

Love and Reconciliation

By **John Gavin, S.J.**

February 23, 2020 – Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time

Readings: Leviticus 19.1-2, 17-18; 1 Corinthians 3.16-23; Matthew 5.38-48

Today's Gospel reading, a continuation of the Sermon on the Mount, contains a challenging selection of Matthew's "antitheses" (Mt 5.21-48), that is, "contrasts" or "oppositions". Each contrast begins with a statement of Old Testament teaching ("You have heard that it was said"), followed by what appears to be a statement of opposition ("But I say to you"). On the surface, these antitheses seem to supplant or abolish the Old Testament teaching, but this is clearly not the intention. In fact, shortly before this passage Jesus stated, "Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have not come to abolish them, but to fulfill them" (Mt 5.17). Thus, the antitheses do not eliminate the law and the prophets but express the manner in which Jesus's life and teachings fulfill them. Jesus moves his hearers toward the deeper, interior dispositions associated with Old Testament teachings.

This Gospel reading and the other two readings focus on the particular problem of dealing with a neighbor who has wronged us. Many questions surround this theme for Christians. What does it mean to forgive my neighbor? Am I obligated to reconcile with my neighbor even when that person refuses to convert or express contrition? Can I directly oppose a present evil, or must I show no resistance? Our readings can help us to reach greater clarity regarding these questions.

Reconciliation and God

On the one hand, we can rightly say that God's love is unconditional. We cannot buy or demand God's love, but rather God lavishes it upon us freely. We have been made in the image of God, and we are to be temples of God (1 Cor 3.16), raised up by the Holy Spirit to become the divine likeness. When we fell into sin and rejected God's love, God did not abandon us. Instead, his love reached into the very depths of our suffering: the Word became flesh and dwelt among us (Jn 1.14). On the Cross, the Word Incarnate confessed the horror of our sins and reconciled us to the Father: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Lk 23.34). God's unconditional love became fully evident on the Cross when the Son poured out his life that we, sinners one and all, might share in his life.

On the other hand, God's forgiveness is not "unconditional". Only God has the power to forgive sins; only Jesus's sacrifice upon the Cross reconciles us to the Father. Yet, God also respects our freedom. God's love offers us the reconciliation we yearn for and the grace we desire, but this does not mean God forces us to accept it. Like the prodigal son we must leave sin behind and make our way home, where the Father will run to meet us. "*If we confess our sins*, he is faithful and just and will forgive our sins and will cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 Jn 1.9). God's love has won the battle for reconciliation, but our hearts must still, through the power of grace, convert toward him through confession and penance.

Reconciliation and the Church

The Church has been commissioned by Christ to be the instrument of reconciliation in the world through Baptism and the sacrament of Confession. In doing so, the Church continues to convey the healing touch of Christ in history.

We see the unconditional nature of God's love in the availability of Confession in the Church. In making Jesus's forgiveness of sins present in the sacrament, the Church manifests the outpouring of divine love. *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* expresses this astounding gift of conversion offered in Confession: "God gives us the strength to begin anew. It is in discovering the greatness of God's love that our heart is shaken by the horror and weight of sin and begins to fear offending God by sin and being separated from him. The human heart is converted by looking upon him whom our sins have pierced" (CCC 1432). This sacrament demonstrates to us that Christ's love will reconcile us with the Father and the Church.

Yet, we also see that the sacrament demands the free conversion of the sinner. The sinner must come forward to meet Jesus in the sacrament and fulfill the requirements of conversion, penance and satisfaction. Forgiveness in the sacrament, though a demonstration of God's unconditional love, is still conditioned on the free response of the penitent. The sacrament therefore has two essential elements: "on the one hand, the acts of the man who undergoes conversion through the action of the Holy Spirit: namely, contrition, confession, and satisfaction; on the other, God's action through the intervention of the Church" (CCC 1448).

Reconciliation and Our Neighbor

Again, only God can forgive sins, while we can only imitate that forgiveness in our limited way toward those who harm us. The distinction between divine and human reconciliation is an important one. Many frustrations and much social friction occur today because we have sought to replace divine reconciliation with the human. We have come to understand reconciliation as a programmatic erasure of the past, or a form of mercy that overlooks responsibility and consequences. We apply the wisdom of this world (1 Cor 3.19) to the problem of evil, believing that the schemes of men can eliminate the scourge of sin. We forget that, though we are indeed called to practice forgiveness and seek reconciliation with our neighbors, we can only do so in union with and in imitation of the true reconciliation in Christ.

