
Love and Repentance

Dear Nick,

Thank you for these insightful reflections on reproof and the role of retributive and restorative justice. I found especially important your distinction between punishment understood as retribution and punishment understood as the expression of disapproval; and I believe you are right that Scripture rejects retribution. As Christians, our desire should not be for “eye for an eye” payback, but a commitment to social reproof of wrong behavior.

Your letter has made me spend some time reflecting on what should empower and drive us to reprove our authorities—first, a desire for their repentance and transformation, and second, a love “beyond fear,” both for those closest to us in our own lives but also for everyone as a beloved child of God, even our enemies or those authorities with whom we deeply disagree. I want to tell three stories that I think illustrate these key points.

First, I think the biblical story of King David and the prophet Nathan is a good example of what a loving but corrective reproof can look like.

From the moment David spies Bathsheba bathing, he is determined to have her, against her will, against the law, and against God’s commandments. He involves his whole court in facilitating his illegal and sinful desires; he dictates military strategy to kill an officer in order to cover up his sin. He leaves Bathsheba pregnant, and her husband, Uriah, dead.

The prophet Nathan comes in the aftermath of this chaos and requests a meeting with David. He tells the following story:

“There were two men in a certain town, one rich and the other poor.² The rich man had a very large number of sheep and cattle,³ but the poor man had nothing except one little ewe lamb he had bought. He raised it, and it grew up with him and his children. It shared his food, drank from his cup and even slept in his arms. It was like a daughter to him.

⁴ “Now a traveler came to the rich man, but the rich man refrained from taking one of his own sheep or cattle to prepare a meal for the traveler who had come to him. Instead, he took the ewe lamb that belonged to the poor man and prepared it for the one who had come to him.”

⁵ David burned with anger against the man and said to Nathan, “As surely as the LORD lives, the man who did this must die!⁶ He must pay for that lamb four times over, because he did such a thing and had no pity.”

⁷ Then Nathan said to David, “You are the man!”

(2 Samuel 12:1-7)

This rebuke hits David in the heart. It cuts through his selfishness and thoughtlessness so that he repents of the evil he has done and prostrates himself before the Lord. We do not know if his repentance included reparations to Bathsheba, but we do know he acknowledged his sin and sought forgiveness. He spent six days fasting, sleeping in sackcloth, and crying out to God.

When I read this story, I thought about which of the story’s characters I most identified with: David, Nathan, or the people of David’s court who supported and facilitated David’s actions.

I knew I didn’t want to be like David. He did horrific things, committing rape and murder, both sinning and lying to cover up his sin. This seems to put him in a different category from most of us; but really, we are not so different. We may never kill another person, but we regularly use our words as weapons and treat others with contempt.

Despite David's actions, he can also serve as an example for us. He sinned horribly, but also repented passionately. When was the last time you spent an hour crying out in repentance to God, let alone six days? I can't think of a time in my own life. I'm more likely to hear people recount sin or cruelty with a shrug—laughing about how they “told off” a mistaken waiter or charged expensive dragon fruit as bananas at their local self-checkout.

In his repentance, David represents both a high and a low in our relationship with God. The members of David's court, by contrast, represent the status quo. They are not prominent characters in the story. The dozens of soldiers, servants, and courtesans that inhabited David's court are neither named nor noticeable. Yet the members of the court must have seen Bathsheba brought to the palace, or even helped to do it. Surely word traveled. Everyone saw Uriah sleeping on the castle steps even as Bathsheba's dresses stretched tighter. Uriah's entire battalion had to be told to step back and leave him fighting alone; they all followed their orders.

I may be drawn to Nathan's boldness or David's repentance, but I think most of us in our daily lives are more like people of the court. We see those with power acting with impunity and choose to do nothing. Our boss mistreats one of our coworkers—we decide we don't want to get into it. An acquaintance tells an offensive joke—we laugh uncomfortably and say nothing. We hear about abuse, embezzlement, injustice, and we satisfy ourselves by thinking that we would never do such a thing ourselves—in the process, acting in a way that allows the corruption and abuse of power to continue.

