

Our Father's World
July 31 2005 and August 14, 2005

This is indeed God's world. The glories of this beautiful day, the mountains, the woods around us, the bountifulness of nature, all remind us that the world we enjoy is beyond our human power to understand, much less create. We have no choice but to acknowledge God when it comes to such things. Or perhaps not. In our day mankind is uncomfortable with the idea that there is some power greater than himself. This is true on the individual, personal level as well. The world's wisdom, expressed in our secular culture, encourages us to "Look out for Number One." Or "Toot your own horn, because nobody else is going to toot it." The most pervasive form of humor today seems to be the "put-down," that elevates self by denigrating someone else, at the same time demonstrating one's superior wit and intellect. The message is to elevate self as the most important object in creation. This leaves no room for God.

In our scripture reading, the apostle Paul is following up his theological treatise to the church in Rome with good practical advice on how to live, not according to the world's wisdom, but consistent with the message and fact of salvation in Jesus Christ. Our reading is from Romans, Chapter 12, verses 17 to 21. I am reading from the New Revised Standard Version.

17. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all.
18. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.
19. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, "vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord."
20. No, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by so doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads."
21. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Before I go further, please let me emphasize that these words apply to our personal lives. Paul is not giving advice to foreign ministers or to Caesar, and he is not addressing our responsibility to defend others from injustices. The first century Christian was typically powerless, and not in a position to be concerned with such issues. Rather, how does the Christian in Rome to whom Paul addressed these words, and how do we, respond to evil done to us by others?

Paul's advice is consistent with Jesus's teaching, in Matthew Chapter 5, verse 21:

38. "You have heard it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.'
39. "But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also."

Jesus further challenges his listeners to love their enemies. Yes, love. He explains why in verses 46 and 47:

46. "For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?"

47. "And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the gentiles do the same?"

Jesus is saying that being truly righteous requires going beyond the world's wisdom, where an insult must be repaid in kind, and any harm or slight must be avenged. Paul, in his letter to the Romans, gives a somewhat different explanation than that from in Sermon on the Mount. He says, "Leave room for the wrath of God." He quotes from Deuteronomy, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord."

Now, these words "wrath" and "vengeance" give us trouble. We know them all too well from the behavior of people in our own day as well as from throughout history. What would be left of great literature and drama without wrath and vengeance? But we find them difficult to ascribe to a kindly, loving God. What is Paul really saying?

If we read these words narrowly, we can come to a somewhat satisfying conclusion. OK, we are not supposed to take revenge personally. God will get even for us. In fact, by being ever so sweet back, we will "heap burning coals" upon the head of our tormentor. We conjure the thought of our enemy burning in Hell, and our being able to crank up the temperature a bit hotter by being nice. This can appear very satisfying. We don't need to get even; we will use God as an instrument for doing so.

Does something still seem wrong here? Think about our relationship to God. If we are using God as a tool, we are no better than the heathen. That's what heathen worship was, an invocation of magic that would bind a god to do the will of the priest, be that summoning of rain, ensuring fertility, or cursing an enemy. If we attempt to use God, we are putting ourselves in charge, not God. Or so we think. But, it indeed is God's world, not ours, and He will not let Himself be used as our instrument. We are His, if we accept His grace and salvation, and that requires putting God's will before our own.

In the context, we can understand the "wrath of God" as being the consequences of sin, according to the way the world, God's world, works. If we accept that vengeance is not our business, that it is something that lies in God's domain of concern rather than ours, that leaves us free to do the work God may have for us to do that is within His purpose for our lives.

One of the best illustrations of this comes to us from the Hebrew scriptures, the story of David and Abigail found in I Samuel, Chapter 25. At this time David had become a hero by slaying the Philistine giant Goliath, but is on the run from jealous King Saul. He is hiding out with his band, really a small army, of 600 men in the wilderness of Paran, near the lands of the tribe of Judah. How does he support himself and his followers? By methods we would today call robbery, piracy, and extortion. Among other things, we see that he is running a "protection racket." So, think of David as being the head of a band of thieves. This was not necessarily a dishonorable profession. Remember that there was little that one could call a government. Saul was busy fighting Philistines, and there were no more judges. David's protection may have been the closest thing to benevolent local government at the time. The situation unfolds in verses 2 to 8:

2. There was a man in Maon, whose property was in Carmel. The man was very rich; he had three thousand sheep and a thousand goats. He was shearing his sheep in Carmel.
3. Now the name of the man was Nabal, and the name of his wife Abigail. The woman was clever and beautiful, but the man was surly and mean; he was a Cabelite.
4. David heard in the wilderness that Nabal was shearing his sheep.
5. So David sent ten young men; and David said to the young men, "Go up to Carmel, and go to Nabal, and greet him in my name.
6. Thus you shall salute him: 'Peace be to you, and peace be to your house, and peace be to all that you have.
7. I hear that you have shearers; now your shepherds have been with us, and we did them no harm, and they missed nothing, all the time they were in Carmel.
8. Ask your young men, and they will tell you. Therefore let my young men find favor in your sight; for we have come on a feast day. Please give whatever you have at hand to your servants and to your son David."

