

When Is It Right to Repay Evil With Pain?

by John Piper

The sermon explores the relationship between mercy and justice, and how they are both essential in revealing what God is like.

Duration: 41:29

Scripture: Luke 6:27-31, Romans 12:9-10, Romans 12:14, Romans 12:17-21

Topics: "Loving Enemies", "Godly Justice"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker discusses five behaviors that go against the teachings of the Bible. These behaviors include punishing enemies, rewarding lack of learning, not paying workers their wages, using force to punish wrongdoers, and not disciplining sinful church members. The speaker emphasizes that these behaviors contradict the commandment to love and show mercy to others. He urges listeners to spread a passion for God's supremacy and to treat people better than they deserve, following the example of Jesus. The sermon also highlights the importance of justice and mercy in various aspects of life, including parenting, education, and the economic order.

Transcript

The following message is by Pastor John Piper. More information from *Desiring God* is available at www.DesiringGod.org. I invite you to open your Bibles to Romans chapter 12. For the reading of the sermon text, we'll be reading verses 17 through 21.

Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. 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.

To the contrary, if your enemy is hungry, feed him. If he is thirsty, give him something to drink. For by doing so, you will heap burning coals on his head.

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. Let's pray together. Father, I ask for your help now to be faithful to the Bible, and not to say anything that would be contradictory of it, and to bring every affection of my heart into conformity to its proportions, and to have a proper balance.

And I ask that justice and mercy would be mingled in the lives of your people in such a way that the way you really are would shine forth in this world. Father, our hearts are grieved. Indeed, sometimes we want

to say with Jeremiah, our eyes run down with tears that people do not know your law, that millions of people in this country and around the world are oblivious to your truth, that ignore you, defame you, belittle you by paying no attention to you and making the television vastly more important than you are, is a great heartache to us.

And we want to be means on this earth as ambassadors to change the situation for millions of people. We want to spread a passion for your supremacy in all things, for the joy of all peoples through Jesus Christ. We do not want to waste our lives by joining them in the foolishness of what people do with their days as they prepare to meet the King of Kings and give an account of every idle word they uttered.

Holy God come, sober your people. The time is so short until we stand before the Judge. In Jesus' name I pray, Amen.

The pressing issue now that we have not dealt with in chapter 12 is this, and we deal with it today. What's the relationship between these summons that Tony just read to treat your enemy better than he deserves, to bless those who persecute you, to be patient and to live peaceably. What's the relationship between that sustained call to mercy and those times and places in life where it is clearly right to pay back pain for wrongdoing? Let's get the picture clear here now by summing up what we've seen in verses 9 following.

Verse 9, let love be genuine. Verse 10, love one another with brotherly affection. Verse 14, bless those who persecute you.

Bless and don't curse them. Verse 17, repay no one evil for evil. Verse 18, second half of the verse, live peaceably with all.

Verse 19, beloved, never avenge yourselves. Leave it to the wrath of God. Verse 20, if your enemy is hungry, feed him.

If he's thirsty, give him something to drink. Verse 21, overcome evil with good. Now that's a clear message.

Be merciful people. Love mercy. Treat people better than they deserve.

That's the message of chapter 12. It's the message of Jesus. Chapter 6, verse 27 of the Gospel of Luke.

But I say to you who hear, love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you. Bless those who curse you.

Pray for those who abuse you. To the one who strikes you on the cheek, offer him the other also. From the one who takes away your cloak, don't withhold your tunic either.

Give to the one who begs from you. And from the one who takes your goods, don't demand them back. And as you wish that others would do to you, do so to them.

This is a very strong teaching in the Bible. Be merciful people. Go the extra mile.

Turn the other cheek. Treat people better than they deserve. Don't retaliate.

Bless those who curse you. Don't return good for evil. This is clear.

This is powerful. We need to change and be like that. And there are two reasons why we do.

Number one, when you live like that, you show something of what God is like. It's the way God is. Matthew 5, verse 45.

He makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good. And sends his rain on the just and on the unjust. Psalm 103, verse 10.

He doesn't deal with us according to our sins or requite us according to our iniquities. Ephesians 4, verse 32. Be kind to one another.

