

# Revenge

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well, if someone slaps you on the cheek, turn to him the other.

Is Jesus perverting justice here? If someone hits you, should you let them hit you again?

The Sermon on the Mount is Jesus doing something unusual, quite radical actually. He's offering a new ethic, a new way to live, but it's not a way of live that undermines the Torah, the Old Testament, the law of God, Genesis to Deuteronomy.

He says in fact he's come to fulfill it. He's come to up the stakes, to up the ante. He's not subverting the law.

He's raising it. He's telling us that to be a person that is in the kingdom of God is to be a person that does more than the law asks, than the law requires.

[ 1 : 12 ] One of the things he's doing here, like with murder and adultery, is he's calling out the Pharisees. He's calling out the people that are standing around him.

He's saying, you think you're okay because you've obeyed the Ten Commandments. But I say to you, you haven't obeyed the Ten Commandments.

You think you haven't murdered, but every time that person cuts you off and you hope that they die, you've murdered them. And every time she passes by, he passes by and you think about them with lust, you've committed adultery against your spouse, against some other.

So Jesus comes and he gives us this formula. You've heard that it was said. He's referring to the Old Testament. He's referring to the law. He's referring to the Ten Commandments there.

But he's also referring to something else. He's referring to oral tradition. And he's referring to the way that the laws have been taken in by the Jewish community, especially by phariseic law, rabbinic literature, and raised up themselves and made into something else.

[ 2 : 28 ] In a way that suggests that righteousness can in fact be obtained. And then Jesus comes with this little phrase, but I say to you.

Now, what's he doing there? When he says, you've heard it was said, he's talking about the Scriptures. And when he says, but I say, he's telling you that the one who speaks the Scriptures is standing right in front of you.

You see? But I say to you, I am the authority here. You've heard it was said in the Old Testament. That was the authority. That is the authority. But I, the authority, the God who speaks is standing in front of your face.

You want to know what it's like to live in the kingdom of God? I'm speaking. It's me. It's right here. I am the kingdom. I am the righteous one.

And I'm here to up the ante on the law. Now, what I want to do is this. I want to ask first, very briefly, what is this passage not about?

[ 3 : 34 ] OK. And that's important. Then ask, what is this passage about? And then look at why it matters.

That's it. What's this passage not about? What's this passage about? And why does it matter for us? What's this passage not about? Well, this passage has been used by a lot of different people throughout history for a lot of different things.

And I'm not here to pronounce judgments on any of these things. Political positions or whatever. I'm simply here to say that this is not what the passage is about. It's not about pacifism.

This is Jesus talking to the disciples about what it looks like to live in the kingdom of God. He's talking to the church. He's talking about a kingdom ethic.

He's not declaring what the government ought to do. He's not speaking to Rome. OK. This is the disciples. This is the kingdom of God.

[ 4 : 35 ] This is how the church organic that goes out into the world to lift up the world by being 11 and a pearl should live. All right.

It's not about mandating pacifism or anything like that. It's not putting out there a social justice warrior message per se.

It's not denying the state's rights to punish, to do justice. It's not doing any of that. And so what we need to do here is deal with an issue of interpretation from the get go.

If you come with me back to the passage, you've heard that it was said in I for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. But I said you do not resist the one who is evil. OK. Well, that little verse there at the end do not resist the one who is evil is the verse that has been taken to do a lot of the work and these political movements that I'm referring to here, which I'm not making any judgments about.

But just saying that's not what's here in this text. Do not resist the one who is evil. It would be better if it read something more like this when someone does something evil against you.

[ 5 : 44 ] Do not set yourself over against that person with evil. OK. It's a translation is a bit confusing. Do not return.

What has been done to you with the same thing. OK. That's what that's what he's saying there. In other words, don't repay evil.

For evil, right? It's a direct correlation to an I for an eye and a tooth for the tooth. All right. So that's important to see that that verse is saying something like don't repay evil for evil.

What's at stake here then instead? What's at stake here is this. Jesus is continuing the thesis that he gave in the first part of Matthew chapter five.

And that was this. You are to be a city on a hill. You are the salt of the earth.

[ 6 : 49 ] You are the light that it would be pointless to put underneath the basket. OK. Because you are the kingdom of God. You're the church.

And so he's giving an ethic that saying people of God, take this ethic, go out into the culture, into the world and be salt and light.

So that he says, people may see your good works and glorify your God who is in heaven. What he's doing here is he's talking about your witness.

You, he says, are an organism. The church isn't a static institution. It's not the building, as Derek said this morning, and it's not the free church denomination or any other denomination.

The church is an organism that's alive and active. And the church is you and me. And it's us as the body of Christ. And Jesus is calling us throughout the Gospels to take us as organism, as living beings, and go out into the world and to be leavened to mold stale lump, as the morality of the world.

[ 7 : 58 ] They can't see reality. And he's saying that living a particular type of ethic makes you the city on the hill that points people to him.

OK. That's what he's doing here. His thesis is to do good works so that people can see it and glorify your Father who is in heaven. Now listen to this phrase, when someone slaps you in the face, turn to him or her the other cheek.

