

# Tit-for-Tat

I'd like to talk about a different aspect of faith today than we usually focus on. Yesterday Ireland balloted on a peace process. A process that hopefully will bring an end to centuries of recrimination and hostility between two groups of people. Each of us can think back over the past 20 / 30 years and think of the carnage that has occurred because of those hostilities and the relationships that have been destroyed.

It is an example of a problem that we find throughout all society. It is a human problem - not just an Irish problem. The way in which children start playing "tit-for-tat". "You do this to me, and I'll do this to you, and what I do to you will be worse than what you do to me."

Relationships are destroyed because of such attitudes. This then extends all the way up to adults and nations. Homes and families are destroyed because of that attitude. It becomes all-consuming. It gets out of all proportion to the original cause. It's destructive.

Perhaps the budget got overspent on a particular item. The other spouse responds accordingly. Before long the overspending of the finances are not the problem. The fighting becomes the major problem. It's like a vicious cycle. A downward spiral as one event follows another.

It's a challenge amongst those who claim to be the people of God. It will be a challenge to us as long as we are human. Because it requires faith to live another way - to live by a different standard.

Paul in Hebrews 11 said "Without faith it is impossible to please God". Faith is an essential element in our relationship with God. If we don't have it there's no pleasure for God. There's no pleasing God. It doesn't matter what else we do. If faith isn't evident in our lives we are lost.

Paul defines the definition of faith a little more exactly when he says:

*"He that comes to God must believe that He exists".*

So the first element required of faith is an unshakeable faith in God's existence. But it doesn't stop there. The devils believe God exists! Just believing that God exists is not adequate of and by itself:

*"... and that He is a rewarder of those that diligently seek Him."*

God has a reward for His people. For those who diligently seek to follow His way of life.

The problems so many countries are trying to resolve are conflicts that are brought about by living a life that is not one of faith. Solving those problems requires we live a life of faith. God establishes a standard by which we are to live and by which we are to relate to one another.

*Rom 12:1 I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service.*

We are to be a living sacrifice. Our lives are to be totally devoted to God's purposes. Nothing else. We give of ourselves to our Creator and to our Saviour. The end result of that is described in the next verse:

*2 And be not conformed to this world: (the world plays tit-for-tat) but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God*

We are to be made into something totally new. That's how we should live. It's a challenge. Later in the chapter Paul talks about the tit-for-tat principle.

*Rom 12: 16 (NRSV) Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are.*

The next verse tells how we are to live in harmony:

*17 Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all.*

Tit-for-tat is not a Godly life!

*18 If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.*

There are some occasions when we can't live at peace - because somebody else wants to create war. But we have to live peaceable as much as we can.

*19 Beloved, never avenge yourselves, (don't seek to get even - don't render evil for evil) 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 doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads."*

*21 Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*

The natural condition of a human being is to be overcome by evil. Some people are able to rise above a situation or brush it aside better than others. But ultimately speaking people who don't have access to God's Holy Spirit find themselves trapped in a cycle where they render evil for evil. It's sad. God says "Don't be overcome by evil. Overcome evil with good".

Can good overcome evil? God says it can and will! We're part of this particular Church because we believe that. We look forward to the establishment of the Kingdom of God and His righteousness whereby evil will be supplanted and removed. We spend time on our knees praying for that time to come.

But it should also be an attribute of our lives on a daily basis. It's part of God rewarding those who diligently seek Him. Living this way of life that God has established is part of being faithful and showing that we do have faith in God. Good will overcome evil - with the aid of God's Holy Spirit guiding and directing us.

This has been a challenge for humanity from the beginning of human relationships. The challenge in the Garden of Eden was between what God had stated was truly good (the Tree of Life) and what Satan wanted to represent as being good (the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil).

*Gen 4: 3 In the course of time (this is understood to be a reference to the Holy Days) Cain brought to the LORD an offering of the fruit of the ground,*

*4 and Abel for his part brought of the firstlings of his flock, their fat portions. And the LORD had regard for Abel and his offering,*

*5 but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his countenance fell.*

He tripped over his bottom lip!

*6 The LORD said to Cain, "Why are you angry, and why has your countenance fallen?"*

*7 If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it."*

"If you do the right thing Cain, you will be accepted." That's what involved in being accepted - **doing** the right thing.

You must master it. You must keep it under control. How? By doing well - or doing good.

Cain chose to not accept the Way of God. He allowed sin to master him and he committed the first murder. He became overcome with evil. Evil destroyed the man.

*9 Then the LORD said to Cain, "Where is your brother Abel?" He said, "I do not know; am I my brother's keeper?"*

Cain raises a question which God seeks to answer for us throughout the rest of the pages of the Bible. We are our brother's keeper. It requires faith to do that. Cain was taught that if he did good he could resist evil. God also shows us that the condition of Cain holds true for every human being that is cut off from Him.