Tender hearted. Forgiving one another. As God in Christ forgave you.

So the first reason why we should be this way is because it shows the way God is. Here's the second reason. It shows that your heart is profoundly contented in all that God is for you in Jesus.

Mercy, like no other behavior, tells the people in the world, I don't need to gratify my heart by taking vengeance on you. I am at peace. I have been satisfied by my God.

I hand it over to the one who judges justly. I am satisfied in him. I don't need self-exaltation.

I don't need revenge. I don't need money. I don't need comfort.

I don't need security. My God is my all. I am here to serve.

What a beautiful thing it says about our God. When we are merciful, it says not only that's the way he is, it says, and he has satisfied my soul. So, let's be that way.

That's the message of chapter 12. It's just unmistakable, clear, powerful, and indicting. Here's the catch.

That's not the only thing God is. God is not just merciful. He is also a God of justice and vengeance.

And you've seen it often now in verse 19. Vengeance is mine. I will repay, says the Lord, like Ken prayed.

There's not one single sin that has ever been done in this universe that will go unpunished. Not one. Not one wrong thought.

Not one wrong attitude. Not one wrong deed will go unpunished. Either it will be punished in hell forever, as it deserves, or it will have been punished on the cross, where Christ absorbed all the punishment that our sins deserve to trust in him.

There will not be a single unpunished sin, because God is absolutely just. It's the foundation of his being. His righteousness is at the core of who he is.

And that's the issue. And the question flowing from it is, does God ever share with any human being any of his right to punish wrong? Does he ever share with a human being any of his right to punish wrong? And the biblical answer is, yes. The main reason I believe that the biblical answer is yes is because I see it in texts showing us those situations where in fact humans are to punish wrong in other humans, and secondly, it's biblical because when it shows that, it also shows it in such a way that it is not contradictory to the call to mercy in chapter 12.

And that's what I want to talk about this morning, those two things. Where in the Bible do you see evidence that humans are to participate in God's taking of retribution on wrong? And how can this not be

contradictory to what you have just showed us in chapter 12 of Romans? So that's where we're going. And the way we'll do it is this.

There are five illustrations in the Bible, at least. I think there are basically five, which reveal places and times when humans are to join God in showing retribution, pain for wrongdoing. And then we'll look at why it is that those five illustrations are not contradictory to the call for mercy.

Number one, illustration number one. The Bible teaches us to discipline our children, to punish our children. Proverbs 23, 13, Do not withhold discipline from your child.

If you strike him with a rod, he will not die. Proverbs 13, 24. Whoever spares the rod hates his son.

If you don't believe in corporal punishment, you hate your child. Ephesians 6, 4. Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring him up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. In other words, parents, mingle justice and mercy in the way you punish and forgive your children.

We talked about this last time. When a child dishonors a parent through disobedience, the Bible does not say, bless the child who curses you. Bless and do not punish.

It doesn't say that. It doesn't say when the child strikes you on the right cheek. I see kids hitting their parents and and the parents doing nothing about it.

This is sick. It does not say when a child strikes you on the cheek, turn the other cheek also. It says, discipline your child while you have life and don't hate him by confirming him in his sin.

That's illustration number one. Illustration number two. The Bible teaches.

I deduce this by way of extension from the family. The Bible teaches that in the sphere of education, you should not reward lack of learning with good grades. And you should not reward good learning with bad grades in the sphere of education.

And I extend it from the family because in the Bible, education is the responsibility of the family. That we happen to create schools to assist us is neither here nor there. You don't have to do it that way.

You can do it that way. But the Bible says mom and dad are responsible for getting this kid equipped to live a productive adult life. And if there are partners in education, that's fine.

Make sure they're the right partners. In this sphere, assessment of a child's progress and performance proceeds along the lines of justice. Good performance in learning in an assigned task is rewarded with a good assessment.

A bad performance in the fulfillment of assignment is rewarded with a bad assessment. There's a name for this. It's called truth.

If you do excellent work, a teacher calls it that. And puts that grade on it. That's true.

