

Chapter 3

*Recompense to no man evil for evil.
Provide things honest in the sight of all
men. If it be possible, as much as lieth in
you, live peaceably with all men.*

Romans 12:17,18

“Now, preacher, who would do something like that?” Detective Lamonde sounded amused and incredulous. “What would it accomplish? Who would gain from such a thing?”

“Does that matter, detective?” Thomas asked, disbelievingly.

Detective Lamonde, a heavy-set middle-aged man with thinning brown hair and a mustache, rocked back in his chair and nodded. “Sure it does. If you’re going to convict someone, you have to prove three things: means, opportunity and motive.” He had ticked the three points off on his fingertips as though lecturing. “You say you

have found the means. We don't know that. You don't have the results back from the Department of Health yet. It could be some sort of bug." He shrugged.

"Next comes opportunity. Who would've had the opportunity to do this? One of those sweet little old ladies who was working in the kitchen? What kind of people go to your church, preacher?" Lamonde grinned. "And if it was one of them, do you really think one of them would have had the third part, the motive?" Detective Lamonde really seemed to be enjoying himself.

"Let's say one of them did have the means and opportunity. What would be the motive to make a bunch of good Christian folks get the trots, especially when you couldn't be sure who it would affect?" He laughed, and continued laughing until he went into a coughing fit, then finally stopped

long enough to light up a cigarette, still shaking his head.

Nevertheless, Thomas insisted on filing a report and took away a copy of it with him, along with one of the laxative boxes and an extra copy of the page from the Physician's Desk Reference book. He was livid over the detective's lack of concern. He didn't share Thomas's concern or suspicions, but only seemed to find the whole thing to be hilarious. The primary interest the man seemed to have, was in the idea of almost forty people frantically trying to share four bathrooms at once.

Thomas returned home that afternoon, mentally and physically tired. The summer heat always took it out of him anyway, and all the stress from the past few days was beginning to tell on him, too. Speaking with the police had not helped.

As Thomas sat there mulling over the attitude the detective had displayed, Amy walked into the room. She sensed right away that something was wrong. So, knowing Thomas as she did, she didn't ask but simply fixed him a glass of diet soda and brought it to him. She knew he'd tell her eventually.

After a few minutes of silence, the knots in the back of Thomas's neck unwound and he told his wife about his interview with Detective Lamonde. Amy, too, couldn't understand the policeman's attitude about the crime or about the evidence Thomas had found.

"Doesn't he see the connection?" she wondered aloud as she sat down beside her husband.

"Oh, he admits that the laxative could have caused the problem, but he is asking 'police questions', like 'What is the

motive?’ and ‘Who had the opportunity?’ and ‘Do we really know this was the thing that caused everyone to get sick?’” Thomas sighed “I guess in a way he’s right. We have to wait until the lab results get back before we can go much further. The empty laxative boxes are just circumstantial evidence.”

Amy raised her eyebrows at that statement. “What do you mean, ‘we,’ Thomas? And circumstantial evidence? Where did you pick up that terminology, Mr. Masters-in-Theology?”

“It’s our responsibility, too, honey—especially if the police don’t seem to take it seriously.” But he grinned at her. “And as far as the terminology, I watch Perry Mason reruns sometimes!”

The phone rang, and Amy answered it. She handed it to her husband. “It’s Bob.”

“Pastor, how are you doing today?”
Bob always went through the formalities.

“I’m well, thanks, Brother Gramm. You?”

“Fine, thanks.” He cleared his throat. “I contacted the architectural firm, and they said they have a pretty full calendar right now, but that a representative could come to a church council meeting week after next if that was alright.”

“What about fees?” Thomas was almost afraid to ask this question.

“Well, the initial deposit to get them started is \$2000, so we were pretty close on our guess about that.” Bob cleared his throat again—he had a habit of doing that when he was nervous. “The plans themselves will probably cost somewhere between \$34,000 and \$40,000, after all the essential drawings are completed.”

Thomas swallowed hard, but replied, “We knew it wouldn’t be cheap, and especially if we went with one of the better

local firms. How long before they need the rest of the money?”

“They said they could make arrangements to take it in three monthly installments, with the first installment on approval of the initial drawings, and the remaining installments at thirty-day periods after that.” Bob was quiet for a moment, then continued, “Really, pastor, I don’t think it’s all that bad. I spoke with Frank Gravely over lunch today—he’s the head of the building committee at First Methodist, you know—and he said the plans for the church they built three years ago cost them over \$40,000. Of course, they have attendance averaging over 600 every Sunday morning, and they have that little preschool, too.”

Thomas nodded, then realized that Bob couldn’t hear his head moving, and answered hastily, “Of course! Add three years of inflation to it, and our price doesn’t

sound so bad. Of course, they needed a bigger building, but they also have the larger offering base to support it, as well as the revenue from the preschool.” He sighed. “You know, as much as they talked about it in seminary, I just never really saw myself as thinking in business terms like ‘revenue’ and ‘offering base’ when I became a pastor.”