What would it look like instead to live like Nathan? When I read this story I want to be like Nathan, and I think most people would agree, sharing a desire to boldly speak truth to power. Nathan went before the king with a message of reckoning for his sins—prophets of God had been killed for less. We may say we want to do the same, but do we, really? When we look back over our last week or year, have we done anything remotely similar? Few of us are willing to face the consequences of standing up to abusers in even petty incidences, let alone in situations of life or death.

I think we can learn from Nathan's bravery, but also from his tact.

Nathan is a prophet of God, but he also has a relationship with David—he knows how to tug on David’s heartstrings and get him to listen. Nathan wants to speak truth, but more than that, he wants David to repent and change. Therefore, he doesn’t picket outside the castle condemning David; he goes inside, and starts with a story. Only when they had established common ground (“*David burned with anger*”) does Nathan tell the truth he had come to share—“*You are that man.*”

This approach is what causes David to realize: “I have sinned against the LORD.”

Then, perhaps even more remarkably, Nathan replies: “The LORD has taken away your sin. You are not going to die (2 Samuel 12:13).”

I think this extension of forgiveness is almost as bold as decrying David’s sin in the first place. If I had been in Nathan’s shoes, knowing everything that David did, I would have wanted punishment, not repentance. Of course, David does still suffer the consequences of his sin, including war, familial infighting, and the death of his and Bathsheba’s child. But despite all that, I think it’s difficult to be open to forgiveness, repentance, and change from authorities for whom we want revenge and punishment.

Nathan’s attitude is very different from another biblical character, Jonah. God calls Jonah to preach repentance to Nineveh, but Jonah doesn’t want to—he boards a boat instead in a fruitless attempt to flee God. Many are familiar with the story that follows—how Jonah’s boat faces a fierce storm, and he convinces the sailors to throw him overboard, where a giant fish swallows him. After three days, the fish spits him out onto dry land, and he goes at long last to Nineveh.

But the story doesn’t end there. After confronting the people of Nineveh with their sin, they actually repent wholeheartedly. Like David, they fast, put on sackcloth, and turn from their evil ways. In the end, God spares their lives: “But to Jonah, this seemed very wrong, and he became angry . . . ‘LORD, take away my life,’” he says, “For it is better for me to die than to live (Jonah 4:1, 3).”

Nathan confronted David with his sin, but more than that, he called him to repent and change. David’s repentance is good for David, but also good for the people of his kingdom. Jonah, by contrast,

only wants to preach punishment. When the people of Nineveh repent, which is surely the best thing for them and their community, he responds petulantly. He had wanted to watch Nineveh's total destruction.

Reproval cannot be made from a position of vengeance—your previous letter points out that reproval, instead, is part of loving our neighbors. Yet even when we do stand up for what's right, how often are we like Jonah? As much as we welcome grace for our own failures, we want vengeance, not repentance from abusive bosses or corrupt politicians, even if a change of heart would be best for both authorities and the people that they govern.

I have already written about how justice work requires the bravery of a prophetic voice, but when I think about applying this to my own life, the piece I haven't discussed yet is love. One of my favorite verses in the Bible, 1 John 4:18, says: "There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear . . ."

I want to tell a final story that I think illustrates this. Jo Ann and I raised our children in a rough neighborhood. There is a gang presence, and one or two murders every month. We love our community, but still, when my oldest daughter Anna was a teenager, I would always walk her to the church youth group that met a few blocks away.

Even when walking with me, Anna would sometimes get comments or catcalls from the neighborhood boys. One of the most common (and most infuriating) was actually directed at me: "Suegro!" the boys would shout, "Hey, father-in-law!"

This always made me tense up, and because I would do anything to protect my daughter, I would start to imagine scenarios of how I would protect her. I know that if one of those boys had ever tried something, I would have done anything to protect her, even if there were a lot of them, even if they were armed. In that moment, I wouldn't think about the consequences for me—I love my daughter, and that love is stronger than any fear I would feel under those circumstances.

You, I'm sure, can imagine this love. Imagine, Nick, if your granddaughters were spending some time with us in Nueva Suyapa and I was showing them around the neighborhood. Imagine that a group

of these guys went after them. I know you would want me to do everything in my power to protect them.