If you do bad work, a teacher calls it that, puts that name on it. That's called truth. Another name for it is justice.

Education proceeds along the lines of justice. When the foundation is in place of justice, then is created the wonderful possibility of pedagogical mercy. And a teacher can stay hours after school helping a poor

kid.

A teacher can go the extra mile over and over again beyond the expectation, beyond justice. But if you take away the foundation of justice and truth, mercy has no meaning. Mercy is the going beyond what justice requires.

If you say there should be no justice here, don't call good, good or bad, bad. Call everything X. There is no mercy. It is gone.

Justice as the foundation creates the possibility of mercy in education as well as other spheres. Third illustration. First family, parenting, then education.

Here's the third one. The Bible teaches that a laborer deserves his wages and a sluggard doesn't. If you're an employer and your employees do not do what they signed a contract to do, you may mercifully give them a second, a third and a fourth chance, but in the end you will fire them and you should.

It is right. Patience is a virtue and justice is essential. What you say to the person is the economic order is ordained by God.

The world cannot survive without an economic order. And the economic order will not survive if one can take goods for which he does not pay or if one is paid for work he does not do. The economic order cannot survive those two breaches of justice.

It will collapse. We are paid for work performed, not for stealing. It's called stealing when you take what you have not paid for or demand pay for work you have not done.

Here's a biblical illustration of this. 2 Thessalonians. You remember the situation in this book.

The rumor had spread by some kind of prophetic teacher that the day of the Lord was at hand and the people, some of them, were quitting their jobs in view of this immediate arrival of the Lord Jesus as has happened in every century of the church. Some quack has come along and predicted the Lord's coming and people start doing queer things, irresponsible things. Instead of making this world work the way it's supposed to work for the glory of God, they start dropping out of the ordinary institutions of society.

Here's the way Paul responded to that. If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat. Whoa, doesn't sound like Romans 12, does it? For we hear that there are some among you who walk in idleness, not busy at work but busy bodies.

Now such persons we command and encourage in the Lord Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living. So when Jesus and Paul teach us to return good for evil, I do not assume that they mean violate the fundamental principle of justice in the economic order. I do not assume that they mean that you should pay employees who never show up.

And I do not assume that they mean you can take anything without paying for it. I don't assume that's what they mean because the Bible teaches otherwise. Here's the fourth illustration.

The Bible teaches that the civil authorities have the right to use force to punish wrongdoers. Police have the right to use force in arresting a criminal. And judges have the right to use force to imprison felons and to fine those who commit misdemeanors and use coercion and force, physical force, to make sure those punishments are brought to pass.

Policemen should not turn the other cheek when they are functioning as representatives of state authority. And you can see it there in Romans 13, verses 2 through 4. So if you're still at chapter 12, just lift your eyes across the column. Verse 2, chapter 13.

Whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed. And those who resist will incur judgment. Verse 4. For he is God's servant for you, but if you do wrong, be afraid.

For he does not bear the sword or the billy club or the handcuff or the revolver in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer. So when you read verse 19 of chapter 12.

Vengeance is mine. I will repay, says the Lord. I do not exclude the possibility that he can share that right with appropriate authorities.

Fifth and final illustration. The Bible teaches that the church should discipline its members who are intentionally, persistently, and persistently sinful. First Corinthians 5.4. When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present with the power of the Lord Jesus.

You are to deliver this man. He was sleeping with his stepmother and they were proud of it. You are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh.

I think that probably means he's going to get sick and die or maybe live. The next phrase says so that his spirit may be saved at the day of the Lord. This is really tough love.

Hand him over to cancer or whatever. But don't make light of sin in this church. Justice.

Second Thessalonians 3.14. If anyone does not obey what we say in this letter, take note of that person and have nothing to do with him that he may be ashamed. There is a holy ostracism to be performed when professing believers sleep around and then invite you to go bowling. You don't go.

You say we can't just act as though nothing's wrong. You get out of bed with her and repent and then we'll go bowling. So let me sum up these five.

The Bible teaches us to discipline our children. Number two, the Bible teaches that in education you should reward. Lack of learning with bad grades and learning with good grades.