*Eccl 7: 20 For there is not a just man upon earth, that doeth good, and sinneth not.*

*Rom 3: 10 as it is written: "There is no one who is righteous, not even one*

Sin is a common ingredient to humanity and there's only one way for it to be overcome. That is through the sacrifice of Christ and the coming out of sin. God also realises we need a defence against Satan's wiles so that we can truly have the mind of God and be transformed.

In a week's time we will be keeping the Feast of Pentecost which portrays the essential spiritual ingredient so our lives can be transformed and we're not caught in the trap that Cain found himself in, or that Solomon described of mankind. We can rise above that. We can be equipped with the defences and the offensive weapons to be able to resist Satan and to be able to resist Satan's lies.

Pentecost, part of God's Holy Day plan, portrays the giving of God's Holy Spirit to His called and chosen ones so that they can overcome sin. They can then live this new life and not be overcome by evil - but rather overcome evil by doing good.

This passage in Romans 12:14-15 is quoted from other scriptures:

## **Deut 32: 35 Vengeance is mine ...**

God told the Israelites they weren't to seek vengeance. He would take care of things much better than any human being can. This is because He knows what another person needs to come to the point of repentance. God can read the heart in a way that we cannot.

God says **He** will take care of what other people do to you! That requires faith. It's part of the life to which we are called.

*Prov 25: 21 If your enemies are hungry, give them bread to eat; and if they are thirsty, give them water to drink;*

*22 for you will heap coals of fire on their heads, and the LORD will reward you.*

Don't seek to get even. Don't seek your ends. Seek to live another way of life.

The word Solomon uses for "enemies" is not a detached dispassionate word. Oftentimes the word for "enemy" refers to a nation. But in this verse, the word for "enemy" is also translated "hate" or "hatred" It's talking about something more personal, and not detached. It's talking about an inter-relationship. It's not talking about someone whom you've grown up hating because they are of a different religion. It's not a reference to difficulties between Muslims and Christians, or Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland. It's talking of animosity between parties, but it also applies to the other.

Solomon says "If the one you hate is hungry, feed him". It's very personal! "If they're thirsty, give them water to drink." Because the end result is you heap coals of fire on their head and the Eternal will reward you.

Did mankind follow that example? Notice how distorted this view was 1,000 years after Solomon's words:

*Matt 5:43 "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.'*

Where do you find this in God's Word? Nowhere at all! In reality you find the exact opposite.

*Exodus 23: 4 When you come upon your enemy's ox or donkey going astray, you shall bring it back.*

You are to do good to your enemy. You are to be concerned about his well being as much as you are about your own.

Jesus Christ was confronting an attitude which did not arise from God's Word, but which arose from what is referred to today as the "Oral Law". The law that had been recorded in the Mishnah and which was supposedly given to the Elders who went into the mountain with Moses, Joshua and Caleb.

The Pharisees were the natural inheritors of that law. That gave them status in society as opposed to the Sadducees were in charge of the Temple and the Temple Law. One of the great differences between the Pharisees and the Sadducees was that the (Sadducees) rejected the Oral Law. They said "It may be good, but it's not binding. It's the written law that counts." The Pharisees said "Both are equally binding".

If they contradict one another, how can they both be binding? The Pharisees elevated the Oral Law above the written law. Matthew makes that plain in chapters 4 and 5. When Christ was confronted by Satan, He responded by saying "It is written". Meaning "It is stated in God's Word ..." It came from the Old Testament - it was written!

## **Matt 5:43 Ye have heard ...**

(showing the contrast between the two laws - the Law of God and the Oral Law - the law man had created for His own convenience. Traditions of men rather than the Torah of God)

*43 "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.'*

*44 But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,*

*45 so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.*

*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?*

*48 Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*

*Rom 12: 2 ... prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.*

What is the will of God? That we love one another. That if someone hates us, we take care of them. If we do that for someone who hates us, how much more will we do it for someone with whom we have a positive relationship? We'll have concern for everyone. We won't be selective.

Paul told the Galatians that the end result of living the way the world does, is that of destruction.

*Gal 5: 15 If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another.*

How many mothers have taught their children to hate others, and then have had to walk behind a funeral cortege weeping because their son has been killed as a result of that hatred for other people?

Think of Rwanda and Burundi. Two peoples. Hutus and Tutsi. You can separate them by their height. They hate one another. They have grown up hating one another. They are willing to die for this hate. And others get caught up in the hate as well. If we bite and devour within the family, our children are affected. Children who see conflict between parents can be scarred for life.

The love of God is a difficult concept for the human mind without God's Holy Spirit to comprehend. People see love as an emotional reaction. That's how it is portrayed. God shows it is much deeper.

*1 Cor 13: 4 Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant*

*5 or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful;*

*6 it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth.*

*7 It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.*

*8 Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end.*

But agape love has no end! "Agape is a creative force which creates value where no value exists." It does something to another person.

Consider Rwanda. How does a Hutu see a Tutsi? In the physical realm they see a person of significantly different stature than themselves. One is tall, the other is short. They see someone who in the right circumstances will kill them or be killed by them. They see a potential enemy. That's the natural state.