Bob chuckled. “At least we don’t have shareholders’ meetings, pastor! Then things could really get messy!”

Thomas thanked him for his time, and asked him to coordinate a meeting for Thursday night two weeks away if it was agreeable with the architects. “Just let me know for sure, and I’ll make the announcement at Sunday morning services about the extra council meeting.”

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The rest of the week went pretty smoothly, and Thomas managed to restrain

himself to only one call each weekday to the Department of Health. However, on Friday the receptionist there told him in no uncertain terms that it was not necessary to continue to check on a daily basis—they would let him know as soon as the test results came in.

Sunday morning attendance was up from normal, but Thomas put it down to curiosity about what had happened the previous Sunday. He took his message text from the fifteenth chapter of the Gospel of Saint Luke, and spoke on the parable of the lost sheep and the shepherd. Afterwards, when there was concert prayer for the congregation and special requests, he asked that all especially remember Sister Carter, who had been in the Dixon Medical Center, but was now resting at home.

Thomas stood at the entrance to the church shaking members' hands and greeting

people. The youth group walked by him in a herd. He laughed and joked with a couple of them, but two seemed to go out of their way to avoid shaking his hand, or even looking him in the eyes. He wondered why they should be so shy about seeing him but another member grabbed his hand to shake it, and the thought passed from his mind.

As he stood at the door Simon Daniels, a long-time member, stopped to shake his hand. “Are you sure that you should continue with this building project after all the fuss the church has been through in the last week, pastor?” he inquired dubiously. “I mean, we didn’t get to take the special offering last week, and I doubt that today’s offering will make up the shortfall from that.”

Thomas remembered that Simon was one of those who opposed the building of the new sanctuary, albeit quietly. He

wasn't a member of the church council, but probably everyone realized that the money for the church project had to come from somewhere besides the general fund.

“Brother Daniels, the church council agreed to go ahead with the project as planned, and trust to the Lord to bring things to fruition,” the minister told him firmly but with a smile. “God always makes a way for His people! You saw how the congregation was crowded together in the sanctuary today.” He gestured around. “How can we continue to grow, if we don't have anywhere for people to sit?”

Brother Daniels turned and looked broodingly at the people streaming past him out through the church foyer. “I suppose so, pastor. Just seems like we ought to wait for all the ruckus to die down, that's all.” The man walked morosely away, and Thomas

watched him walk to his car, get into it and drive away alone.

Stan Bowman came up to shake his hand, and watched Brother Daniels drive away, too. “Strange sort, Simon,” he said. “Hasn’t been the same since Emily died, three years ago. Keeps to himself all the time, hardly ever comes to the Men’s Fellowship meetings.”

“I’ll have to go visit him more often,” Thomas said. “I guess I’ve been remiss in that.” But Stan shook his head.

“Wouldn’t make any difference, pastor. Not that you shouldn’t, you understand—we ought to make every effort, true. But Simon just doesn’t get out much any more,” Stan Bowman observed, then turned to shake the hands of a new young family that had been there for three Sundays running. That always made Stan happy, as families with children made for a healthy

Sunday School, and that was his special focus.

Thomas heard someone saying in a stage whisper, “Pastor... Pastor!” He turned around and saw Bob Gramm hurrying up the aisle toward him, waving an envelope held in his hand. Bob’s face was white as a sheet, but he was smiling.

“What’s the matter?” asked the minister. “Did we get a winning entry from the Magazine Clearinghouse?”

“Better than that, Thomas!” Bob was so excited that he let his normally formal manner within the church building lapse. “Come over here for a second!” He drew Thomas by the elbow, over to a secluded corner of the foyer. There, he handed the envelope to the minister, and after a pause, prompted him, “Well, see what’s in it!”

The minister tapped the open envelope and slid the contents onto his hand. Inside was a typed message. It read:

Dear Reverend Wilson,

I know you were counting on last Sunday's special offering to help with the building of the new church facilities. I believe God wants this church to grow, and to do that, it has to have room. God has blessed me for many years, in many ways, and I want to help. So, here is my gift to God and the church, to help get His will done.

Please don't try to find out who did this. You'll just ruin my blessing if you do!

In Jesus' Name

There was no signature, but at the bottom of the note was another folded piece of paper, clipped to the first sheet. He slipped it from its place and unfolded it. Shocked, he saw a cashier's check for \$2,500!

He scanned it hurriedly, but there was no name except that of the local bank and the bank president, Milton O'Toole. He had only met the bank president once, and didn't believe Mr. O'Toole would be giving Holly Creek Christian Church such a huge monetary gift. He was a nice fellow, but he was a member of St. Boniface Catholic Church, and they were engaged in their own building program at present.

Then the minister felt guilty. The note had specifically requested that he not try to find out who had given them this wonderful gift, and yet here he was, trying to figure it out. "Sorry, Lord," he whispered, "and thank you!"

"What's that?" Bob asked.

"Oh, nothing, nothing. This was in this morning's offering?" he asked, looking at the envelope in his hand.

