

Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost
September 10, 2017

Text: Romans 13:1-10

Theme: “Payback”

Payback, revenge, even sweet revenge? Payback is a common theme in literature and films. It's a reoccurring theme, even a common event in life. It is certainly also one that is found in the Bible. The Book of Esther has a lot of payback. The evil Haman receives payback. He had devised a plan to hang Mordecai and destroy the Jews, but it gets turned around. He is hung on the very gallows constructed at his order for Mordecai and the Jews execute payback on those who sought their harm—sweet!

Jesus has some things to say about payback. In Matthew 7:2 we read, “For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged, and with the measure you use it will be measured to you.” In the parable of the Rich Man and Poor Lazarus, the Rich Man will experience payback in torment from which there is not one single drop of relief.

Yes, payback, a common theme. It is a natural reaction, even reflex, is it not? Does payback need to be checked or executed? The answer is “yes.” Our text for today is all about payback. It is a matter of what will the payback be and to whom.

You may well remember what we read and spoke of last week from Romans 12. We heard the instructions to bless those who persecuted us, bless and do not curse. We read that if our enemy was hungry to feed him, and if he was thirsty to give him something to drink. We spoke of not being overcome by evil, but to overcome evil with good. That's all well and good in theory, but how do we carry that out in reality? It can be more than a little difficult. What do you do when your neighbor let's his dog on your property to do its business and it happens again and again? How do you react when your brother is slow in

giving you your share of the inheritance? What course of action should you follow when your contractor has used defective materials? How do you respond when you have been wronged?

Look at it this way. This basket is you. This basket is your neighbor (neighbor in the biblical sense). Your neighbor wrongs you. That is represented with this ball. So what do you do? Do you give some payback? That is represented with this ball, but do you now owe him more than that? You payback more than you have received. Then what does he do? Is he not tempted to respond in kind with more? And so it goes back and forth, no resolution, instead escalation. Someone decides it's time to play hardball or to go for all the marbles and we have a mess. Payback can get out of hand. What do we do about this; how do we handle it?

If we handle it from the old nature then it is more sin payback with interest. But should not something be done? Yes it should. There is a different kind of payback, divine payback. God has people for this. Both our text and our Gospel lesson touch on this today. Maybe that person God is using is you. Someone sins against you. What do you do? Do you let 'em have it, unload on them, or unload about them to those around you? No, God calls us to something else. "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone." (Matthew 18:15) We go to our brother in love. We are our brother's keeper. In the body of Christ we are members one of another. The goal is not be a snare of sin for our brother, first part of our Gospel lesson certainly warns against that; no, the goal is repentance. Your brother is caught up in sin and you are called to restore. Since it was against you, you are the one for the job. You go carefully in love seeking to be an agent of restoration, not a snare or stumbling block for more sin. The goal is to enable sin to be seen as sin that there may be repentance and a brother gained.

Since the reference is “brother,” the primary application is within the church between brothers and sisters. But it works also with those with whom we are in relationships such as neighbors, co-workers, family members, friends. Now this may not work or at least may not be such a good idea when it is someone who has a position of power over you, like a child before an adult, or a student before a teacher, or the abused to the abuser, the robbed to the robber.

But God has people for that too. This is the subject matter of the first part of our text for today. God has given governing authority, authority exercised by those put into position to exercise it. “Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those who exist have been instituted by God.” (vs 1) Paul says those who resist are resisting God’s authority (vs 2). Authority has been instituted to promote good and hinder evil. Paul says they are not a terror to good conduct but to bad. Paul tells us to do the right thing and the authority will not be a source of fear, but will commend. But if we choose to do the evil then there is good reason to fear. “You are not those avenging yourselves, beloved, but give place to wrath, for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay.” (Romans 12:19) And some of that payback will happen here and now. “He is God’s servant for your good...For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer.” (vs 4)

The governing authority is called to met out what goes into the payback basket, justice for the offense. Government is given to protect us from ourselves, that is the rotten fruit that results from the old nature, keeps us from destroying ourselves in a downward spiral of chaos and darkness. Governing authority watches over the protection of life and property. Governing authority is concerned with consequence of wrong doing in this life.