It's easy for my mind to make the connection between fearlessly loving my own daughter, and protecting the daughter or granddaughter of a friend like you. But we both know that every single person in our communities is someone's son or daughter; every single parent hopes that their own children will be protected and saved. What's more, every one of us is a child of God, equally loved and equally deserving of that same protection.

"Should I not have compassion on the great city of Nineveh?" (Jonah 4:11) God asks Jonah. God loved Nineveh and its people, despite their sin, just as God loved David despite the evil he had done. He wanted repentance—both for David and Nineveh's own good and for what transformation would mean for those entire kingdoms.

However hard it may be to imagine, God loves the politicians who are profiting from corruption, just as God loves corruption's most marginalized victims. God wants repentance, a change of heart and action, even of the authorities who are stealing money from programs for the poor and abusing human rights. I think this must impact how we approach advocacy.

Love, as we've said, does not erase consequences. Authorities should still pay for their sinful or illegal actions. But I do think approaching advocacy from a posture of love must change our expectations. Do we believe that God can work change in the hardest hearts? Are we actually open to repentance or even reconciliation if that change occurs?

So many people in society are like Jonah, calling out authorities with righteous anger and filling their conversations or social media posts with hate and condemnation. Others are like the people of David's court, whispering among themselves about atrocities that are occurring, but preferring to stay out of the way. I think we all need to be more like Nathan, looking for the right strategy that will bring home to members of government or other authorities that they need to repent and change their hearts and actions.

I believe that perfect love, fearless love, can sometimes mean loving victims through the process of arresting, reproofing, and chal-

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lenging those who do them harm. But I believe that it can also mean loving perpetrators by being prophetic voices like Nathan to David, laying their sin clearly before them and hoping for their repentance. Here at ASJ we want to love our neighbors in both of these ways.

Your friend,
Kurt

Evoking the Emotions of Empathy and Anger

Dear Kurt,

In our conversations with each other you told me that it was especially the murder of Dionisio that led you to reflect on the role of forgiveness, punishment, restoration, etc. in the work of ASJ. At one point you asked me whether I thought there was space for what you called “healthy anger” in justice work. That question reminded me of my own reflections on my experience in South Africa and my engagement with Palestinians, reflections which led me to conclude that there is not only space for healthy anger in justice work. Justice work requires anger—and more generally, requires emotional engagement with perpetrators and victims, both on the part of those who work directly for justice and on the part of members of the public. Being informed about the issues is not enough. Emotional engagement is necessary.

After my visit to South Africa in 1975 and my meeting with Palestinians on the west side of Chicago in 1978—encounters that I described in my second letter—I found myself reflecting on why I was so moved by these experiences whereas, though I had actively participated in the civil rights movement in the US and in opposition to the Vietnam War, nothing that I experienced in those two movements had affected me in the same way. Why the difference?

The answer I eventually arrived at was that, in these two awakenings, I had seen the faces and heard the voices of the wronged, whereas that was not the case, or was only barely the case, for my participation in the civil rights movement and in my opposition to the Vietnam War.

And what was it about seeing the faces and hearing the voices of those victims of injustice that moved me to speak up for them?

The answer I settled on was that seeing the faces and hearing the voices of the wronged evoked empathy in me. By “empathy” I do not mean compassion, and even less do I mean pity. I did feel compassion. But the compassion was enveloped in empathy. I found myself empathetically united with these people, emotionally identified with them. I felt anger with their anger, hurt with their hurt, humiliation with their humiliation.

The same thing happened to me during my first visit to Honduras, in that small living room that I wrote about in my previous letter, when two mothers described the rape of their daughters and spoke of the refusal of the police to investigate until ASJ intervened. Here, too, seeing the faces and hearing the voices of the wronged evoked empathy in me.

Perhaps some people are motivated to engage in the struggle for justice by a sense of duty. Perhaps some are motivated by the conviction that this is what a good and virtuous person does. And perhaps some are motivated by the conviction that, in so acting, they are obeying God. But in my case, I did not really get involved until my emotions were engaged—until I cared. I doubt that I am peculiar in this respect. I think that, for most people, being motivated to struggle for the righting of injustice requires emotional engagement.

