

Payback

By Dana Buck

Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: It is mine to avenge, I will repay, says the Lord.

Romans 12: 17-19(NIV)

There's nothing like Saturday morning
Faint sunlight that brings sweet renewal
No alarm clock will ring, there'll be no hurrying
And greatest of all, there's no school

The covers are kicked with abandon
Throw on a t-shirt, sneakers and jeans
In the pockets restore the key to the back door
A jackknife and six jelly beans

To the kitchen for orange juice and Wheaties
And a bonus – the last jelly roll
Read the stories of jocks on the cereal box
Drink the last bit of milk in the bowl

Then fly down the steps like a panther
On sneakers as flashing as skates
Run three houses down, make a whistling sound
And dash through the half open gate

For its here that the rendezvous happens
The garage of best friend Billy Corder
The door's barely ajar, and there's no room for cars
(Billy's dad being packrat and hoarder)
Sliding in from the sunlight to shadow

Then past newspapers in towering stacks
'Round old tables and chairs to the place where the stairs
Forms an alcove that's hidden in back

This corner's been their secret hideout
Since they met on the swings in third grade
Their club so exclusive, so secret, reclusive
Few memberships ever get made

And sure enough Billy is waiting
As the alcove is stealthily invaded
Bill plays the club host as he chews on some toast
From the kitchen he recently raided

With a mouthful of bread he inquires
"What's the password?" Then sits back to wait
He cracks a wide grin when he hears "Gunga Din"
And says "Willie, what kept you?" "You're late"

Yes the clubhouse of Willie and Billy
Holds a bond more substantial than time
And this tie's been intact since they discovered the fact
That their first name's so pleasantly rhyme

From here they've launched countless adventures
Been ballplayers, pirates and spies
To this space 'neath the stairs no other compares
Just right when you're ten-year-old guys

Then a sound in the dark by the doorway
Reminds them they're not quite complete
For this clubhouse of two added somebody new
When a family moved in 'cross the street

The new member is quickly approaching
Winding their way through the boxes and bins
Then a deliberate pause (for this club has its laws)
As a voice whispers out "Gunga Din"

They both give permission to enter
And in from the junk packed garage
Comes a smiling female with a blonde ponytail
Like a Saturday clubhouse mirage

She sets herself down on a tire
Pops a bubble she's blown with her gum
"Sorry I'm late, had a date with a plate"
"Couldn't leave till the dishes were done"

She laughs at her own bit of humor
The boys roll their eyes in reply
"My mom says it's ok if I stay out all day"
"What's the plan for the morning you guys?"

You may ask "how'd a girl gain admittance?"
"How'd she shatter the feminine ban?"
Without being silly, how did Willie and Billy
Become Willie and Billy and Jan

Well, it doesn't take long once you meet her
To find Jan is no typical girl
She wins any foot race, plays an epic third base
Climbs the tallest of trees like a squirrel

Undefeated in ping pong and marbles
Rabid football and basketball fan
As if there was doubt, Willie and Billy found out
You don't say no to a girl like Jan

So together they form quite a trio
With the exclusion of girls now receding
And so, t'was a plan put forward by Jan
That shaped their Saturday meetings

The agenda was really quite simple
With paper and pen in their fists
Record who had seemed cold, insulting or mean
On a roster they called Payback List

Every person who bullied or threatened
Confronted, embarrassed or hurt them
Had their name written there as each member declared
The reason they wished to insert them

"I'm submitting my teacher, Ms. Redner"
Said Billy, his voice low and cool
"There was talking in class, she assumed, never asked"
"And then made me remain after school"

“She’s a good one” said Jan nodding slowly
“She punished me on my first day”
“Made me stand by the wall ‘cause I ran in the hall”
“She deserves our attention today”

“Well I’ve got a name for the roster”
Said Willie “It’s Mrs. O’Brien”
She yelled at me hard when I cut ‘cross her yard”
“Even though it’s just all dandelions”

“She’s a mean one” said Billy agreeing
“With those signs that say keep off the grass”
And they concluded with verve Mrs. O’Brien deserved
A prominent place in their cast

It was Jan’s turn to make a submission
Her demeanor turned quiet and sad
“I’m conflicted and caught for believe it or not”
“My name for the list is my dad”

“He comes home every night without speaking”
“When he does he just makes my mom cry”
“He pays me no regard, no more catch in the yard”
“No matter how often I try”

“He used to be funny and loving”
“Now his mood’s always distant and black”
“I don’t want much at all, just with him play some ball”
“He desperately needs some payback”

The boys exchanged looks of discomfort
As Jan cast her eyes to the floor
Their concern was exuded for they’d never included
A close family member before

