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TO HURT YOUR ENEMIES IS TO SET THEM FREE!

Today's Text: Prov. 24: 17-18; 25: 21-22

Extracts:

1. *Do not rejoice when your enemy falls, and do not let your heart be glad when he stumbles; lest the Lord see it, and it displeases Him, and He turn away His wrath from him [Prov. 24: 17-18]*
2. *If your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat; and if he is thirsty, give him water to drink; for so you will heap coals of fire on his head, and the Lord will reward you [Prov. 25: 21-22]*

*In William Shakespeare's play, **Merchant of Venice**, there was a nobleman from Venice (in modern Italy) called Bassanio who was in financial difficulties. He approached his good friend, Antonio, for help. Unfortunately, Antonio's fortunes had been tied up in business at sea. So, he had to go to a vengeful greedy moneylender called Shylock who had always regarded Antonio as his sworn enemy. He agreed to lend Antonio 3,000 ducats on the condition that he signed a note that in the event of default, Shylock should cut "a pound of flesh" from close to Antonio's heart. Antonio in deed defaulted because his vessels could not land as scheduled. The matter went to court and Shylock demanded nothing less than his pound of flesh. He refused appeals for mercy. In spite of the fact that Antonio's merchandise arrived during the trial and that he was then able to pay, Shylock refused. Finally, Shylock was allowed to have his pound of flesh, provided he did not draw blood or cut more or less than "a pound of flesh!" When he then discovered that that was not possible, he asked for his money back. It was too late. He was imprisoned for endangering the life of another citizen. Antonio was set free and relieved of his debt to Shylock!*

The lesson we learn from this story is that we should be careful how badly we want to hurt our enemies. God has commanded us not to avenge. Civil authorities have warned us against taking the laws into our hands. Yet, deep down in us, all we want to do is to get our hands on our declared enemies. We celebrate their failures or difficulties and never wish them well. Do we know that we are setting them free from God's judgment by so doing? That is the subject that we shall examine in today's lesson.

1. So you have enemies?

An enemy can be defined as *whoever or whatever is hell bent* on hurting our interests or us. By that definition, we may actually be our own worst enemies! We tell lies. We are truce or covenant breakers. We delight in promiscuous living and call it enjoyment. We are the first to backbite against those more successful than we are, whose success we envy. In our offices, businesses or churches, we are working so hard to keep or raise our status while putting down those below us. The friends of our enemies are our enemies even when they have not hurt us. Can you still plead innocent?

Nevertheless, we do have enemies, *spiritual* or *physical*:

a) *Spiritual enemies*

There are enemies that we cannot see with our naked eyes “for we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places” [**Eph. 6: 12**]. The leader of these unseen enemies is Satan that has been called our adversary who “walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour” [**1 Pet. 5: 8**].

Will you feed the devil and his demonic forces when they are hungry? Will you give them water to drink if they are thirsty? Of course not because they have already been judged! Instead, you are to resist Satan and make him flee from you [**Jam. 4: 7**] by putting on the whole armour of God [**Eph. 6: 11,13-17**]. Even so, you cannot kill the devil or demons, no matter how well you can fight! Only God can determine or limit Satan’s powers [**Rev. 20: 1-3**]. So, no matter how much we would love to lay our hands on our spiritual enemies, we *cannot* hurt them outside of God’s plan.

b) *Physical enemies*

These are the enemies that we can see with our naked eyes. They may come in the form of family members [**Micah 7: 6; Lk 12: 53**], friends, colleagues, political or professional rivals, etc. Are they all really our enemies? Let us look at some cases:

- What if you are your own enemy? Some of us have poor work habits or interpersonal relations. They cannot meet their work deadlines, apart from coming late to work or being frequently absent. Some of us are very disrespectful of elders or constituted authorities. If such actions invite sanctions against us, are the people meting out punishment against us our enemies? After all, the word of God is clear that governments and other constituted

authorities were ordained by God and those who resist them resist “the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves” [Rom. 13: 1-2]. Therefore, if you want to hurt your enemy in this case, you may wind up hurting yourself!

- What if your enemy is an instrument of a divine plan for you?
There are some people that we may perceive as our enemies but without them, God’s divine plan for us may not materialize. For example, if Potiphar had not put Joseph in Pharaoh’s jail, where would he have met the king’s butler whose dream Joseph interpreted and whose recommendation two years later made it possible for Joseph to be made the governor of Egypt? What if his brothers had not sold him into slavery in Egypt? Could he have become governor in Egypt if he had remained with his family members in Canaan? Joseph underlined this point much later after revealing himself to his brothers when he said, “God sent me before you to preserve a posterity for you in the earth, and to save your lives by a great deliverance” [Gen. 45: 1-8]. Therefore, could we call all those who maltreated Joseph his enemies?

From the forgoing, it is obvious that we cannot easily identify who our enemies are and whether we should actually call them enemies. However, we need to deal with this sense of vengeance that seems to consume our human nature. We cannot wait to pay our enemies back in their own coins or get our pound of flesh!

2. Can you cut a pound of flesh without spilling blood?

An unforgiving spirit is based on the secular law of *Karma* (fate), that people need to suffer the consequences of their actions. Therefore, if somebody used his/her position of power or authority to hurt you, there is nothing wrong for you to pay him/her back when it is your turn. To illustrate the need for forgiveness, which is the direct opposite of vengeance, Jesus told His disciples the parable of two servants [Matt. 18: 23-35]. One owed his master huge sums of money (ten thousand talents), which he was not able to pay back. He begged for his master’s patience and benevolence. His master was so moved that he wrote off the debt. The servant went out and found a fellow servant who owed him mere pennies (one hundred denarii). In spite of his pleading for time, the servant refused but instead put the fellow servant in jail, pending when he could pay his debts. The news came to their master who became so incensed with his servant’s unforgiving spirit that he clamped him into prison, pending when he could also pay his own debt! Thus, for wanting to hurt his ‘enemy,’ he got a life sentence in jail (because there was no way that he could ever pay back his debt!) while his enemy, the fellow servant, was set free.