I remember discussing the role of empathy in the struggle for justice with you and your staff on my second visit to Honduras, and using my own case as an example. Carlos Hernandez was in the audience. He reported that he had just come back from a meeting in which he found himself seated across the table from a man who, almost certainly, had been one of the brains behind the murder of Dionisio. Carlos reported feeling anger welling up within him at this man who was still free to perpetrate his foul deeds, and finding himself more determined than ever to see that he was convicted of his crimes.

His remark made me realize that, in my own case, too, there was anger at the perpetrators. Empathy with the victims was dominant, since it was their faces I had seen and their voices I had heard. But anger was there, in the background. Carlos’s experience was the reverse

of mine. It was the face and voice of the perpetrator that confronted him, so anger was his dominant emotion. But, of course, he also felt empathy with all those who were joined with him in grieving Dionisio's murder.

What I take away from my reflection on these experiences, Kurt, is the principle that, for most people, serious commitment to the struggle for justice requires emotional engagement in the form of empathy with the victims and anger at the perpetrators. One's experience may cause one or the other of these to be dominant; but both will be involved. No doubt there will always be other emotions involved as well. But I have come to think that these two—empathy with the victims and anger at the perpetrators—are, as it were, the emotional foundation of the struggle for justice. What this implies for the work of ASJ and similar organizations is that they cannot just dispense information; they have to engage people's emotions.

Though in my case it was actually seeing the faces and hearing the voices of the wronged that evoked my empathy, and though in Carlos's case it was actually seeing the face and hearing the voice of one of the perpetrators that evoked his anger, it's clear that one doesn't have to be face to face with victims for empathy to be evoked, or face to face with perpetrators for anger to be evoked. Film can work just as powerfully, as can drama and fiction. Witness the powerful effect on nineteenth-century readers of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. On the other hand, it is my impression that journalistic reports seldom have the same effect. Why the difference?

I think the difference is that when we actually see the faces and hear the voices, or see and hear them on film, or meet them in drama or fiction, we don't just receive information but we imagine what it's like to be persons of that sort in that sort of situation. It is this *imagining what it's like* that evokes empathy or anger. Journalism seldom evokes this sort of imagining. I don't claim that it cannot. Just that usually it doesn't.

There's another difference between Carlos's experience and mine that is worth taking note of. I was not myself a victim of South African apartheid, nor was I a Palestinian victim of Israeli oppression. I was, instead, an onlooker to these two cases of social injustice—an onlooker

who, as a result of my awakenings, became a supporter of the movements to eliminate these injustices. Carlos, by contrast, was himself a victim of the injustice perpetrated by the man sitting across the table from him. He was one of those cast into grief by Dionisio's murder.

That difference between our two cases suggests the following thought: the participants in most social justice movements are a blend of victims and supporters of the victims. I have been a supporter-participant in the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa and in the anti-Israeli-oppression movement in Palestine. Carlos has been and is a victim-participant in some, at least, of the social justice crusades in Honduras.

Confronted with social injustice, typically there are non-victim members of the public who are angry with the perpetrators and feel empathy for the victims before any social justice movement gets under way. And—more surprisingly—often a good many of the victims harbor no particular anger toward their victimizers and no particular empathy for their fellow victims. They are resigned to their condition. There's nothing to be done, they think; so why get all stirred up? Or they have internalized the attitude of their oppressors toward them: they deserve their fate. Or this is their God-ordained place in the social order; it would be wrong to resist.

The moral is that, for both victims and potential supporters, social justice movements must blend tapping into emotions of empathy and anger already present, with evoking those emotions in those who do not yet experience them. It is no accident that a prominent component in the denunciations of injustice by the prophets of ancient Israel was the forceful expression of anger. Here is just one example of many:

Ah, you who make iniquitous decrees,
who write oppressive statutes,
to turn aside the need from justice,
and to rob the poor of my people of their right,
that widows may be your spoil,
and that you may make the orphans your prey.

(Isa 10:1-2)

I suggested that the emotions of empathy and anger, in victims and supporters, are a necessary ingredient of social justice movements. It's important to note that empathy with the victims is not, by itself, sufficient; there must also be anger at the perpetrators. Which presupposes, of course, that the perpetrators must be identified as such. Empathy with the victims in the absence of anger at the perpetrators evokes charity, benevolence, relief—or hand-wringing. We see photos of pitiful looking orphans in Haiti. We are touched. We send a contribution for the alleviation of their plight to the charitable organization whose name appears below the photos. We feel no anger, only empathy. We do not ask whether these orphans are the victims of injustice.

