

Today we continue to listen to Jesus' so-called Sermon on the Plain, in which Luke gathers up a number of favorite sayings of Jesus and has Him stand and deliver. Notice how counter-cultural these words are, even to this day. If someone hits you, you hit back, right? Not according to Jesus. You turn the other cheek. If someone does something good for you, you should, of course, do the same right back. Yes, but Jesus challenges further – love your *enemies* and do good to them, expecting *nothing* back. And he goes on – be merciful, stop judging, stop condemning! Give and give and give and gifts will come back to you! You'd think we'd get it by now, right? Maybe not.

Let's say you decide to go to the movies this weekend, and if you're like me, the vote will likely be for an action movie of some sort. I can virtually guarantee that the plot will follow this trajectory: we are introduced to the hero (or heroine, it'll be the same) who is living a simple life filled with good things. Then, out of the blue, the evil villain shows up and disrupts this life in a terrible, violent way. The hero, reeling in shock, pulls himself together (through extensive and painful training) and finally goes after the villain. He fails a number of times, until finally he finds the right formula of violence and achieves his aim – vengeance and revenge! Evil is vanquished, and the hero is rewarded with acclaim and a new life of peace and calm.

Have some doubts? Here's a few fan favorites in the past 20 years: *Gladiator*, *Straw Dogs*, *Kill Bill*, *The Godfather*, *Death Wish*, *Dead Pool*, *True Grit*, etc., etc. What's interesting to me is that in each case, the hero's claimed motive is not expressed as revenge or vengeance, but as *justice*. And this, my friends, is exactly the problem. Justice is not a synonym for mercy, nor is justice a synonym for vengeance. Justice results from using laws to fairly judge and punish crimes. Justice sits squarely between mercy and vengeance, perfectly expressing the struggle we *should have* between the ideals of God and the easy way of the Devil, expressed as *revenge*. Justice is difficult to get right, so difficult that we often just follow our gut instincts, bypass the hard part, and get right to vengeful punishment. It's easy, neat, tidy, and feels so good. And of course, since vengeance is from the Devil, it's practice will always lead to death.

A few years ago, I met a young man in the prison who was serving 25 to life. He was 18 years old. He shared his story with me. Raised in the mean streets of South LA, he was recruited into the gang life at the age of 13. When he was 17, his older brother was gunned down by a rival gang. He

was told, “You know what to do...” Yes, he did. He borrowed a gun, tracked down a random member of the rival gang and shot him dead. His home gang applauded and praised him for “doing justice”. The police arrested him the next week and he readily admitted what he had done, fully expecting the police to applaud him too. He told me how shocked he was that this did not happen and he ended up in prison. Bitter and angry, he began to make plans for more vengeance killings, both in and outside the prison. Then he was invited to a Kairos retreat. Everything was fine at first. Good cookies, nice people, a lot of God talk, but that was okay – that is, until the third day when the subject of forgiveness came up. He froze up, shut up, and tuned out until another inmate at the table looked him straight in the eye and asked, “So, how is that revenge thing working out for you?” The kid broke, and all of the sorrow and pain and fear and resentment and loneliness poured out in sob after sob. You see, judging and condemning may feel really good for a bit, but they do not heal you, they do not restore you. Ever. Forgive and you will be forgiven, Jesus says.

In the eyes of God, justice is always restorative. Yes, God is often portrayed in the Old Testament as angry, but his anger is better seen as frustration. The Israelites stray from the inherent good practices of the Law, the prophets come forward and rightfully scold the leaders and the people. But keep reading! Read Isaiah, read Ezekiel, read Hosea. The prophets don’t just rant, they go on to say in effect: "And here's what God will do for you now: God will love you more than ever! God will love you into wholeness. God will pour upon you a gratuitous, unbelievable, unaccountable, irrefutable love that you will finally be unable to resist." As Richard Rohr says, God "punishes" us by loving us more!

He goes on to say: “Love is the only thing that transforms the human heart. In the Gospel we see Jesus fully revealing this divine trait. Love takes the shape and form of healing and radical forgiveness--which is just about all that Jesus does. Jesus, who represents God, usually transforms people at the moments when they most hate themselves, when they most want to punish themselves or feel shame and guilt. Look at Jesus' interaction with the tax collector Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10). He doesn't belittle or punish Zacchaeus; instead, Jesus goes to his home, shares a meal with him, and treats him like a friend. Zacchaeus' heart is opened and transformed.”

What is your notion of God? It’s an important question. Is God a punisher? Is God a hard judge? Is the “fear of the Lord” a literal reality for you?

Many of us start our spiritual and religious journey with this notion. If we had harsh, exacting parents, particularly fathers, as a child, we often transfer this mixture of respect and fear to our understanding of God. Jesus says to forgive seventy times seven times, but this stern god is not only hard on sinners, but completely willing to burn people in hell for eternity. So tell me this – would you like to spend more time with this god? Would you trust this god? Would you like to spend an hour in silence with this god? It’s an unworkable and toxic image, and many of us were raised to believe this!

Where did we get this horrible notion of God? Many theologians blame Dante’s *Inferno* as the root of this misconception – his eschatological poem is bad theology but great imagery, and artists from Hieronymus Bosch to Michelangelo gleefully painted their own fears and horrors into life-size depictions. Did you know that the words revenge and vengeance appear in the Bible 50 times? The word mercy, however, appears in the Bible 277 times. Pope Francis, a couple of years ago, said this: “How much wrong we do to God and his grace when we speak of sins being *punished* by his judgment *before* we speak of their being *forgiven* by his mercy. We have to put mercy before judgment, and in any event, God's judgment will always be in the light of his mercy.”

Jesus ends his discourse today with the enigmatic phrase, “For the measure with which you measure will in return be measured out to you.” Essentially, how you show mercy is how mercy will be shown to you. How you judge will be how you will be judged. How you condemn is how you will be condemned. But also, and just as important, how you love is how you will be loved. Gifts, in good measure, packed together, shaken down, and overflowing, right into your lap. That’s the God we have, a God of transformation, a God of attraction, a God of healing who wants the best for you and for everyone, especially sinners. The only question that remains is – do you believe in this God?