“Are you sure Jan?” Willie inquired
She said “Yes,” her eyes starting to mist
“Ok, it’s your dad”, Billy took up the pad
And added his name to the list

So with that, they'd each named a target
The list was now done and complete
They outlined their plans, with conviction shook hands
Then hurriedly biked down the street

They rode till they came to the ballfield
Parked their bikes in and under the bleachers
From there, out of sight, they could watch with delight
The house of Ms. Redner, Bill's teacher

They wait as they spy from the shadows
And their vigilance is soon rewarded
Down the steps full of fire, in her jogging attire
Ms. Redner athletically sported

She strolls to the edge of the sidewalk
Then turns and starts running in place
Her eyes clear and fixed on a bright object which
Puts a satisfied smile on her face

For there it is, parked in the driveway
Splendid in the morning sun's glare
No if, and, or maybe, this is Ms. Redner's baby
Her '52 Chevy Belair

It had been in the family for decades
From grandfather, passed down to her
And now here it sits, just as good as it gets
Awaiting payback to occur

She moves off, jogging quick down the sidewalk
As the trio move into the light
They run 'cross the street on quick sneakered feet
With supplies that they'd strapped to their bikes

In a blink of an eye they get busy
All the while keeping watch for the teacher
They swarm the Belair, just as they had prepared
Quite assured that their message will reach her

And before they vacated the driveway
As stealthy and quick as a viper
Bill left a note with a message he wrote
Tucked under the driver's side wiper

Their timing is tight and exquisite
As bikes 'cross the ballfield they walk
When they pass through the fence, the air fills with suspense
For Ms. Redner's jogged onto the block

As she brings her workout to completion
And fingers her neck for her pulse
Just a few steps from done, recognition's begun
And she feels her heart jump and convulse

She, in wonder, approaches the Chevy
While her hand slowly drops from her throat
She moves round the car with her mouth just ajar
From the windshield recovers a note

But our trio have missed this transaction
For there's other hijinks to be done
On their bikes they are flyin' to Mrs. O'Brien's
Saturday payback has only begun

Again their good luck is uncanny
Mrs. O'Brien just drove down the street
Her dog barks out a cry but she doesn't know why
(It's his view from the passenger seat)

Had she known what her canine is seeing
She'd slam on her brakes really hard
If she'd looked in her mirror, what there would appear?
Three kids moving toward her front yard

Their work is not long to completion
They're here and then quickly they're gone
You can be quite assured that payback has occurred
With one look at the O'Brien lawn

For there in the absolute center
Is the fruit of the plan that was hatched
Situated with flair, it's the location where
Willie's handwritten note is attached

And so, two of three are accomplished
The tasks on the list nearly done
For their final barrage, they must search the garage
Through Billy's dad's stuff by the ton

Finally sifting through mountains of items
The sheer mass serves to pause and confound them
Till at last Billy cries "Where the heck are you guys?"
"Come over here quick, look, I found them"

So Willie and Jan scramble over
The boxes as dense as a thicket
They smile side by side at what Billy has spied
"Oh yeah" Jan says, "This is the ticket"

Meanwhile 'cross the street in the kitchen
Jan's father prepares to go out
So slow is his pace, and he wears on his face
An expression of worry and doubt

For today is day one at the carwash
The last job that he wanted to take
He's felt stuck in a trough since he was laid off
From his job at the mill by the lake

His looking for work had been fruitless
While the bills piled up week by week
He's done all that he can to hide it from Jan
Embarrassed, discouraged and bleak

With a sigh, he heads off toward the bus stop
In a spirit of abject defeat
As Jan's father departed, the club mates got started
Dragging box after box 'cross the street

And with the flourish of Pablo Picasso
Rembrandt, DaVinci, Rodin
This last act from the list truly no one could miss
(Bringing great satisfaction to Jan)

With their Saturday work now completed
They moved from the sun to the shade
And give their hunger triage back in Billy's garage
Baloney and pink lemonade

Meanwhile, across from the ballfield
A teacher stands reading a note
She'd sat down on her steps and quietly wept
Massaging the lump in her throat

The words brought a flood of emotions
As did the state of her car
She rereads the lines of the message, unsigned
The words on the page, here they are

"Ms. Redner, know this demonstration"
"Is intended to highlight and feature"
"What we think about you and all that you do"
"As our new elementary school teacher"

"We felt in presenting this message"
"That it would be timely and prudent"
"To just clearly state that we think you're great"
"Sincerely, just some of your students"

She looks from the note to her Chevy
And smiles, her emotions relaxed
In the driveway it gleams, for it has been cleaned
And thoroughly polished and waxed

She finds herself buoyed and uplifted
And encouraged in spirit and heart
For school had become largely lacking the fun
That it had when she'd first got her start