In short, social justice movements and organizations cannot limit themselves to evoking empathy with suffering people. They have to make clear that these people are suffering because they are being wronged. They are not victims of some natural disaster; they are victims of injustice. The perpetrators have to be identified and condemned. This is the point at which information and social analysis become relevant. In one of your previous letters you describe very lucidly the ASJ model for accomplishing these things. This is also the point at which a new form of anger typically enters the picture—anger by the perpetrators at those who identify and condemn them as perpetrators.

Some truly lamentable dynamics of human nature come into view when we take note of the need for emotional engagement in social justice movements. Empathy with the wronged was evoked in me by the three encounters I have described. But it was not evoked in the Afrikaners who spoke up at the conference in defense of apartheid, even though they had seen the faces and heard the voices of the people of color in South Africa far more often than I had. It was not evoked, and it is not evoked, in most Israelis, even though they see the faces and hear the voices of Palestinians far more often than I have. It was not evoked in those who abused, and in those who tolerated the abuse of, the children and mothers of Tegucigalpa, even though their contact with those children and mothers was far more frequent than mine. It was not evoked in the slaveholders of nineteenth cen-

tury America, even though they saw the faces and heard the voices of the slaves far more often and directly than did the readers of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. In all these cases, empathy was blocked—blocked by the hardening of the heart.

The causes of the hardening of the heart, and of the resultant blocking of empathy, are multiple. Let me briefly mention a few of the most common causes.

One reason why empathy is often blocked is that the hard-hearted person has learned to dehumanize the victims—or if not precisely to dehumanize them, to think of them as lesser human beings with diminished sensibilities, sometimes even as loathsome. They are vermin, scum, terrorists.

A second reason why empathy is often blocked is that those whose hearts are hardened have embraced a narrative that says the plight of the victims is their own fault. The Palestinians, it is said, fled their villages of their own accord in 1948 and continue to refuse to negotiate with Israel in good faith because they continue to refuse to recognize the legitimacy of the State of Israel. Their plight is of their own making. Empathy is out of order. Another example: the poor, it is often said, are poor because they are lazy; their poverty is their own fault.

A third reason why empathy is often blocked is that the hard-hearted have embraced an ideology that says some great good will be achieved by the present policies. Securing that great good comes at the cost of the suffering of some, and that's unfortunate. But the great good to be achieved will outweigh the present suffering. So one must harden one's heart and do what the great good requires. Pol Pot preached to his followers in Cambodia that they must rid themselves of emotion and become purely rational.

There is yet a fourth reason why empathy is often blocked, and this is perhaps the most common of all. Empathy for the victims is blocked by the person's realization that feeling empathy would lead to acknowledging his own complicity in the plight of the victims. Acknowledging that complicity would require reforming his way of life; and he finds that such reform is more than he can bring himself to do. He would be ostracized by friends, make less money, lose his

position of privilege and power. Best, then, to harden one's heart and make contributions every now and then to charitable organizations. Then nothing has to change.

To evoke empathy for the victims, and thus to advance the cause of justice, one has to diagnose the hardening of the heart in the case one is dealing with, and then do what one can to remove that cause. In each case, one has to craft one's approach to one's diagnosis of what it is that is causing the blocking of empathy. A number of Israeli historians have shown that the standard Israeli narrative, which says that the plight of the Palestinians is of their own making, is simply false.

Sad to say, attempts to remove blockages to empathy are often unsuccessful; then pressure of one kind or another has to be applied. That's what happened in the case of South Africa. It was the boycotts that eventually had an effect. In his fine book *Blessed Are the Organized*, Jeffrey Stout describes a number of cases in the US in which justice was eventually achieved by bringing pressure of one sort or another to bear on the perpetrators.

You asked whether there is "space for healthy anger in justice work." If my observations in this letter are correct, then not only is there space for healthy anger in justice work; justice work cannot succeed without healthy anger. The struggle for justice requires, in those working for justice, healthy anger against the perpetrators of injustice and healthy empathy for the victims.

Your friend,
Nick