Now do you hear why? Because you are the city on the hill. Is it special, or does it say anything to anyone when someone slaps you on the face and you slap them right back?

No. Nothing. It's just revenge. It's exactly what they would expect. But when someone slaps you in the face and you don't retaliate, who is this?

Who is this that doesn't act like everyone else does? It's a city on a hill. It's the salt of the earth. It's the light of the world. And by that they may see your good works and see him.

[ 9 : 12 ] So that's his thesis. Now, that's what this, so what's this passage not about? Now let's look at what this passage is about. We've stated it in the big picture just then, but I want to go back and show you something about this law itself, the law of revenge.

Because the Old Testament gets a bad rap in our day, doesn't it? If you live out in the world at all, if you read the news or read magazines that aren't Christian or do anything that's not in the Christian culture bubble, you know that the Old Testament law gets a super bad rap.

And Jesus is quoting here, and I for an eye and tooth for tooth, Lex Talionis, the law of the Talon.

And I just want to read to you a few passages of where this appears in the Old Testament and just show you what this law is doing first.

Because in seeing what the law is doing, we can see something of what Jesus is doing with it.

Okay? Exodus 24 is the first place it pops up in the Old Testament. And don't worry about, you can

flip there if you want, but just listen because by the time you get there, I've already read it and you want to listen.

So just listen to it. When men strive together and hit a pregnant woman so that her child comes out, but there is no harm done to the child, the one who hit her shall be charged.

[10:31] As the woman's husband shall impose it upon him, and he shall pay according to what the judge determines. And if there is harm to the child, then you will pay life for life.

An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, a hand for a hand, a foot for a foot. Burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe. Okay?

The Vengeant God of the Old Testament we often hear gives this law to Israel. And who is it that it's protecting?

When men strive together and hit a pregnant woman and the baby dies, it's protecting the vulnerable and the weak and the innocent.

Every single time this law appears in the Old Testament, it's presented in a way that it's protecting first the innocent, that it's mandated in situations of extreme physical harm, absolute injustice.

[11:34] One of the things that was happening a lot in the ancient Near East in this culture, even up to the time of Christ in the first century, was family blood feuds. You know, I don't know if you guys know the famous American blood feud between the Hatfields and the McCoys.

Is that familiar to people? Something like that, a very ancient version of the Hatfields and the McCoys. So-and-so looks at so-and-so's sister, talks to her in the wrong way, the brother goes back, kills the guy.

Then what happens? Well, then the other family comes and kills their son. And back and forth and back and forth, and you have a blood feud. This is very common in the pre-modern world, by the way.

It's all over the place in history. We don't know anything of this type of thing, but it's very common throughout history. So, one of the things that this law is doing is saying, actually, don't seek revenge at an individual personal level.

Did you notice who it is that's administering the punishment in this passage, in Exodus? The judge, the court, you see. In other words, Jesus is referencing a law that was to protect the innocent in cases of extreme physical harm, and it was about stopping people from seeking personal revenge.

[13:02] Instead it was turning them and saying, no, go to the court. There is a law. There's justice. There's government. Go there. It's not your job. It's not your place. Differ justice to the courts.

You see. Listen to the second one, Leviticus 24-20. Whoever takes a human life shall surely be put to death.

Whoever takes an animal's life shall make it good. In other words, if you kill somebody's animal, you give them another one, a life for life. If anyone interests his neighbor as he's done, it will be done to him.

Fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth. Whatever injury has been given, a person shall be given to him. Whoever kills an animal will make good on it, and whoever kills a person will be put to death. You shall have the same rule for the sojourner and for the native, for I am the Lord your God. Now listen, there's two radical things in this that were nowhere else in the ancient Near East. This rule applies to the foreigner that enters into your land.

[14:06] That's absolutely radical. If you know anything about the ancient Near East, that a foreigner would be treated with this level of personal rights.

If you injure a foreigner who's not one of the people of Israel, that family has a right against you to seek the court. If you kill somebody's animal, you must replace it.

This is radical rights legislation in the ancient Near East. This is old school stuff, man. This is old natural rights.

This is the type of stuff that we look down from our modern position and say, those people just didn't have it together. We know what it is, life-liberating the pursuit of happiness, right?

The law here is merciful to the innocent. The last one's in Deuteronomy chapter 19, and this ups the ante again. A single witness will not suffice against a person for any crime.

[15:12] Does that not sound like modern law? You have to have multiple witnesses to even get one of these charges passed. Multiple witnesses do process.

He says, only on the evidence of two witnesses or of three witnesses shall a charge be established. If a malicious witness arises to accuse a person of wrongdoing, then both parties to dispute shall appear before the Lord, before the priest and the judges who are in office.

The judges shall diligently inquire to the truth. If the witness is false, then he and his brother has been accused falsely, then you shall do to him as he meant to do to his brother.

You shall purge the evil for your midst. You shall not have pity. It shall be life for life, eye for eye, hand for hand, foot for foot.

You can see something of the mercy actually here. You can see something of the protection of the innocent. You can see that this law pertained in the Old Testament to extreme physical harm and that multiple witnesses had to be gathered to place a charge upon anybody.

