

WHY THINGS GO WRONG AND HOW TO PUT THEM RIGHT - Part fourteen

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How to Receive Blessing From the *Lord* When You've Been Mistreated by *People*

Isaiah 53:6-7 - "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. [7] He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth."

Acts 8:29-33 - "And the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over and join this chariot." [30] So Philip ran to him and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet and asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" [31] And he said, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. [32] Now the passage of the Scripture that he was reading was this: "Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter and like a lamb before its shearer is silent, so he opens not his mouth. [33] In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth."

1 Peter 2:21-23 - "For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. [22] He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. [23] When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly."

The disciple of Jesus is called to remember, not only is he *saved* by the death of Jesus on the cross, but he is called to live all of his life by the *pattern* of the cross. This is what Jesus meant when He said we all must "**take up our cross, every day, and follow Him.**"

In other words, the cross doesn't just have to do with *getting to heaven*. It has to do with *living on earth*. And I can't have the cross for *one* purpose without taking it fully on my shoulder for the *other*. Eternal redemption is quite literally *tied* to daily cross-bearing in the teaching of the New Testament.

This is the repeated theme of those opening three texts. They deal with the very same subject from three angles:

First, we see something so basic to the character and nature of Jesus, our Lord, that it is actually part of the way the Prophet *identifies* Jesus long before He actually came. In other words, He would be *marked* not only by His death, but by the fact that He didn't *retaliate* when He was so badly mistreated.

Second, we see how the way Jesus responded when He was mistreated was *central to the spreading of the gospel*. The reason Philip had such an open door to reach this meditating Ethiopian was the stunning impact on his mind of the way Jesus responded when mistreated. That was the part of Isaiah's prophecy that grabbed this man's heart and turned it to Christ.

And this was not the *only* time this happened. Consider the conversion of Saul. We all know about Saul's conversion on the road to Damascus. But something else happened a little earlier that had quite an impact on Saul. He was standing in the crowd one day when a follower of Jesus Christ (that's who Paul was so vehemently against) was being stoned to death:

Acts 7:58-60 - "Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. [59] And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." [60] And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." And when he had said this, he fell asleep." Saul saw how Stephen responded, as a follower of Jesus, when he was so cruelly mistreated.

Then, **third**, Peter gives instruction to a young church that was feeling the heat of persecution and hatred. These new Christians were starting to get, either discouraged, or angry with their enemies. And Peter takes them to task for it. Notice, he doesn't give them *sympathy* ("You poor people. You have a *right* to feel the way you do. After all, this is *their* fault, not *yours*"). Rather, he calls them to remember their conversion. He calls them back to Jesus Christ. The way *He* responded to mistreatment was the way *they* must respond. That's what being a Christian is all about.

In other words, Jesus' response to mistreatment was the *normal* Christian response to mistreatment. But, while this is the *normal* response to mistreatment, it is not the *easy* response.

How can I make this happen in my own life?

1) **ONCE AGAIN, BEFORE I CAN SOLVE THE PROBLEM OF A RETALIATING SPIRIT IN MY HEART, I MUST APPROACH THE PROBLEM FROM A SCRIPTURAL PERSPECTIVE, RATHER THAN THE WORLD'S**

Every Christian must put to death the myth that morality is achieved by each one sticking up for his own rights. Jesus can't be followed until this lie is confronted.

I will never be able to solve a *spiritual problem* taking *worldly advice*. And there is probably no area where God's approach to a problem and the natural instincts of the world are more at odds. The myth of our *personal rights* is the most cherished and ingrained creed of the spirit of this age. And that's what we must confront first if we are going to follow the path of Jesus.

The thinking of this world (especially the ideas planted in our minds by the media) are all *bent and warped by the fall*. Like the crazy mirrors at the circus, they don't reveal truth. They distort the way things really are.

And here is the biggest myth used by the Devil to suck Christians into error. *He tells us it's our job to stick up for our rights*. This is one of his most successful ploys because, unlike stealing and lying and adultery, there is something in all of us that *naturally leans* in the direction of defending ourselves when we are wronged. Sticking up for our rights *feels righteous*. And our world tells us it *is* righteous.

We live in a world where *protestors are admired and compliant people are considered weak*. Anybody armed with a sign is a hero. We applaud the person who throws open his window and says, "I'm mad as hell. And I'm not going to take it anymore!"

So that's the problem. In this kind of world, it is hard to follow a leader who *"like a lamb before its shearers is dumb, He did not even open His mouth. When reviled, did not revile in return."*

The first step toward God's solution to personal mistreatment is to both *expose* and forcefully *renounce* the myth of avenging personal rights. Watch for the way the world tries to *pump this lie into your head*. Tune it out of your mind like you refuse addictive drugs shoved into your veins.

2) **ALERT YOUR MIND TO CONCENTRATE YOUR ATTENTION ON THE RESPONSIBILITY YOU HAVE RATHER THAN THE FAULT OF THE OTHER PERSON**

Jesus lays down this principle in the Sermon on the mount:

Matthew 7:3 - "Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye?"

At no time does the object in my brother's eye eclipse the problem in my own - even when my brother mistreats me. Simple justice magnifies his wrongdoing. It's almost impossible to turn my attention to what *I* should do next, or how *I* can grow in the Lord through this situation while my brother's glaring injustice toward me is staring me in the face.