Third, the Bible teaches that the laborer deserves his wages and the slugger doesn't. Fourth, the Bible teaches that civil authorities have the right to use force in punishing wrongdoers. And fifth, the Bible teaches that the church should discipline its members who are intentionally and persistently sinful.

Now, in every one of those five instances, we have illustrations of behaviors that do not. Duplicate verse 20 of chapter 12. If your enemy.

Is hungry. Feed him. We've been looking at behaviors that are the opposite of that.

Punish him. Put him in jail. Put him out of the church.

Spank him. Give him a D. So the question is this now. Lastly.

Why are these five instances not contradictory? Why is this not a schizophrenic Bible? Why is it not contradictory to chapter 12? And I have two answers to that question. One is this. All five of these

illustrations.

Are taken from institutional life. And in these institutions. There are principles that God has ordained for the institutions to survive and thrive.

And they are essential both for justice and mercy. I'll come back to that. The second reason is that the motive for doing acts of justice and doing acts of mercy is the same.

If you're doing them biblically. Namely. Not any craving for vengeance.

Not any desire to be shown superior. Not any need to get any praise or benefit. Not any craving for money or security or comfort.

But a freedom in Christ. Being made content by the beauty of God. And now a desire to submit to God.

His call to mercy. And his call to justice. So let's talk about each of those two answers.

First. First the institutional answer. All five of those illustrations come from institutions.

The family is a God-ordained institution. Education is a God-ordained institution. Business is a God-ordained institution.

State is a God-ordained institution. Church is a God-ordained institution. And it's plain from the Bible that God wills all of these to exist.

These are not human ideas. This city. This metroplex.

Called the Twin Cities. Functions and works. Because people find themselves in institutions ordained by God.

Not created by man. And all five of them are willed by the Lord to endure while this age lasts. And a servant of the king cares about whether they function.

And will be invested in them. That's why the church is mainly not made up of missionaries. But of businessmen.

Women. Because we're supposed to be in those institutions. Making them work according to God's principles as a witness to his justice.

And his mercy. Now the normal way that they work. The essential fundamental foundation for all of those institutions is justice.

Treating people according to what they deserve. And of course there can be merciful exceptions. But if everything becomes an exception to the rule of justice.

The rule of just recompense. There will be no institution. They will all evaporate.

They will collapse. The life of an institution depends on fulfilled expectations. Doing the work.

Getting there on time. Making the goods. Providing the service.

Getting and giving the pay. If you say none of that matters. The institution ends.

If God wills these institutions therefore. He wills the justice that makes them possible. And God does will these institutions.

And therefore he does will the justice that makes them possible. And when you serve in them and function as representatives. Or as integral parts of an institution.

Your life is marked by justice. And not just. By mercy.

Now that justice relates to mercy. In at least two ways. One way.

Is that both justice and mercy. Reveal. What God is like.

A fair. And well honed business. Is a testimony.

To the glory of God's justice. And the other way they relate. Or this justice relates to.

Mercy is that. When you uphold it. You create the very fabric.

In which mercy is possible. Visible. And makes sense.

And is beautiful. A just employer. That has clear policies.

Treats everybody fairly. When that justice forgives a fault. It will be beautiful to the employees.

When a teacher who is meticulously fair. Treats every child according to what that child does. No favoritism to the rich.

Or the white. Or the black. When that child goes.

When that teacher goes the extra mile. Forgives. Loves.

Takes time. With a struggling student. Everybody will see.

That's not favoritism. That's pure mercy. And it could come to me.

As well as to that person. Because she's fair. All throughout the institutions of the world.

When justice is upheld. Mercy becomes possible. Visible.

And beautiful. Here's the last answer. Namely that.

This is not contradictory. Because it comes from the same motivation. And I'll just say it again.

Whether you are acting in mercy. Or whether you're acting in justice. The motive should be the same.

First. I want to show what God is like. I don't want to draw any attention to myself.

I want to show what God is like. And secondly. I want to act out of the fullness.

Of God's blessing and mercy to me. In Jesus Christ. Satisfying my soul.

So that I am not craving affirmation. Or craving one-upmanship. Or craving vengeance.