On the one hand, we are indeed called to imitate God's unconditional love. This extends, Jesus tells us, even toward our enemies. "But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your heavenly Father" (Mt 5.44). Such love is possible only when we are infused with the theological virtue of Charity that allows us to see each person as a divine image and a temple of the Holy Spirit. We love with the received love of God.

This means that, when wronged, we must not allow anger and its hunger for vengeance to overwhelm us and transgress the command of love. Jesus's antitheses, in their fulfillment of the Torah, convey this radical moderation of our thirst for excessive punishment or harm toward a sinner who has injured us: we cannot demand "an eye for an eye." The two virtues sought in this context are clemency and meekness. Thomas Aquinas associates these virtues with the virtue of temperance, which deals with the governance of our excessive desires (ST II-II, Q. 157, A.1). Clemency moderates "exterior punishment", that is, the desire to harm a wrong doer through excessive punishment. Meekness, however, diminishes the interior passion of excessive anger itself, thereby providing an interior peace for discernment. These two virtues help to prevent just anger toward evil from becoming a sinful anger that leads to greater wounds. Thomas wrote that "if one desires the taking of vengeance in any way whatever contrary to the order of reason, for instance if he desires the punishment of one who has not deserved it, or beyond his deserts, or again contrary to the order prescribed by law, or not for the due end, namely the maintaining of justice and the correction of defaults, then the desire of anger will be sinful, and this is called sinful anger" (ST II-II, Q.158, A.2). The antitheses teach us then to seek the twin virtues of clemency and meekness and to avoid destructive vengeance when we are insulted (e.g. being struck with the back of someone's left hand) or injured.

On the other hand, our forgiveness cannot outstrip God's or the Church's. We are indeed called to offer forgiveness to those who harm us, just as God so generously offers it to us. We should never hold it back when rightly sought by a penitent neighbor, even when the smallest signs of conversion are offered. Yet, this does not mean that we overlook our neighbor's responsibility to confess, do penance, and accept the consequences for wrongs committed. Our reading from Leviticus makes this clear: "You shall not bear hatred for your brother or sister in your heart. *Though you may have to reprove your fellow citizen, do not incur sin because of him*" (Lv 19:17). A forgiveness that ignores the obligation of a

wrong doer to convert, erases a transgressor's responsibility, and overlooks justice, in fact abandons the divine respect for human freedom. A forgiveness that does not also call for conversion only harms the wrong doer by reinforcing sinful behavior and trivializing evil. Fr. James Schall wrote, "Forgiveness is an act of love, not of blindness. Love sees evil and names it. It does not ignore it or call it something else or claim that it is not important. We can only love those who identify evil correctly. This is why we can love the sinner and hate the sin, because the sinner can also, if he wishes, name the sin." We must indeed reprove our neighbor at times and demand restitution, though such an admonishment should be accompanied by clemency, meekness and the desire to forgive.

The actual application of Jesus's antitheses will continue to inspire a healthy debate within the Church. Yet, the essential point is clear: God's unconditional love and offer of the forgiveness of sins have come to us in the person of Jesus Christ. God desires us to be nothing less than holy and perfect, to convert toward him in a free response to grace, and to have the life of the resurrection in union with him. Divine love and reconciliation form us for that true life in Christ.

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For Further Reading

- *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, [## 1422-1498](#)
- James Schall, S.J., [“On Forgiveness”](#);
- St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II,
[Q. 157 Clemency and Meekness](#)
[Q. 158 Anger](#)

In Short . . .

- *Jesus’s “antitheses” in Matthew’s Gospel do not abolish the teachings of the Old Testament, but rather they point toward the fulfillment of the Torah in Christ.*
- *God’s unconditional love does not cancel man’s freedom, moral responsibility, and the need for conversion and the abandonment of sin.*
- *Only God has the power to forgive sins; only Christ reconciles us with the Father.*
- *Clemency and meekness, two virtues associated with temperance, moderate our desire for vengeance and prevent us from falling into sinful anger.*
- *Our call to forgive one who has harmed us does not eliminate the need for repentance and conversion on the part of the wrong doer.*