How could agape create value in an enemy? - By realising they too are a potential member of God's family. Realising that that person is going to have the same privilege of being able to accept the sacrifice of Jesus Christ in payment of their sins. That person will, as a result of that, have the opportunity of coming out of their sins, and of receiving God's Holy Spirit and above all accepting Jesus Christ as their Lord, Master and High Priest. They will have the opportunity of being part of the rulership in the Kingdom of God.

What does that concept do to your image of the other person? How then can you see them as an enemy? How can you hate the other person on that basis? It won't happen overnight. You have to be patient and kind. Love is not envious, boastful or arrogant. Not self elevating. It's not rude. It doesn't insist on its own way. It's not irritable or resentful. It doesn't create irritation or resent amongst those it deals with.

As Paul says "As much as lies within you, live peaceably with all men." It's something that comes as a result of Godly love. Paul goes on to say that when he was a child he reasoned like a child, but that when he became an adult he put an end to childish ways. Likewise when you became a Christian you put away non Christian ways.

*1 Cor 13: 12 ... Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.*

*13 And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.*

It's a very powerful section of scripture, talking about the life to which we've been called. What is this good that we are to heap on people's heads? The word "good" is a very common word in the English language. It has become so frequently used that we have to use superlatives to describe states of goodness! "Very good." "Excellent."

Goodness really doesn't need such superlatives. There is no good in terms of the physical world or in terms of humanity. People think they have "a good idea", or "a good plan". Is it really good? It's possible -

providing one thing. There's only **one source** of goodness. It's not the human mind - it's a far greater power than the human mind.

*1 Chron 16: 34 O give thanks unto the LORD; for he is good; for his mercy endureth for ever.*

It is only God that embodies goodness. "Good" relates to God not humanity!

*Matt 19: 17 And he said to him, "Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good. If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments."*

Keep The Good Way God has given to you. Keep the commandments. It's a means by which God is able to reveal His goodness - or His state of good - to us.

Theological Dictionary of the New Testament (edited by Bromley): "Only God is truly good. His goodness is the kindness through which Christ confers the good things of salvation. Apostles are thus preachers of good news. The good news of God's Kingdom. With God's righteousness being the focus of it."

Nothing in this world deserves to be called good. God is good. This is a basic statement of God's Word. This God **does** good.

*James 1: 17 Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning.*

When we are to heap something on someone's head, it's not something **we** think is good - but what **God** defines as being good. God doesn't give us the choice of deciding what is good and what is bad. He already has decided that for us.

Our responsibility is to determine what is the good and perfect and acceptable will of God. We do that by burying our nose in God's Word and seeing the life God asks us to live. That's how our mind is transformed and renewed. (Rom 12:2) The goodness we are to extol has to be based on what God says, not what man says.

Why do you think we are to heap "coals of fire" on someone's head? Coals burn. The reference to coals of fire was to the coals that were taken off the altar of burnt offering that were used to produce incense. A sweet savour. When the priest went into the Holy Place to trim the candles etc. he had to take coals off the altar and put on those coals finely ground incense to burn before the Eternal. Incense was placed **on** the coals to create a cloud of incense.

In the book of Revelation it mentions that the prayers of the saints are like sweet smelling incense. We are doing something right - something that is to the honour and glory of God. The way in which we relate to one another has to be to the honour and glory of God. Something on which that incense can be poured and create something acceptable and pleasing in God's sight.

Matthew 5 talks about us letting our light shine before men - so that they see our good works and praise and give thanks to God. The praise and glory of our good works is for God's benefit, not ours. It's the way we show that we accept that God is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.

It's a challenge for each of us to live this way of life. For some of us that challenge takes different forms. It may be a challenge when a particular person walks in the house. For others it may seem more detached. But we each **are** our brother's keeper!

By living this way of life we are affirming that rhetoric question which Cain threw at God in Genesis chapter 4. You are affirming that you are living God's Way of Life. It's a responsibility of all Christians to be concerned about the well-being of others, irrespective of the circumstances.

I've spoken recently about Joseph. Joseph's brothers knew he could vent his anger towards them. That he could kill them in the most brutal possible way.

*Gen 45: 3 Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph.*

When Joseph said this, you can guarantee those men's bowels turned to water! They had lived a way of life of rendering evil for evil. Joseph had learned to render good. Joseph said "Don't be concerned. You didn't do this to me. God allowed this to happen for your benefit and for the benefit of the rest of humanity."

It's a different picture. His brothers accepted it - until father Jacob died. Then they got all nervous again. Joseph told them it was not his responsibility to seek vengeance. That if he did that he would be fighting against God, because God had allowed this to happen.

That's why vengeance isn't ours! It's God's.

Does the spiral always have to be downward? Could we not create an upward spiral provoking one another to love and good works? Building one another up? Because what goes down can also go up!

People can learn to build one another up - that's the world we look forward to. The World Tomorrow. We have faith in that world - that it will come and be established. Can we live that way in preparation for the world ahead? Can we relate to one another in that way - to those who hate us - so that God's name can be honoured and glorified above all else?

... Peter Nathan

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United Church of God Radlett

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