Then there is eternal payback for wrong doing. Our wrong doing, wrong thinking, wrong speaking, that is, sin baskets are full. We had an enormity of dirty laundry for which we could never recovery, never repay our sin indebtedness. Jesus illustrates this in the story He tells at the end of Matthew 18. There is a servant who owes the king 10,000 talents. How much is that? It's a lot. It is estimated that to earn one talent by a common laborer would take 20 years of work. So you do the math, 10,000 talents, 20 years for one talent, 200,000 years to earn that much. Since it was extremely unlikely the servant would live that long, you can see it was impossible to repay. That's the point. Now we can compare that to the debt owed that servant by a fellow servant of 100 denarii or about four months wages: 200,000 years, or 2,400,000 months to four months, or 600,000 to 1. This is quite a difference don't you think?

We had all this dirty laundry and Jesus takes it all. Our sinful human payback results in more to be paid back, but divine payback deals with it in a way to be rid of it. All the divine payback for our sin is received by the Divine Himself in our Lord Jesus. We are washed and made white in our Lord Jesus. We are even covered over with His righteousness.

Our Heavenly Father desires not the death of the sinner but would have the sinner turn and live. His will is that none of those who believe in Him should perish by being ensnared into sin by the action of others or self-inflicted sin (Matthew 18:7-13). His will is for the message of Christ to go out to more that more may be added to the ranks of the saints and the numbers of those in hell diminished. Divine payback for sin has been paid out and received. Blessed are those who know and believe this.

One day there will be another payback, God's final payback, settling of accounts for who have not trusted in God's settlement in Christ. We read of that in 2 Thessalonians

1:5, “This is evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be considered worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you are also suffering - ⁶ since indeed God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you, ⁷ and to grant relief to you who are afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels ⁸ in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.” We are still here so that may happen to as few as possible. Speaking the Gospel is part of our debt of love repayment.

The debt of love payback is our business. Sin payback business is God’s business. Paul tells us to owe nothing to anyone except to love one another (vs 8). We do this among our brothers and sisters caring for their needs and calling them from sin when they are caught up in it. We do this among our brothers and sisters and all when we respond to evil with good. Love is the fulfilling of the law. From God’s love to us we are indebted with a love debt we can never repay. We will never run out of good to do.

We have been freed from spending our energy on personal revenge to pursuing good. We live within the order God has established in this world, order within the disorder of sin, while we wait for the reordering of things in the new heavens and the new earth. We recognize that the rule of law is a gift from God. It is one of the two divine institutions He has given for life in this world. The other is man and woman as husband and wife. Recognizing this is of God Paul tells us we are in subjection to the authorities not only to avoid punishment but for the sake of conscience. It is what new creations in Christ do. So in this order we pay what is due; taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenues are due, respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due.

But what if those honored are not so honorable? That does not change the fact that ruling authority is a gift from God, and ruling authority being from God certainly is not a

license for those in positions of authority to abuse it. We are blessed to be in a land where we have a process to change those in authority in many instances. We are called to pray for those in authority. We hear Paul's instructions for that in 1 Timothy 2:1-2, "First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, ²for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way."

Though we recognize and are subject to governing authority there are times when we are even called to disobey it. We are called to do so when the authority would try to obligate us to break God's commands or force us away from our confession that Jesus is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. We have example of the apostles doing that very thing before the Sanhedrin. As we do so we know we will be paying a price. We understand that it all likelihood we will suffer penalties for our obedience.

Yes, our faith is all about payback. It is not the payback of sin with more sin. It is the trust that Jesus has received all divine payback already for us. We now live out that faith in the structure of ruling authority God has given for the protection of life and property. We are always called to payback the debt of love, a debt never repaid. It is paying forward, if you will, in deeds of love. It's what we do as those transformed to meet evil with good, not with more evil. It is our reasonable service. For Jesus' sake. Amen