Bob shook his head. “No, someone slid under the door of the financial office. Terry Bradley found it when they went in to count the offering, but it was addressed to me,” and he pointed to the front of the envelope where Bob’s name was neatly typed, “so he didn’t open it.” Bob grinned at him.

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At lunch, after they asked God's blessing over their food, Amy looked curiously at Thomas. “Okay—what's the big grin about?” she asked. “I know you like meatloaf, but it doesn't usually get that sort of reaction from you!”

He’d kept the note that was attached to the cashier's check, and he took it wordlessly from his jacket pocket and handed it to her. She scanned it quickly, and looked up. “What sort of gift was it, Thomas?”

“Keep this between us for the time being, Amy, but it was a cashier's check for \$2,500!” He enjoyed the amazed and happy look on her face almost as much as the initial sight of the money.

“Praise the Lord!” she said. Then she looked at him. “You're serious, aren't you? I mean, this isn't one of your teases, is it?” He shook his head. “Wow. Praise the Lord again!” she said, and reached out to take his hand in hers. “That's so wonderful, honey! That check will more than cover the cost of the initial consultation with the architects. Who else knows?”

He had just taken a forkful of meatloaf, and had to clear his mouth. “Well, Bob does—he found the check. I asked him not to tell anyone, but I imagine he's told Carolyn by now.” He took a sip of water. “I'm going to call Stan and a couple of the

others right after lunch, and break the good news to them.”

Thomas called Stan Bowman, Jack Fox and Ben Kingston and told them all about the mysterious note and magnificent gift. They too were excited about the blessing. While talking with Stan, Thomas had an idea.

“Brother Bowman, I'm going to go up and see Simon Daniels and Roger Henderson personally this afternoon. Remember, Brother Daniels was expressing doubts over the building continuing without last Sunday's offering. And he lives right below the Hendersons, up on Grey's Mountain. So don't call either of them, if you don't mind. I'd like to tell them both.”

Stan was silent for a moment, and then spoke slowly. “Pastor, I'm not one for spreading tales. But take my advice on this:

don't let Simon Daniels know that you're visiting the Hendersons, too.”

Thomas was puzzled. “Why not, Brother Bowman?”

Stan sounded hesitant. “There's some bad blood between those two. It goes back to before you moved here. It was probably ... let's see ... about ten years ago.”

“If it was that long ago, whatever it was, don't you think it's cleared up by now?”

“Haven't you ever noticed how Simon never shakes hands with Roger Henderson, and he won't even sit on the same side of the church? You see,” and Stan cleared his throat, “before this thing happened, they got along just fine together. They were fishing buddies, pretty close friends. Then, Roger decided to put some beef cattle, black Angus, on that lower shoulder of the mountain that is fairly flat

pasture land. Well, that land adjoins Simon's property.

“When Roger started laying out fence posts to keep his cattle from straying, Simon came up there in his old pickup truck and asked him what the devil he thought he was doing. Simon accused Roger of putting fence up on his side of the line, and trying to take the best part of the property.

“They couldn't come to an agreement about it. It got pretty heated, and finally Simon went and hired a surveying firm to come out and re-shoot the property lines from the legal descriptions.” He chuckled. “He never should've done that. It seems that Roger was wrong about where the property line was. Thing is, it was further down the hill than either of them thought, and when the surveyor got through with all his calculations, Simon actually lost about 9 acres by not keeping his mouth shut.

“After all the delay and accusations, Roger was just human enough to go ahead and put the fence along the newly established property line. That also fenced in a pretty little trout stream that Simon had fished every spring before that. From that day on, he hasn't said one word to any of the Hendersons—Roger, Betty or their son, Donald.”

“Ah, I see. That's really sad,” said Thomas, “for them to let such a feud separate brothers in Christ!” He thought for a moment. “I don't think I've seen Donald in some time. In fact, I can't even remember what he looks like.”

“Oh, he came to the church homecoming last Sunday, pastor. He was the young man sitting at the far end of the Henderson's pew. He has sandy-colored hair, cut short. I think he's thirty-five or so.”

“I remember him now,” Thomas said. “I saw him in the fellowship hall. I think he was helping his mother bring some things into the kitchen.”

“Just remember what I said, pastor. You tell Simon Daniels where else you're going today and you'll get a cold shoulder for sure.”

“What about telling Brother Henderson about seeing Brother Daniels?” the minister wondered aloud.

“I don't think Roger holds any of it against Simon any more. After all,” and Thomas could hear the grin in his voice across the phone lines, “Roger was the winner in that little war! Winners can afford to be gracious.”

The drive up Grey's Mountain was a beautiful one. Wild day lilies dotted the roadsides, and black-eyed-susans stared at him from every ditch. When he pulled up in

Simon's driveway, he stepped out of his car and waited a couple of minutes to see if anyone would come out to investigate who had driven up.

When no one did, he walked across the weedy lawn and stepped onto the bottom step. The screen door on the front of the small house swung open and the slight figure of Simon Daniels in overalls was framed in the doorway, holding a double-barreled shotgun pointed directly at Thomas.