Wool from sheep was seen by the ancients as a gift from God. Shearing sheep was not just an exercise in husbandry, it was a cause for celebration, a day of thanksgiving. It was a day on which hospitality could be expected. David chooses this occasion to remind Nabal that he had reason to give thanks for David's "protection" and that a sharing in the feast was expected. The language used is very polite, and in accordance with the customs of the time. David emphasizes this by referring to himself as Nabal's son, from whom respect would be expected, but to whom a measure of generosity is due. We read Nabal's response in verses 9 to 12.

9. When David's young men came, they said all this to Nabal in the name of David; and they waited.
10. But Nabal answered David's servants, "Who is David? Who is the son of Jesse? There are many servants today who are breaking away from their masters.
11. Shall I take my bread and my water and the meat that I have butchered for my shearers, and give it to men who come from I do not know where?"
12. So David's young men turned away, and came back and told him all this.

Uh oh. Nabal's response is not what David was expecting. Notice that it is well calculated to insult. It is a very clever put-down. Nabal and Jesse, David's father, were both of the tribe of Judah. It's not a big place. Even if they were not wealthy, David also had six older brothers, and surely some of them would have been known to Nabal. Notice Nabal's suggestion that David is no more than a run-away slave. If there was anything lower than a slave, it was a run-away slave. A slave was seen as having at least some value, but was on the very bottom of the social hierarchy. A run-away slave was less than worthless, and was usually put to death if recaptured. How do you think David felt when he heard this? We see in verse 13:

13. David said to his men, "Every man strap on his sword!" And every one of them strapped on his sword; David also strapped on his sword; and about four hundred men went up after David, while two hundred remained with the baggage.

But, the story does not unfold as we might expect. We continue reading with verse 14:

14. But one of the young men told Abigail, Nabal's wife, "David sent messengers out of the wilderness to salute our master, and he shouted insults at them.
15. Yet the men were very good to us, and we suffered no harm, and we never missed anything when we were in the fields, as long as we were with them;
16. they were a wall to us both by night and by day, all the while we were with them keeping the sheep.
17. Now therefore know this and consider what you should do; for evil has been decided against our master and against all his house; he is so ill natured that no one can speak to him."
18. Then Abigail hurried, and took two hundred loaves, two skins of wine, five sheep ready dressed, five measures of parched grain, one hundred clusters of raisins, and two hundred cakes of figs. She loaded them on donkeys
19. and said to her young men, "Go on ahead of me; I am coming after you." But she did not tell her husband Nabal.
20. As she rode on the donkey and came down under cover of the mountain, David and his men came down toward her; and she met them.
21. Now David had said, "Surely it was in vain that I protected all that this fellow has in the wilderness, so that nothing was missed of all that belonged to him; but he has returned me evil for good.
22. God do so to David and more also, if by morning I leave so much as one male of all who belong to him."

David is determined on vengeance. He has given protection, and all he has received in return is insult. How long can one maintain authority as a bandit leader if this is tolerated? Notice the oath David utters. "God do so to David, and more also, if by morning I leave so much as one male of all who belong to him." The language is even more graphic in the Hebrew and as translated in the King James version. It is of the same form as the oath Jezebel pronounces in seeking Elijah's life. It is convincing and terrible in its expression of determination. Then he runs into Abigail.

23. When Abigail saw David, she hurried and alighted from the donkey, fell before David on her face, bowing to the ground.
24. She fell at his feet and said, "Upon me alone, my lord, be the guilt; please let your servant speak in your ears, and hear the words of your servant.
25. My lord, do not take seriously this ill-natured fellow, Nabal; for as his name is, so is he; Nabal is his name [Nabal sounds like the Hebrew word for a fool or brute, who respects neither God nor man.] , and folly is in him; but I, your servant, did not see the young men of my lord, whom you sent.

Abigail, with her cargo of good food, by her well chosen words, and by the joke at Nabal's expense, has at least for the moment gained David's attention. She now speaks with a wisdom that, for that time and circumstance, is astounding. Continuing with verses 26 to 31:

26. Now then, my lord, as the Lord lives, and as you yourself live, since the Lord has restrained you from bloodguilt and from taking vengeance with your own hand, now let your enemies and those who seek to do evil to you be like Nabal.

