

“Antisthenes” (or “The Law”), a lost dialogue on Matthew 5.13-20

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Socrates. Antisthenes, my dear young man, what brings you out to the park on this beautiful day? I assumed you would be studying hard with all of your friends.

Antisthenes. Why, Socrates, I am here to find you and ask you a most important question.

S: I am flattered, but what leads you to want to ask me a question, Antisthenes? Have your friends not warned you that I never seem to give them the answer that they are looking for?

A: Yes, they have warned me, Socrates, but I have also heard it said that you are the wisest man in our city.

S: The oracle told me that I was the wisest, but no one else thinks so, and I myself cannot see how it could be true. In fact, I know that there is one who is in fact wise, and good.

A: Who would that be, Socrates?

S: Why, Antisthenes, none other than the God and Father of Jesus himself.

A: Yes, yes, Socrates, but I cannot ask him my question.

S: I'm not sure that is true, Antisthenes, but in any case, what is your question?

A: Socrates, I want to study law: can you see any reason why I should not?

S: I am assuming, Antisthenes, that you wish to study law to make money. Am I right?

A: Not at all Socrates. I wish to study law to help people to be good, for that is what you have taught us is the one thing needful in life.

S: I have indeed taught you that to be good is the one thing needful, but I hope that I have not taught you that people can be good through the law. If I have, I have failed in my teaching.

A: But surely, Socrates, the law is the means whereby people are taught what is right and wrong, and therefore how to avoid what is wrong and do what is right.

S: You are partially right and partially wrong, Antisthenes. Let me ask you a question: do you think that the opposite of being good is to be evil?

A: That makes sense, Socrates.

S: And, who would you consider to be the most evil person?

A: Well, I have heard recently that most people consider Hitler to have been the most evil person, and I agree with them.

S: Why do you think Hitler to have been the most evil person?

A: Because of the horrible things he did.

S: And you would argue that he was responsible for those things?

A: Yes, of course, he was.

S: But, what if I were to tell you that he did those things because his parents had been mean to him when he was young, and that his schoolmates had been horrible to him when he was young, and that his mind and spirit were so wounded and twisted by these things when he was young that he was not responsible for what he did when he was older.

A: Well, I suppose that I would have to say that he was not evil as such but had been made evil.

S: Well let me ask you, Antisthenes, whether you were twisted and wounded in your youth?

A: No, Socrates, I know that I was not. My parents were loving and my schoolmates and I have always been close friends.

S: Then, Antisthenes, let us suppose that you are presented with an occasion on which you lie about something to your parents or your friends, or an occasion on which you do something evil. You have just indicated to me that you have no excuse for what you did. You are completely responsible for it. Would you not say that you are more evil for having committed that action for which you are entirely responsible than Hitler for committing actions for which he cannot be held responsible?

A: Though it seems completely contrary to what I believe, I would have to say that you are right, Socrates. But, surely I am not more evil than Hitler?

S: I have not said that you are, Antisthenes; you have said so, and as a lawyer, you would have to admit that what I have said would lead to your own conviction and to Hitler's freedom.

A: But, Socrates, this goes contrary to everything I hold to be true.

S: But, that is the law, my dear Antisthenes, and the law has never been designed to tell people what they should think. The law is intended to assess responsibility and to assign blame. The law is not there to make people good.

A: So, then, you are telling me that the law is of no value.

S: Not at all, dear Antisthenes. The law is as valuable to us as a doctor's accurate diagnosis is. The law, like the diagnosis, will tell you clearly and accurately exactly what is wrong with you; however, you do not expect the diagnosis to heal you, do you? If the

doctor tells you exactly what the problem is with your vision, do you expect to see better because he tells you what illness you have?

A: Of course not, Socrates. I must take medicine or have an operation for that to happen.

S: Even so it is with the law, Antisthenes. As the great Augustine once said: "[the law] discovers disease, but does not heal it; nay, the malady that is not healed is rather aggravated by [the law], so that the cure of grace is [even] more earnestly and anxiously sought for" (On the Grace of Christ, chap. 9). If you wish to help people to be good, you must find a means other than the law.

A: But, if the law provides the diagnosis of our condition, Socrates, and you have helped me see that even I need the diagnosis, then who will provide the cure for the problem?

S: First of all, Antisthenes, would you agree that we must start by accepting a doctor's diagnosis if we are to be healed?

A: Yes, of course, Socrates. If the doctor says that we are ill and ignore his diagnosis, then we shall surely die of our disease.

S: Quite right, Antisthenes. To ignore the true diagnosis of the law is to be condemned to death and to ignore the sentence. And, you can be as helpful to people as a doctor by indicating to them clearly and accurately where they have failed.

A: So then, you do see value in my becoming a lawyer, Socrates?

S: Only if all you wish to do is to diagnose illness, Antisthenes. But you indicated to me that you wanted to help people become good, that is, to heal them. To do this, you must be able to provide a remedy for their illness.

A: That is true in medicine, Socrates, but where is the healing provided for in law?

S: It isn't, Antisthenes, and that is why the law can never teach you to be good, because it never provides for your healing when you are sick. The only people for whom the law is healthy are people who never break the law, and I know of no one who never breaks the law, not even you, Antisthenes. Furthermore, Antisthenes, once the remedy is provided, then a good physician must also enable his patient to follow the course of healing prescribed.

A: Quite right, Socrates, I see now why the law cannot help us to be good.

S: But, my dear Antisthenes, as I have already told you, it can, by pointing to our failure in trying to be good. It can show us where we should NOT look in order to be good.

