivate. However, we must be careful what we learn from experience. Benjamin Franklin once observed that a burned cat will never sit on a hot stove again; but it will not sit on a cold one, either!

Here is the challenge of Christian love. The very act of love makes us **vulnerable** to others. Sooner or later—and usually it is sooner—someone will take advantage of that vulnerability. The natural, human response is to protect ourselves from future hurt. The spiritual, Christian response is to risk doing it all over again. Turn the other cheek—even

if it gets slapped. If someone asks for your coat, give them your cloak as well. Bless those who curse you. Pray for those who persecute you.

IV. Proactive Christian Love

Jesus said that the two great laws are to love God and love neighbor as self. The rest of Scripture is commentary on these two commandments. 1 John 4: 19 reminds us that “*we love because we have first been loved.*” We are called to love even when people are unlovable. Christians love not only when it is convenient but when it is not. In fact, you can make a case that love is not truly love until it is sacrificial love. Then we discover whether our professed love is a convenience or a commitment.

We have two choices in our relationships with others. We can be **proactive** or **reactive**. Proactive people act because of who they are inside. Reactive people base their actions on how others treat them. Proactive Christians are Spirit-controlled. Reactive people are other-controlled. The other person’s actions control how I react. Ultimately, Christian love is not based upon who the other person is but who we are in Christ.

There is an old Jewish story about a pious man who was attempted to save a **scorpion** from the rising waters of a flooded river. Each time the man reached out to the scorpion, it would attempt to sting him. A passerby asked why he bothered to help. The righteous man answered, “Should I change my nature because of its nature?”

What matters is who we are in Christ—not who the other person is or how they react. This totally removes from the equation the question of fairness and unfairness. It doesn’t matter how the other receives what is given. Our good deeds may indeed not change the other person, but they do change us.

Certainly, there is some **common sense** involved here. Jesus said we must be “*as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves.*” (Matthew 20: 16) We need to act intentionally in ways that will really help others rather than simply make us feel good about ourselves. It can be difficult to be wise and discerning in doing good.

I mentioned people coming by the church office seeking assistance. The deception of some does not keep us from helping others. However, we do participate in centralized forms of assistance with good record keeping so that some people don’t abuse the system. But we still help.

V. Amish Grace

Many here will recall the tragic events that unfolded on October 2, 2006 at the West Nickel Mines School in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. About 10:25 that morning, a man named Charles Carl Roberts entered the one-room schoolhouse in the **Amish** community. He barricaded himself in the building with the female students as his hostages. Forty minutes later he shot and killed five young girls aged 6 to 13 before committing suicide himself.

The news shocked the nation and devastated the community. In the face of such evil, one question was asked in a hundred different ways, “Why?”

The senseless murders stunned the world; however, the Amish response proved to be just as astonishing. On the day of the shooting, one of the grandfathers of the murdered girls was quoted as saying, "We must not think evil of this man." Another Amish father said, "He had a mother and a wife and a soul and now he's standing before a just God."

An Amish neighbor of the gunman visited his family after the shooting to offer comfort and support. The rest of the community visited Roberts' widow and parents. A group of about 30 members of the Amish congregation attended Roberts funeral. The Amish even set up a charitable fund for the wife and children of the shooter.

The schoolhouse was torn down the following week and left as quiet pasture. A new and renamed school opened nearby called The New Hope School.

Conclusion

I stand in awe of the Amish response. I must confess that I am not at all sure that I could be that gracious, loving, and forgiving. But such is the stern nature of Christian love. To bless those who curse us, to pray for those who curse us, to love those who hate us, to do good to those who return evil.

After all, we serve in the name of Jesus Christ, who prayed on the cross, "*Father, forgive them. They know not what they do.*"