27. And now let this present that your servant has brought to my lord be given to the young men who follow my lord.
28. Please forgive the trespass of your servant; for the Lord will certainly make my lord a sure house, because my lord is fighting the battles of the Lord; and evil will not be found in you so long as you live.
29. If anyone should rise up to pursue you and to seek your life, the life of my lord shall be bound in the bundle of the living under the care of the Lord your God; but the lives of your enemies he shall sling out as from the hollow of a sling.
30. When the Lord has done to my lord according to all the good that he has spoken concerning you, and has appointed you prince over Israel,
31. my lord shall have no cause for grief, or pangs of conscience, for having shed blood without cause or for having saved himself. And when the Lord has dealt with my lord, then remember your servant."

In the path of this bandit leader seeking revenge, Abigail articulates a future of David as a faithful servant of God, having come under the will of God to be King of Israel, without dirtying his hand in the blood of Nabal and his servants. She addresses what is to be, not the present. To convey this message Abigail saves no dignity for herself. She throws herself down in an abject posture. She takes responsibility for the guilt of the slight to David and his men. She speaks of herself as his servant, which had the meaning of "slave" in that context.

This particular story appears to end happily. David listens, and gives thanks to God for Abigail and her message. He recognizes that vengeance for such a slight is indeed God's business, rather than his. Murdering Nabal and his servants would have been a catastrophe not only for them, but for David and his future. He would have alienated the very people, the tribe of Judah, on whom he depended for support. The next morning when Abigail finds Nabal sober, she tells him what happened. The Bible tells us that "his heart died within him," and Nabal dies about ten days later. Then, David sends servants and asks Abigail to be his wife.

Being faithful to God's purpose, and leaving vengeance to him, does not always have such a seemingly happy ending. We do not live in the Garden of Eden. In this broken world, there is always some cause for sorrow or some difficulty, even for the rich and powerful, or those who seem to lead charmed lives. Consider Abigail. The only further mention of her in the Bible, is that she had a son, David's second, named Chileab. She was one of about 16 wives. That's not counting the concubines. By the time of the succession crisis, apparently Chileab is dead. Amnon, the oldest, was murdered by Absalom, number three, who died in his revolt. Number four, Adonijah, was killed after Bathsheba's son Solomon seized the throne with help from her conniving. David could have used Abigail's good advice later in his reign. Suppose she had still been around, and David consulted her:

"Abigail, dear, do you see the young woman on that rooftop next door?"

"Yes, David, that's Bathsheba, wife of Uriah the Hittite."

"Dearest Abigail, what ever should I do about that poor girl; she has no clothes! Maybe I should ask her to come over. Surely there is something I could do for her."

You can imagine what Abigail would say to that! She would no doubt have articulated wisdom that would have led David in a different direction than the one actually taken. As it was, David's choice proved terribly destructive to him and his authority, his family, and all Israel. Whether Abigail had died before or after her only son, or whether she was ignored, we do not know. But we do know of Abigail's message to David on this one occasion, which called David to God's purpose. And this message rings as true for us today as it did for David.

When we leave vengeance to God rather than ourselves, we give up control. We cannot count on God to heap coals of fire on our enemies, or give us the satisfaction we believe we would enjoy from personal revenge. What God can do, though, is beyond our imagination. He can take those enemies, and extend to them, too, the opportunity of salvation. He can take an angry David bent on revenge, and lead him to become the greatest king of Israel, also remembered to this day for the many psalms which continue to bless us. He can turn the evil city Ninevah to repentance, to the disappointment of the prophet Jonah. He can take a Paul, zealous to persecute Christians, and make him a great apostle.

The "burning coals" Paul mentions are probably meant by the apostle to be the embarrassment on the part of the person who, doing ill, is repaid with kindness. This will not reach everybody, but there may be some one person that our selfless signs of God's message will reach. That is what it means to be a witness to God's love for us, a love that repays evil with good. A love that seeks the one lost sheep. A love that led Jesus to die on the cross that we might have life, and have it more abundantly. We can have that life only by surrendering our claim to lordship. Only by setting aside our right to administer justice to those who do evil to us. We must accept that it is God's world, not ours; His purpose that matters, not ours.

If we rely on our own strength for setting things right between us and others in the world, that strength will eventually fail. If we rely on our intellect, our cleverness, our political or social power to influence other in order to get even or establish our position, even that can eventually fail. For all flesh is mortal, and ultimately we will lack even the power to sustain our own life. But God's power does not fail. By putting ourselves in his hands, by accepting his power, we no longer need to rely on our own failing strength. For Jesus calls to us to be not just servants, but sons and daughters of God, and witnesses so that others too may live.

Amen.