Yet Jesus says this is what I must do. I simply can't *change* my brother. I must look to what *I* can do to maximize *my own growth in grace* in spite of what my brother may have done.

Jesus says *there is something in my own eye that needs my attention*. What is it? Probably, if I have been mistreated by my brother, what I need to remove from my own life is my *natural reaction of anger and vengeance toward being so horribly mistreated, so unfairly*. Jesus says, this is what I must concentrate on.

As long as I continue to frame my problem by the actions of my brother, I will never be able to follow Jesus in my response. That's what Jesus meant when He said, before I would be able to walk in His ways, I would have to learn, in very real terms, what it meant to *"lose my own life."*

Matthew 10:38-39 - "And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. [39] Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it."

3) **YOU CANNOT STAND IN GOD'S GRACE WITHOUT EXTENDING GOD'S GRACE ON THE SAME TERMS AS YOU RECEIVE IT**

Let me share with you some of the most important words on forgiveness you will ever hear. They come from the lips of Jesus:

Matthew 6:14-15 - "For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, [15] but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."

Many people have a hard time with those words. They think that these words from Jesus somehow remove the *freeness* of God's grace. But they don't

We need to understand the difference between two very similar words. The words are "*free*" and "*unconditional*." Here's how I think the Scriptures distinguish those two terms: God's grace is absolutely *free*. God's grace, as far as I know, is never *unconditional*.

True, we are saved by *grace* and not by works. Paul makes this point crystal clear. But think about it. Were there absolutely *no conditions* placed on the free grace of God you received when you came to Him? Did you not have to *believe* in His offer of salvation? Did you not have to *repent* of your sins? Did you not have to *acknowledge Jesus Christ as your Lord*?

The obvious answer to all those questions is *yes*. You did have to meet all of those conditions. Now, none of those things *earned* your salvation. It was, and will always be, a *free* gift. But it was not an *unconditional* gift.

The same idea is presented in these words from Jesus. We could never do anything to *earn* God's forgiveness. His forgiveness is *free* to all who will receive it. But it is not *unconditional*. If I want to *stand* in God's free grace in Jesus Christ, I must *extend* that same free grace to those who wrong me - who *sin* against me.

In other words, we have come back to where we started this teaching. I cannot accept the *salvation* of the cross without taking up the *pattern* of the cross. Part of the life of the cross - part of *receiving* the gracious power of the cross in my heart - is embracing the *terms* of the crucified life. And right at the heart of the life of the cross is the pattern of the one who, when reviled, reviled not in turn, but as a sheep before its shearers is dumb, He opened not his mouth.

That is the *only kind of life the cross imparts*. There is no other kind of eternal life offered.

4) WHAT FORGIVENESS LOOKS LIKE

a) *Forgiveness is for truly guilty people*. If there was some *excuse* for the way this person treated me - if he or she couldn't help it - then they don't *need* my forgiveness. Forgiveness is only for people who mistreat me *without excuse*. So we need to be clear about the price of forgiveness right at the start.

b) *Forgiveness means I will not allow myself to cherish feelings or thoughts of ill-will or bitterness after I have forgiven the person who wronged me*. I must forgive my brother *from my heart*:

Matthew 18:33-35 - "And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?" [34] And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. [35] So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart."

Verses 33 and 34 contain the last lines of Jesus' famous parable of the unmerciful servant. The last verse (35) is *not* part of the parable. It is Jesus direct conclusion offered *after* the telling of His story. Forgiveness must always come from the heart of the forgiver. That means, it must reach the way I actually *think* about the person whom I have forgiven. I can't fool God on this point.

c) *Forgiveness means I won't bring the matter up with you ever again*. I can't forgive someone, and then keep their wrongdoing handy for when I want to put pressure on them on some other point. I can't *give* forgiveness, and then take it *back* at some later point of frustration.

Isaiah 43:25 - "I, I am he who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins."

This has to be some of the best news we will ever hear from the pulpit of any church. No one will be able to stand up before God's throne and shout out, **"Hey, what about when Pastor Don did such and such..."** God will look up and say, **"No, sorry, I have no record of that sin. I don't remember Don ever doing anything like that."**

Of course, as precious as that thought is, it is also a very steep challenge. It means God **requires** that kind of forgiveness from me toward those who wrong me.

- d) **Forgiveness means I will not tell others about what you did to me.** I can't both **forgive** you and **gossip** about you at the same time. If I tell others about what you did to me **after** I have offered you my forgiveness, it proves I only wanted to **appear** forgiving, while still trying to inflict damage on you for what you did.

5) **SEEK PEACE AND SUBDUED ENEMIES WITH LOVE**

Romans 12:18-21 - "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."**

Let me close with two thoughts from these words:

- a) It is always God's will, and the Christian's responsibility to create and maintain peaceful relationships. Very practically this means, as a Christian, I will not do anything to **provoke** trouble. I will not do anything to **protract** trouble - **Proverbs 15:1** - "A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger." And I will not do anything to **prolong** trouble - **Ephesians 4:26** - "Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger...."
- b) Subdue enemies by the power of Christ's love. I am specifically called upon by God to find good things to do for people who wrong me. Any other course of action only **broadens the cycle of sin**. Someone has to bear the cost for wrong doing. Our world will tell you that the guilty party must be made to suffer. Fortunately, the cross tells a different story all together.