“Laying Aside Revenge”
June 11, 2006
Matthew 5:38-42; Romans 12:9-21

Introduction: Revenge-one of those guilty pleasures. We all know it is wrong, but there is something deeply satisfying about watching revenge movies, or movies where the bad guy gets it in the end. What is it about revenge that is appealing and as Christians, how should we handle revenge?

Defining Revenge

In the Sermon on the Mount, we see how Jesus is encouraging His disciples, to look deeply into the heart of the Law in order to faithfully and fruitfully live it out. In this text, we see the essence of Christian ethics, conduct and life. Jesus cites here one of the oldest laws in the world, that of Lex Talionis. In common terms, it is the law of tit for tat. Barclay tells us that this law is so ancient that it appears in the Code of Hammurabi, circa 2285 B.C. to 2242 B.C. The principle of this ancient law is that if someone inflicted an injury on another person, the offender then had an equivalent injury inflicted on them, and thus an eye for an eye, a tooth for tooth. This ancient law later became incorporated as part of the Old Testament. We see this for example in Exodus 21:23-5, where Moses says, “But if there is serious injury, you are to take life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise.” It is important to realize that this law was intended to guide judges in a legal matter to determine the proper penalty, not to guide people in their interpersonal relationships. This law was also never literally carried out by the Jews. Instead, it defined financial payments to provide restitution.

Limiting Revenge

Jesus reminds them of what the law originally intended. The law was meant to define and limit revenge. In the ancient days, vendettas and blood feuds were common. If a man from one tribe hurt a man from another tribe, the offended tribe would seek revenge against the whole other tribe, and would murder them (kind of like the Hatfields and McCoys). This law then limits vengeance. Stott says that Jesus was not contradicting the practice of retribution, which was essential to maintaining public order, but rather was forbidding revenge or redress in private relationships. Jesus tells us not to resist an evil person, to not retaliate against them, and to not return evil for evil. Bonhoeffer tells us to not add fuel to the fire, for evil cannot breed where grace abounds. Jesus is telling us not to make our
rights the basis for our relationship with others. The cross of Christ is the ultimate victory of love over evil, and as people of the cross, we must humbly love rather than hate. Jesus tells us that we are to not seek revenge, redress, vengeance, or retaliation. Instead, we are called to overcome evil with good with love.

**Radical Love**

First, Jesus tells us to turn the other cheek. What a powerful phrase. If a right handed man stands in front of you and strikes you on your right cheek, it would take amazing physical contortions to not strike you with the back of his hand. Jewish rabbinic law said that hitting someone else with the back of your hand was twice as insulting as hitting them with the flat of your hand. Jesus then is telling us that even if someone insults you in the most humiliating way, don’t retaliate and don’t resent it. Life will bring us insults, both large and small. We must not take it personally and instead we must have our identity rooted in the love of God. We must be like Jesus. Jesus was frequently insulted and attacked, called names and even physically attacked on the way to the cross. Just as Jesus held His peace, so must we. As Bonhoeffer says, we are to join in visible participation in His cross. Or as Spurgeon once said, we are to be the anvil just as bad men are the hammers. We cannot strike back, we must let God fight for us.

Jesus tells us if someone sues us and takes our tunic, we should give them our cloak too. A tunic was a long sack-lined inner garment made of cotton or linen. Even a poor man would have more than one tunic. The cloak was a blanket-like outer garment, used as a robe by day and blanket by night. Each man would have only one such cloak. Jewish law allowed for the taking of a man’s cloak for a day as a pledge of payment, but it had to be returned by that night. Jesus is saying that we are to never stand on our own rights. We are to think of things in terms of serving, rather than rights. Where sins of others abound, our grace must abound even more strongly.

Jesus tells us that if someone forces us to walk a mile, we are to go one mile more. We must remember that Israel was an occupied country, and so the Romans had the right to force Israelites to carry things for a mile. Such an act was very humiliating to the Israelites. The word here for force is aggareus, from the Persian word for courier. The ancient Persians had an elaborate postal system, with roads divided into stages that lasted a day. Each stage was to have food, water and animals available and if they did not, any private person could be forced to give food, lodging, horses or even carry messages. This word then came to mean being impressed and forced into the service of an occupying power. We see an example of
this when Simon of Cyrene was compelled to carry the cross of Christ. Instead of enjoying our liberty to do as we please, Jesus calls us to serve others, more than they demand or expect, with joy and gratitude. Instead of doing the minimum begrudgingly, we are to serve with a smile and a determination to exceed expectations. We all have been around people who are inefficient, angry, unhappy or ungracious. As believers, we are not to be like this. Jesus calls us to serve and to help, regardless of whether we are asked nicely.

Jesus also tells us to “give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.” We are to live a lifestyle of grace, a lifestyle in direct contrast to a life of sin. Love is the fulfillment of the Law, and love is shown in gracious care to others.

As Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said, hate multiplies hate…leading to a descending spiral of violence…the injuries to a person who hates are as devastating as to the victim…love is the only force capable of transforming an enemy into a friend, for love has both creative and redemptive power. C.S. Lewis, in his book, *Mere Christianity*, discusses vengeance, and how a universal appeal for justice influenced him in becoming a Christian. Lewis never ceased to be amazed at how the people of all cultures would demand to have their rights protected. The strength and power of moral indignation in the human soul astounded his atheist views. Even though we may not always live up the moral standards, that we proclaim or hold to, when someone else violates our rights, we cry foul quickly, loudly and repeatedly. We cry foul because someone has taught us what is fair. And so the need for justice is deep within our bones. It is God who teaches us what is fair, and who gives us a yearning for justice. This thought process led Lewis to faith.

What is interesting about this is the double standard we employ in our lives. We are quick to point fingers at others, and molasses slow to admit our own fault. As believers, we are called to want what is best for others, to see others be blessed. When injured, we don’t seek or take revenge. We let go of animosity. We return good for evil. Revenge is God’s territory, not ours. We choose to entrust ourselves to God, knowing that He will one day make all things right.

Keys to turning other cheek: it is not about us, don’t be defensive; pray first, pray for our own response, for grace for the other; rest in God’s grace and love for us; don’t make matters worse; who gets in trouble, always the one who reciprocates. Grace as the answer to evil.

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