

## Is it lawful to do good?

He was pretty as a picture, but was very full of himself! The three year old Tennessee Walker colt was barely halter broke, and thought that the world should revolve around him. He was the subject of a Sermon on the Mount® with a message on passing values from one generation to the next. The procedure for this message begins with Spark demonstrating the qualities of trustworthy leadership. Then the colt would be introduced and I would dally the colt's lead rope around my saddle horn while riding Spark without a bridle. As Spark is a seasoned horse in leading (ponying), being bridleless frees me to meet the colt's needs. However, no sooner was the colt dallied than he began to demonstrate very aggressive behavior towards Spark! In order to get the colt's attention where it belonged, I told Spark to move forward. Spark was limited from any form of defense and feeling a bit threatened by this colt; he not only moved forward but moved with the intent to get away from this colt. It was then that I found myself with two runaway horses without a bridle. Needless to say there was not a problem in keeping the audience's attention! Fortunately, being in a steel pipe arena, I was able to direct Spark to a wall where he slid to a stop and the colt also halted. Once again we started, but Spark still had not gotten his confidence with this colt, and again we approached the wall for another stop! Finally we were able to arrest the wildness of this colt and Spark regained his confidence.

Though it took a little longer to get the colt in a learner's attitude, saddled and able to ride next to Spark, a strong theme began to emerge. I reflected on I Peter 3:9 "not returning evil for evil, or insult for insult, but giving a blessing instead; for you were called for the very purpose that you might inherit a blessing." Also, Proverbs 26:4 reveals the power in a wise response "Do not answer a fool according to his folly, lest you also be like him. Answer a fool as his folly deserves lest he be wise in his own eyes." No horse or person is above reacting. Some fiery darts are so inflammatory that we find ourselves with the knee jerk reaction before we knew what hit us. Even after Spark (a well seasoned horse) made a few unwise choices, it was only after he had regained his wits and come back into right relationship with his trainer that he was able to overcome evil with good. Certainly he was capable of returning insult with insult or a threat with a fearful response, but he was soon able to demonstrate that the wisest response to such aggressive, mean-spirited, self-centered behavior was to stay focused on the master's goal. In fact this is really the emphasis of Hebrews 12:5b-8 "My son do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor faint when you are reprov'd by Him; for those whom the Lord loves He disciplines and He scourges every son whom He receives. It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline? But if you are without discipline, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons." We see the three levels of training: discipline, reproof, and chastening. Discipline is not punishment, but a clearly defined and focused goal. Reproof is when we miss that goal or err in our judgment. Chastening is when we willfully disregard the goal and consequences are needed to wake us up and restore us to that original objective. Because of the relationship Spark has with his trainer, he was able to benefit from correction without needing any chastening for a fearful decision.

When others violate our boundaries we are prone to respond with a defensive nature returning evil for evil. Such was the nature of the Israelite people with the great oppressive government of Rome. They were so embittered by their dominance that they felt justified to return evil for evil. However God said that this is not the key to victory. I Peter 3:14-15 says “But even if you should suffer for the sake of righteousness, you are blessed. And do not fear their intimidation, and do not be troubled, but sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence.” The key is not to yield to a defensive posture but to stay focused on the offensive weapon. The scribes and Pharisees, while they had not yielded to return evil for evil, had become so fearful of anybody doing wrong that they forgot to do right. When Jesus came along and challenged them about their power to do right with the right spirit, they despised His very words. Yet the truth of Christ’s sentiments ring as loudly today as they ever did.

While Spark was in a reactionary state of flight he lost his power to make wise decisions, but when he submitted his fears to the master and became obedient he regained his power to do good. In a day and age when there is much hostility and oppression against the message of Christianity, we must not fail to use our greatest weapon against evil and that is the resolve to do good. The religious leaders of that day were offended by Jesus healing on the Sabbath. Jesus put it in perspective when He said “is it lawful to do good?” Is it lawful to reach out into a community with love and support to encourage them in the character, values, and disciplines that will fortify edifying relationships, protect children, strengthen communities, and challenge others towards wise behavior? While I find there to be a great questioning and cynical spirit today, I also find there to be a great hunger for things that are practical and helpful. I believe that the secular world is asking if our Gospel can meet the needs of their life. Even though they are asking questions, they are not merely asking for answers, but are seeking a demonstration of the spirit and power of a living God meeting the needs for our marriages, families, finances, and for a clear purpose in life.

Only when Spark was able to demonstrate to the colt a wise response to his master was the colt willing and able to hear what he had to offer. The moment he comprehended the privilege of service and direction, the colt too was willing to bear a saddle. The colt easily rode off for the first time with a newly formed relationship with the master.

How is it that we are to give a blessing instead of evil? There are three key issues. First; we can pray for those who seem oppressive. Second; we can identify their needs and minister to them. Third; we can share with them how we are benefiting from the things just the way they are. Not only does the Scripture clearly define the calling of returning a blessing instead of a curse, but to serve those who are unreasonable. Jesus’ very question “is it lawful to do good?” verifies that we have been called and empowered to do good. I challenge you to consider those rubs, sore spots and hurtful situations from which you want to withdraw. Furthermore, I challenge you to give over to God your fearful and justified actions, and finally to pledge yourself to be a vessel of God and go back to those hurtful persons and situations and give a blessing rather than a curse.

- Lew Sterrett