

Is Instant Karma a Thing?

Galatians 6:1-10

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Karma is a thing. All you need to do is Google it and you'll run into scores of companies and NGOs that trade up on the name Karma. There is the ill-fated, all-electric supercar, the Fisker Karma, reincarnated last month as a Chinese car. Karma Wellness Water brand has lots of probiotics but only 20 calories for long life. Karma Kreme orange flower and patchouli oil body lotion is to die for. There's a Karma co-op, a Karma café and Karma condo all in Toronto, and a hundred more businesses with Karma in the name. Karma is a thing. But what exactly?

The word "karma" has passed into popular culture as a trendy, hip thing that doesn't have much to do with its roots. Now, what I want to talk about today is *Instant Karma*. But for that to make sense, you need to bear with me for a few minutes while I explain not instant karma, but ancient karma. Originally, in Buddhism, karma was a sort of cosmic moral bank account.

You see, Buddhists believe in reincarnation—that when we die our souls will be reborn into another body. What body we are going to be born into depends on our karma: on the sum total of the good and bad we did while we were alive.

Evil actions, in this life, like killing, stealing, and lying are bad karma and will lead to rebirth lower down the social ladder or perhaps even down the evolutionary ladder. Good actions, on the other hand, such as generosity or kindness adds to your karma account and leads to a better next life.

In other words, in Buddhism, you are judged when you die, though not by a god, since Buddhists don't believe in gods. You are judged by the very laws of nature, the moral structure of the universe. So, for example, the Buddha said of reincarnation:

**Not in the sky, nor in the midst of the sea,
Nor by hiding in a mountain cave:
No place on earth is to be found
Where one might escape one's wicked deeds.**

On the other hand, traditional Christians do not believe in reincarnation. They believe, rather, that the soul, upon death, either goes to a heaven, or some other good place; or the soul goes to hell. I'm speaking of traditional Christianity here, because actually there is a lot of debate about such things now in nearly all Christian churches. The idea of hell is definitely in decline.

But that basic idea about judgment is also present in our text from Galatians. It suggests that when we die, God will judge us for the good or evil we have done. If we live a corrupt life, we will die—eternally; and if we live a spiritual life, we will live, in bliss, eternally.

Now, there is a sermon or two here, on what really does happen when we die—reincarnation up or down the ladder, based on our karma; or, judgment to either heaven or hell or something like that. For now, as far as such judgement is concerned, suffice it to say that there is another Biblical theme that appeals much more to me—that is the theme of grace. We are “saved,” whatever that exactly means, not because we’re so good, but because the overwhelming picture of God in scripture is one on the side of life, redemption, and new beginnings. As it says in 2 Corinthians 5, one day all things shall be made new. When we die, the Biblical vision is that on the basis of grace we will awake to a whole new adventure.

So that’s the traditional thinking of both Buddhism and Christianity with respect to karma. But getting back to karma being a thing—it’s Instant Karma that people usually think of, rather than the Buddhist doctrine or reincarnation.

Everybody’s favourite Karma these days is Instant Karma, especially the karma that fights back. I’ve picked three of popular Vine Videos to illustrate what Instant Karma is all about.

The first one is about a cat and a pot. **FIRST VIDEO**

The second is about a boy and a girl. **SECOND VIDEO**

And the third one is about a cat and a treat. **THIRD VIDEO**

Instant Karma is the idea that the universe instantly rewards people for the good they do and trips them up for the bad they do.

So what is going on? Well, we all want life to be fair. And looking for Instant Karma is a kind of magical thinking rooted in our deeply held desire that life be fair.

We do this sort of magical thinking all the time, often unconsciously. Our pervasive and magical belief in Instant Karma is the subject of many psychological studies. For example, in one recent experiment described in the journal *Psychological Science*, some students at a job fair were led to think that the job-search process was beyond their control. That is, those hiring were picking resumes from the pile with little or no scrutiny. Other students were led to believe that getting the job depended on their careful resume selection. Now, at the same job fair, a charity was soliciting donations from those who applied for work. Time and again, the psychologists found that those who did not believe that getting the job depended on the quality of their

resumes donated more money to the charity than did those who were led to believe that getting the job depended on their resume. The big donors were counting, perhaps unconsciously, on Instant Karma to help them get that job.

In a follow-up study, job seekers who were encouraged to see their job search as beyond their control were discovered to be measurably more optimistic about getting a job if they gave money to an unrelated charity compared to those who did not give to the charity.

Instant Karma. We manipulate karma to get what we want by offering Karma some delectable treats. We unconsciously scratch Karma's back, hoping that it will scratch ours.

But here's the thing. There is no such thing, really, as Instant Karma, because life is demonstrably not fair.

For example, we all know that many innocent children have died in Aleppo, but that Bashar al-Assad nevertheless still rules. We all know that some unkind people get rich and some poor people are saints. We all know that some politicians go through multiple bankruptcies, make innumerable racist comments, and don't pay their contractors for completed work, but end up as presidential candidates. Instant Karma is a nice thought, but it isn't exactly built into the structure of life.

The Bible agrees. Jesus says, "God makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous." Jesus, our ideal for doing the right thing was rewarded with death on a cross for his acts of love. How is that for instant karma? God isn't sitting in his throne-room with a calculator, throwing out blessings or curses depending on your sum total.

Life isn't fair. Good deeds often go unnoticed and evil is rewarded. Sometimes—in war, when Tsunamis strike, or when we're born mired in poverty—some of us suffer for no reason that we can see at all.

Life isn't fair.

There are many mysteries here. There is the mystery of God. If God isn't running the world on the basis of rewarding the good, punishing the evil, then what is God doing? We'll examine that question next week. But you will have to be patient, for now.

Still, there is one crucial and hopeful thing I do want to say about life being unfair, this morning. We have an antidote, and it is called living in community. For if God isn't sitting up there with a calculator doling out blessings and curses based on how good or bad we are, then we are going to have to rely on each other, instead. God may

not have a calculator, but we have love and compassion, grace and kindness, resources of time and money to address each other's unfair misfortune.

In the absence of Instant Karma, we can support each other through life's ups and downs, and even life's endings. And, at root, that's what church is all about. We are a community that picks each other up when we fall, that forgives those who fail, that holds each other accountable when we want to quit, that—like Christ—embraces those who have been rejected, suffers with us when there is no cure, and visits when we are lonely.

Instant Karma, though appealing, isn't really a thing. But Lawrence Park Community Church is a very real thing. In the words of this morning's scripture, we "bear one another's burdens, and in this way fulfill—not the law of Instant Karma—but the law of Christ." God may not be in heaven with a calculator, ready to dole out Instant Karma, but as Jesus once said, where two or three gather in his name, here, living in community, God is with us nonetheless.