Even if we are inclined to avenge our hurt, we may not be able to do so for the following reasons, among others:

a) *We may not have the authority to do so!*

A civilized society is organized on the basis of laws. When one person commits an offence against another, the offended party does not have the authority to administer judgment on the offending party. To do that is regarded as taking the laws into his/her hands for which there are severe sanctions. Instead, s(he) reports the matter to the police that will investigate the charges and bring the matter before the courts for adjudication. For example, the Jewish leaders could not sentence Jesus to death because they did not have the authority. So, they handed Him over to Governor Pontius Pilate, the local representative of the Roman Emperor, Caesar. He was the one who authorized the crucifixion of Jesus [Jn 18: 28-31]. When a corrupt governor like Festus wanted to send Paul back to Jerusalem to face his Jewish enemies (who had sworn to an oath to kill him on the way), Paul appealed to Caesar in Rome, since he was a Roman citizen. Festus had no choice but to consent when he told Paul, "You have appealed to Caesar? To Caesar you shall go!" [Acts 24: 26; 25: 1-12]. So, if we have no authority to hurt our enemies on earthly matters, why do we challenge God's word that we should leave vengeance to Him?

b) *We may not have the privilege to avenge!*

What makes you believe that you can avenge when you may never have the privilege or opportunity to do so? You may never become your wicked boss's boss and s(he) may never need your help to obtain favours from your employer when s(he) retires. The oppressed Hebrew slaves in Egypt were in bondage for over 400 years and they could not have avenged their hurt if God had not sent Moses to deliver them. Dead Abel could not have avenged his own death in the hands of his brother, Cain. So, let us face it. In many cases, we cannot avenge *even if we want to!* Why don't we leave the matter in the hands of the One who knows what to do?

c) *How do we know what vengeance is exact?*

Punishment must fit the offence; otherwise, there will be a miscarriage of justice. That was the dilemma that faced Shylock in the Shakespeare story. He was entitled only to a pound of flesh, nothing more or less. If he drew Antonio's blood, that was more than the pound of flesh. In the end, even when Shylock was willing to hurt his enemy, he could not determine how much hurt would be enough. He could not hurt his enemy! In like manner, God has asked us to leave the matter to Him because we will do a poorer job should we handle the matter by ourselves.

d) *What if the offence against us was not deliberate?*

Some people may hurt us without realizing it. For example, the enemy's problem may be that s(he) is more successful than we are, and we hate him/her out of envy. When such a person runs into trouble, we may celebrate it, which is like hurting him/her! So, how can we see such people as enemies that we want to hurt back when they are not even aware of their offence?

Even when people offend or hurt us, it may not be deliberate. For example, a motorist who kills the only son of a 60-year old woman in a road accident may not have done it deliberately. So, why should her own people set the motorist's car on fire and want to kill the man himself? Why should they not hand him over to the police?

In the days of Moses, when emphasis was on "life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth," etc. [Ex. 21: 24], God commanded that cities of refuge be built (the equivalent of today's police custody) "that the manslayer who kills any person *accidentally* may flee there. They shall be cities of refuge for you *from the avenger, that the manslayer may not die until he stands before the congregation in judgment*" [Num. 35: 11-12]. What shall we then do in the age of grace when Jesus has taught us to "love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you"? That is what makes us "sons of your Father in heaven; for He makes His sun to rise on the evil and on the good" [Matt. 5: 44-45].

3. Conclusion: Listen to God!

In today's text, the word of God enjoins us not to rejoice when our enemies fall nor celebrate when they stumble. If we do so, God will be displeased with us and turn away His wrath from our enemies [Prov. 24: 17]. In other words, He will set them free! What does God then expect us to do? He expects us to feed our enemies when they are hungry, and to give them water to drink when they are thirsty. When we do so, we have heaped coals of fire on our enemies' heads and God will reward us [Prov. 25: 21-22].

The choice is yours. Do you want to take the laws into your own hands and thereby incur God's wrath and set Him free from avenging on your behalf? That was what God did to the people of Edom (the descendants of Esau) when He said [Ezek. 25: 12-13]:

Because of what Edom did against the house of Judah by taking vengeance, and has greatly offended by avenging itself on them, therefore, thus says the Lord God: 'I will also stretch out My hand against Edom, cut off man and beast from it, and make it desolate.... I will lay My vengeance on Edom by the hand of My people Israel, that they may do in Edom according to My anger.'

Or, do you obey God, forgive your enemies, reward them good for evil, and thereby receive God's reward while He judges your enemies? David chose this route when he had the opportunity to kill king Saul who had pursued him into the wilderness of Engedi. As Saul and his men were sleeping in a cave, David slipped in and cut off the skirt of the king's robe, without hurting him. At daybreak, David stood on top of the hill and showed the king a piece of his garment and how he had spared his life. Saul responded thus [**1 Sam. 24: 16-17, 20**]:

'Is this your voice, my son David?' And Saul lifted up his voice and wept. Then he said to David: 'You are more righteous than I; for you have rewarded me with good, whereas I have rewarded you with evil...And now I know indeed that you shall surely be king, and that the kingdom of Israel shall be established in your hand.'

The man who wanted to kill David that God had anointed to succeed him was now the one praying for David's success as king of Israel! A few years later, Saul was killed in battle and David was crowned king in his place!

To hurt your enemies is to set them free!