A: How can that be, Socrates?

S: Because the law, by showing us that we all fail, helps us to see that if the law is all there is, we are all condemned men, living in a jail all of our days.

A: True, Socrates.

S: But, consider this, Antisthenes. If we should hear a voice summoning us to come forth from such a jail, would you not be inclined to listen to it?

A: But, Socrates, surely there will be many times that, out of our own desire to be free, we will imagine in our minds that we hear a voice calling us to freedom, only to have it be a mirage, a figment of our imagination?

S: Very right, Antisthenes. I can see that my teaching has not gone entirely in vain! You will often hear false voices summoning you to freedom, only to find that they are really summoning you to an even grimmer prison. But, let me ask you a question, Antisthenes. What if there were one who were brought before the tribunal of law at which an evil person were being judged and were to say that he would substitute himself for such a person and take his place in his punishment and condemnation on the condition that the law breaker be set free?

A: Why would anyone do this, Socrates? This would be suicidal madness!

S: It might seem that way, Antisthenes, unless that person also knew that this person both loved the one who was being judged and knew that it was the only way to save him.

A: Well, then, Socrates, it might indeed be the only way. Are you thinking of a very dear friend saving another very dear friend?

S: That is close, Antisthenes. But, what if the love went deeper than friendship, which we know is only something that happens between equals? What if I were to tell you that, in fact, the love runs deeper. So deep that when the one who offers himself in the place of the accused is doing so because his father has asked him to do so? And that his father, rather than restoring the law breaker to his previous freedom, actually raised the lawbreaker to a position of honour and glory within his own family, a position that the despicable law breaker could never dream of having even were he to have fulfilled the law and never to have broken it?

A: Socrates, that would be not only suicidal madness on the son's part but foolish madness and an abandonment of all fatherly love on the father's part! Why do you even bother suggesting such a ludicrous scenario, Socrates? I'm not even sure why you bother with such foolish imaginings.

S: But, it is not a fiction or foolishness, Antisthenes. For, as you have already admitted, you, who wish to be a lawyer, are a lawbreaker, and so you are being judged. But I can tell you that I know of one who has come to stand in your place and accept your punishment and condemnation. And furthermore, I know that his father is offering you a place in his family and a place of honour and glory at that.

A: Socrates, if you believe this, then I would say with my friends that you truly are mad! This is worse than children's fairy tales and old women's tales.

S: Antisthenes, you want to help people to be good. But, what if I were to tell you, Antisthenes, that this is truly the only way for anyone ever to be truly good? That everything else is just pretending never to have broken the law, and thus a lie.

A: Socrates, let us assume for the moment that your foolish musings were true. Are you saying that the lawbreaker will now go forth and live an angelic life for the rest of his days? Surely you are not that naive, Socrates?

S: No, you are right, Antisthenes. I am not that naive. I agree with you that such a one could not be expected to go forth and live a completely different life, since it takes time to learn to live well. It does not happen with the snap of a finger. But, that does not mean that such a person will not now be living a truly good life as long as you and I agree on what it means to live a good life.

A: And what do you mean by it, Socrates?

S: A good life is not one in which I live a perfect life, free from all the sins and errors that I have always committed. A good life is one in which I have been freed from the penalty of death. What makes it good is that I have been freed from punishment and have tasted true freedom, something that I am willing to guess even you Antisthenes have never experienced.

A: But Socrates I have never been a slave.

S: True, Antisthenes, but have you ever been freed from any constraints placed upon you by your past, by your family, by your friends, by the city? Have you ever been able to do anything that you wanted?

A: No, freedom to that extent I have never had.

S: Well, the freedom that I am talking about is just that. It is the freedom of one who has died and been reborn completely new, having been judged guilty and now freed from any guilt. That person has been freed truly. But, Antisthenes, if that person, now freed from, returns to a life of breaking the law -- not mistakes, Antisthenes, but a willful return to a state of law breaking --, then that person will also truly be responsible for all of his actions. That person would then be truly the most evil of all men, and any punishment he received in the future would be most justly merited. But, if he, now freed, began to live out of the thankfulness of being brought into the family of the one who accepted his punishment for me, well, I believe that that former lawbreaker's life would begin to change, even though he would continue to make mistakes.

A: Enough, Socrates. This is madness and you know it. You are just adding foolishness to madness to absurdity. No one will listen to this, not even if they should see the impossible: a dead man rising from his tomb! Really, Socrates, what nonsense. I am off.

S: Will you go off to become a lawyer anyway, Antisthenes?

A: Of course, I will, Socrates. In these final, fantastic imaginings, you have convinced me that the law is one of the best ways we have of dealing not only with evil people but with foolish and powerful men like you who believe in lies and fairy tales and pervert the youth into believing the same. Eventually, I'll be back, Socrates, though when I come back, I will bring with me other lawyers who will be able to deal with you appropriately, people who know the law, not those who, like you, ignore the law and teach others to do so.

S: I'm sorry to hear that, Antisthenes, but I must admit that I did expect it. In any case, Antisthenes, I can assure you that if you do put me in prison, I will hear of that one I

spoke of, my redeemer. I know that he will beckon me forth from my prison, and in spite of your laws and judgments, I will go forth a free man.

A: Dream on, Socrates. I leave you to your mad rantings. I am off to a party.

S: Farewell, Antisthenes, farewell. I too am off, but I am off to a greater banquet prepared by that father I spoke of. Perhaps someday I'll see you there, Antisthenes?