

Maximising Redemption: The Problems of Retribution

The Lord does not stay angry forever and delights to show mercy.

See Micah 7:18

The Problems of Retribution

One of the problems with wasteful shepherds is they often build excessively harsh and punitive laws. For example there are still some who condone dismemberment and capital punishment. Death and permanent dismemberment does not allow for redemption. This is unbiblical e.g. [Isaiah 65:17-19](#)

Whoever invokes a blessing in the land will do so by the God of truth; he who takes an oath in the land will swear by the God of truth. For the past troubles will be forgotten and hidden from my eyes. (Isaiah 65:16)

Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of his inheritance? You do not stay angry forever but delight to show mercy. You will again have compassion on us; you will tread our sins underfoot and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea. You will be true to Jacob, and show mercy to Abraham, as you pledged on oath to our fathers in days long ago. (Micah 7:18-20)

Physically punitive systems are open to abuse with irreversible consequences (e.g. framing an enemy for a murder charge). Michael Moore's documentary "Bowling for Columbine", demonstrates that cultures that embrace the use of weapons deals with escalating violence problem because they are not teaching their citizens alternative ways to manage anger and fear or overcome conflicts.

The fruits of retribution and punishment are never sweet. Even victims who go through the court system and win the case are often left with unresolved emotions. They have retained their anger and continued to relive the original crime as a witness which keeps reopening the wounds. I've seen victims whose anger and depression is even worse after a "victorious" case because they've put the rest of their life on hold awaiting the court decision, and once it occurs are left in a whirlpool of unresolved emotions.

Premature death raises other issues: firstly it presumes that God's purposes for the soul have been completed, which is not always the case e.g. in my dad's case: years later he had a problem with a stalker that led to formation of some of the first anti-stalking legislation (and how many rich people are grateful for that precedent?). Secondly, it deprives the opportunity for deep healing because it removes the chance for dialogue between the victim and the perpetrator. Now in my case that dialogue culminated in a conversation where my dad did not see what he had done was wrong and saw no need to apologize. This was profoundly disappointing, but made it clear that he would molest my daughter. Thus I have never felt guilty for severing communications; which does not guarantee that my daughter will never be molested, but at least I will never have to look her in the eye and apologize for bringing a known risk factor into her life.

There are advantages in choosing to forgive and forgo "justice" in the courts. The healing journey is still required, but it is not exacerbated by a delusion that a court determination will cure the internal angst. Anger and pain may take time to diminish, and often one needs to cut ties with the perpetrator (there is a difference between forgiveness and trust). One can forgive another for their past abuse, but if future abusive behavior is inevitable because they are either unrepentant or blind, it is reasonable to protect both yourself and those close to you. (Some people are only abusive to those over whom they have "power" e.g. their children and have normal interactions with other people). Once the cycle of abuse stops (each new act adds to the burden and reopens old wounds or brings back repressed memories), then mourning can happen. At some point one starts to negotiate with the present and future, which typically leads to another round of frustration as one comes to understand the personal handicaps to be overcome (one has to consciously learn what is "natural", unlike those from a non-abusive environment). God willing, at a later point one realizes that one's life has become reasonably normal, that one's emotional landscape is not a whirling mass of unresolved emotions, and that one has found peace and grace. (For example, one of the best compliments I've ever received in my life was from a manager who told me that my career was stalled because I was too boring and unremarkable).

Most of humanity has faced similar challenges (remember "Forbidden Planet"). May God comfort those from countries suffering severe circumstances with the knowledge that "affluence" does not cure human psyches. In fact, it can be harder to become a decent person in affluent societies because people are so busy chasing the mirages of "actualization" and "success" that they lose touch with the quiet inner voice. In "affluent" societies, many souls die strangers to their own children and even themselves, and many others wake up in their middle years to a nightmare where they don't like what they have become. Often in the process of discovering a more godly inner truth they lose their family and community relationships because those around them can not and will not see past the illusion of their existence. They can not relinquish the security blankets of the private school, nice house; or others simply can not stop being abusive because "that's just the way the world is".

It is also helpful to find role models who are mature gentle souls who manage to find peace and grace despite inauspicious circumstances. They are the quiet community leaders that diffuse abusive clichés, welcome the timid into fellowship, foster fairness in the workplace, infuse patience in shopping queues, guide those close to them into taking responsibility for their circumstances, empower others to make choices towards a more constructive self-image and lifestyles, look beyond existing to the greater good, and model thoughtfulness on matters such as global, welfare and the environment. These people usually have a strong sense of God, often with a healthy disrespect for hypocritical churches, and thus infuse faith and hope in those around them.

On a grand scale, we see similar kinds of peaceful reconciliation and overcoming past trauma in the Peace and Truth Commissions held in South Africa after the collapse of the apartheid system. The news headlines indicate that a similar approach is also having a major impact in clearing old wounds in the Aceh province. This area is hasn't received much public discussion but really needs to be further explored because it can be an incredibly useful strategy for overcoming entrenched differences e.g. between different ethnic groups or theological branches. The punitive

alternative of “someone has to pay” seems to keep old wounds festering¹ e.g. the recent near coup in Fiji, taking Saddam Hussein to trial. The “victors” are often oblivious to the resentment that festers in the underdog (this is why some cyclical wars continue because the underdog feels mistreated and waits for their turn to be top dog).

An airing of such tensions occurred in a public forum at an international conference last year where there was a big debate about international law. The US leaders seemed unaware of the hostility by others at the perceived injustice, where the US has done many atrocities (e.g. Peace Corps sterilization Guatemalan Indians, napalm, “dirty” bombs) but never gone to trial. In particular there was a heated exchange about Kissinger, the US speakers denying he needed to go to an international court, but others arguing it was the only place he would get a fair trial. If the US and other major powers are truly interested in peace (versus being vehicles to perpetuate espionage and war to keep war merchants in business), then sometimes the only way forward is to acknowledge that each and every side has done things of which they are ashamed, and that a truce needs to be called without recrimination because it is the only way to stop the escalating violence cycle.

There are times in history where the only way past the anger and retribution is to “let go and let God”. Jesus tries to explain this in [Matthew 18:21-35](#), where he concluded:

“Then the master called the servant in. ‘You wicked servant,’ he said, ‘I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?’ In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed. “This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart.” (Matthew 18:32-35)

¹ As an aside, I still remember from my primary school history the being told that the reason Germany embraced the Third Reich was because of excessively onerous punishment from the WWI. So why do we see some world leaders rushing to put in place economic sanctions in places such as Iran? My primary school history tells me that we are going to create the very thing that we fear.