But this note and the car in the driveway
Served somehow to wonderfully reach her
In that place in her soul where she cherished her role
And was proud to be somebody's teacher

As Ms. Redner sat glad and encouraged
At another house not far away
Stands Mrs. O'Brien who's controlling her crying
As she stares at her lawn in dismay

The grass had been edged, raked and curried
The dandelions gone with the weeding
In the midst of her yard sits a bag and a card
The words of which now she is reading

“Mrs. O’Brien, we hope you are happy”
“With the work we have done with your grass”
“We’re sorry at times we ignored your signs”
“And we’ve thoughtlessly on it trespassed”

“We promise to try and do better”
“That our work here has helped make amends”
“May this bag full of weeds be our pledge of good deeds”
“Sincerely, some neighborhood friends”

She lets herself go to a memory
As her hand gently falls to her side
Of her late husband Don, these three summers gone
How the yard was their hobby and pride

They’d garden each Saturday morning
Grooming flowers, grass, branches and fronds
Then they’d sit in their chairs on the porch by the stairs
How she missed Saturdays spent with Don

Since he’d passed she avoided the gardening
As the lawn yielded to dandelions
No lunch in the shade, no memories made
No joy came to Mrs. O’Brien

Yet now as she stood in the sunshine
And smiled at her manicured lawn
Her heart so long stilled was suddenly filled
As she shared this fine moment with Don

And what of our intrepid trio?
They hang out in their cool garage nook
The day, slow to unravel, they play five games of Scrabble
And consume several new comic books

You may ask what launched Saturday Payback?
Spawned good deeds from this small clubhouse perch?
Inspiration came via Jan’s brilliant idea
From something she’d learned at her church

They were reading the book of Philippians
Verse three, found within chapter two
“Avoid a conceited condition and selfish ambition”
“And count others more worthy than you”

There was also a passage in Romans
“When people don’t act as they should”
“Refuse the desire of your anger and ire”
“And so overcome evil with good”

She brought this to Willie and Billy
And together they all did agree
To make up their list and each weekend persist
In a reverse payback full blessing spree

Kind notes and unseen acts of service
Became their expression of choice
A dozen times they’d, performed acts like what made
Mrs. O’Brien and Ms. Redner rejoice

So now Saturday came to conclusion
With them feeling much more saint than sinner
They switched off the light, in that garage packed so tight
And each made their way home to their dinner

As Jan crossed the street to her driveway
She paused to inspect the front yard
While just up the street, her Dad, dead on his feet
Trudged home from a day long and hard

He stopped on the sidewalk and tarried
Not sure he believed his tired eyes
For on the grass mounted, in numbers uncounted
Were balls of all colors and size

There were balls used for throwing and hitting
And those meant for bouncing or rolling
There were footballs and softballs and baseballs and golf balls
For croquette, for tennis, for bowling

Some were ill-used and deflated
While others looked brand new and spiffy
Balls for soccer and pool, and one really cool
Apparently signed by Ken Griffey

There seemed enough balls in the front yard
To reach from the Earth clear to Saturn
With his hands on his thighs, he could now recognize
They were placed there in some kind of pattern

Then he comprehends this is a message
And the greatest that he's ever had
His tears can't be held, for those countless spheres spelled
"I miss playing ball with you Dad"

He bends over and picks up a baseball
As a thought heals his heart like a salve
When life gets too bitter, just stop and consider
The numberless blessings you have

On the steps, sitting still, finally noticed
With a baseball glove on her left hand
Through streaming wet eyes, he nods as he spies
His precious and beautiful Jan

She stands, with a fist pounds the pocket
He smiles, understanding it all
Gleaming white with red seams, he holds the best of his dreams
And laughing he throws her the ball

For when life seems unfair and a burden
When it's peace and contentment you lack
Remember that blindness is banished by kindness
When in mercy and grace you payback

Devotional Thoughts

There are a host of scriptures in which God requires us to do the very opposite of what our flesh and our sin nature want to do. Right at the top of that list is “love your enemies.” There is a saying: “Revenge is a dish that is best served cold.” However, according to God, that phrase should go something like this: “Revenge is a dish that is best never served at all.”

The desire to “get even” isn’t something that needs to be taught to us humans. Anyone who has watched kids at play knows that. And, without intentionality, it’s not something we grow out of. The desire to avenge a perceived wrong seems to be hard wired into the DNA of our flesh.

Is God asking us to be doormats? Asking us to just take it while we are abused or taken advantage of? Not at all. In Romans 12: 21 the admonition is very clear: *Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.* By loving our enemies, by not striking back in anger, we actually overcome evil. We stand above it. We surmount it. We don’t get “even,” we triumph. God’s ways will always take us to a higher place, a place where we are more like Him. That sounds like the place I want to be.