Or craving money. Or craving power. I'm not craving anything.

I am satisfied in God. I could die now and I'd be happy. I am acting on behalf of.

Either the upholding of this institution for the good of many. Or mercy towards this person in the hopes that they will see Christ. So I conclude with this three-fold exhortation.

One. God calls us, Bethlehem. To be merciful.

God calls you to mercy. Not to return evil for evil. Treat your enemies better than they deserve.

That's what God is like. Do that. And God calls you to justice.

He calls you to uphold the institutions of the world. In which you belong. In which you function.

By treating people fairly. According to what they deserve. And third.

Most important. God calls you to Christ. For two reasons.

Number one. Without Christ in us. Transforming our minds.

Chapter 12 verse 2. Without Christ in us. Transforming our minds. How are you going to have the extraordinary wisdom and discernment.

To navigate the ambiguities of this truth. You are always an individual. And you are always a representative of an institution.

And the ambiguities of which and how they intermingle. Is beyond any human ability to figure out. A policeman is a neighbor.

A pastor is a friend. A boss is a golfing partner. All over the place.

Our individual lives. Shot through with mercy. And our institutional lives.

Governed by justice. Are interweaving with each other. In ways that are imponderable.

In their implications for our behavior. I wonder how you live your life. Without Christ.

What do you do. When you get up in the morning. You businessman.

You teachers. You parents. When you get up in the morning.

And you know. Today I am called to do mercy. And today I am called to do justice.

Is that easy for you? It is impossible for you. That is what it is. Which is why this sermon is at its root.

A call to Christ. What would we do without Romans 12 verse 2. Don't be conformed to this age. But be transformed in the renewing of your mind.

That happens through Christ dwelling in us. That you may prove and discern and smell. And sniff out the will of God.

In this crisis. In this company. This school.

This classroom. This disciplinary thing with my kid. I don't know God.

I don't know how to balance it here. If that is not where you live. You are probably a legalist.

Or you don't give a rip about the Bible. You can't live this life by rules. It won't work.

There is no blueprint. For this mingling of mercy and justice. In this life.

There is simply. There is God. And He is just.

Be like that. There is God. And He has died for you.

Incredibly mercifully. Be like that. Now go show God to the world Bethlehem.

And I am saying that that means come to Jesus. Come to Jesus. First reason.

Because you need Him to give you the wisdom to live a life like this. 21st century America is just complicated. And the second closing reason is.

Because He forgives your failures. Take heart parents. We have all blown it.

Take heart bosses and business men. We have all blown it. Take heart teachers.

We have all blown it. Take heart public servants of the king and the state. We have all blown it.

There is only one hope for living in a world like this. A Christ who helps us. And a Christ who forgives us.

And so. Bethlehem. Pursue mercy.

Bethlehem. Pursue justice. Bethlehem above all.

Pursue Christ. Let's pray. Now Lord.

I just want to pray for your people. This is not a simple message. That they can just walk out and say.

Oh good I will do that at three this afternoon. This is a message that I hope puts us on our faces. In prayer.

I hope it is a message that throws us on the cross. And on the Holy Spirit. And it is a message that I hope will cause unbelievers in this room.

To see that the Bible is amazingly illuminating. About the way this world works. And maybe it is true.

I pray that they would come on in. And assess the world from inside this amazing world view. Called Biblical Christianity.

So Lord. We want to show mercy. I just want to pray for those in the room right now Lord.

Who are rednecks. And who are really glad I preached this. And are eager to go out and smack somebody up the side of the head.

Because they haven't done what is right. I just pray that you would break their heart by the blood of Jesus. Just break their heart.

And I pray for the wimpy people in this room. Who couldn't do an act of justice if they saw it in front of them. If it required any toughness.

I pray that you would give them some fiber in their spine. So Lord. Whether we are tough people and need to be made tender.

Or whether we are tender people and need to be made more tough. Do a work in this church. So that we are whole people.

At work. At home. At church.

We want to make you look good in the world. That is our goal. In Jesus name I pray.

Amen. Thank you for listening to this message by John Piper. Pastor for preaching at Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

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