[16:17] So now we come to what Jesus is saying. Remember one of the things that he's addressing is how the law had been perverted in the first century.

How the stakes had been actually in some way lowered. And he's coming to raise the stakes back up. So I just want to give you a few points of what Jesus is telling us here.

First there's this. Personal vengeance is not justified by the kingdom ethic. Personal vengeance is not justified in the kingdom ethic.

When someone slaps you on the face, don't embrace the law of the playground. You know the law of the playground. If you went to school and someone hits you, you hit them back.

Then embrace the law of the playground. Stephen in Acts chapter 7. He's being stoned to death.

[17:19] And do you remember his last words? Father forgive them. He uttered the words of Christ himself from the cross.

Father forgive them. In other words what Jesus is saying in this passage is that we have to go, forgo our right for the sake of a higher law.

A higher principle. What does that look like? Look with me at the second, the next one. If anyone in verse 40, if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well.

What Jesus is doing here is he's telling you not only should you not take personal revengeance, but you have to be guided by a principle of love even in the legal system.

Notice where this is taking place. If anyone would sue you, in other words this is within the courts and they would take your tunic, gifted them your cloak.

[18:27] Now what's going on here? The spirit of what he's talking about is something that was very common in the first century and that's a law that was also in the Torah from Exodus 22.

If someone, literally this is what it says, if someone has lent you their tunic, give it back before the sun goes down. For that is his garment to sleep in.

So this was a law mandated in the Old Testament. Now Jesus here is talking and saying, here's the situation. It's likely the case and this happened all the time. Someone has lent their tunic to a poor person.

According to Exodus 22, it is the poor person's right, or by law, they must give that tunic back before the sun goes down because it's not theirs.

So when you don't give it back and the man takes the poor guy to court, what do you expect Jesus is going to say? Well you think he's going to say, why are you trying to get the tunic back from the poor guy?

[19:36] He's poor. Just put on a different tunic. The tunic actually, the word here is, it's not like the overcoat dress looking thing that they would have worn.

It's actually the thin piece of fragment that's closest to the body. In other words, you give the tunic back, you're naked.

That's the last element of clothing that you have. You give the tunic back, you got nothing. But listen to what Jesus says. He says, poor man, poor woman, you only got your tunic left and the guy comes asking for it.

He takes you to the court. Give him more than that. Give him more than what he's asking for.

Now what we want to say to that is, why? Why don't you tell the guy who's suing not to sue the guy and to let him keep the tunic? Well because of this, when a poor man, a poor woman, gives every single thing they have, when they're being sued, when they're being acted upon unjustly, and they say, it's okay.

[20:58] I forgive you. In fact, take this. Take more. Well, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father who is in heaven, you see.

City on a hill, salt of the earth, light of the world. Or the third example, he keeps upping the ante. He goes from slaps on the face at the playground to the courtroom and now to the enemy. Love your enemy.

The law of the Medes and the Persians, the law of the king and the Roman Empire mandated that when a Roman official wanted you or asked you to carry their things, mail carriers, soldiers, any non-Roman, which usually was a poor person, had to in fact carry it for one mile.

Come with me to verse, into verse 40, or verse 41. If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. When the Roman soldier comes to you, you lowly man, you lowly woman and says, I'm trying to carry in the shield, I'm trying to carry in the sword, you carry it for the next mile.

[ 22 : 17 ] You have to. And he's not going to pay you for it. But, but, when it gets to that mile, Jesus says, just go ahead and do one more.

Just go ahead and carry it another. Why? Why is Jesus not saying to the Roman government, stop this injustice?

Well, you're seeing the picture, right? City on a hill, salt of the earth, light of the world. When you carry the sword, that extra mile, he sees your good works.

Who is this? That carries my cross with a smile so that he may glorify your Father who is in heaven. And then the fourth and final example is this. Give to the one who begs from you and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you. The true principle of the passage comes out here.

[ 23 : 23 ] In other words, radical generosity. Jesus said in Luke 6. If you lend to those from whom you expect to receive, what gain or credit is that to you?

Even sinners lend to sinners to get back the same amount. But love your enemy. Do good and lend, expecting nothing in return and your reward will be great.

And you will be sons and daughters of the most high, for he is kind to the ungrateful and he is kind to the evil. This is a radical ethic, you see.

The ethic of the kingdom then is this, that citizens of the kingdom of God do not withhold and they do not seek revenge. They love their enemy and they give more than they are asked, even when they're being done in injustice.

This does not say, don't defend your family, don't defend your nation, that the government shouldn't do what the government should do. It's talking about a kingdom ethic, a city on the hill ethic.

[ 24 : 33 ] Why? Lastly, why should you live like this? Why should you live like this?

In Acts chapter 16, Paul confronts a girl that's been possessed by an evil spirit and he cast the spirit from this girl.

She's a slave girl and when he does this, she's unable from that point on to offer prophecies to make the owners rich, basically.

They sell her off to do sorcery type stuff. So they go to the procounsel and they tell them, this Jew has done a wrong to me.

What does the procounsel do? They seize Paul and Silas. They drag them into the marketplace before the rulers and they bring them to the magistrates.

[ 25 : 35 ] The crowd joins in to the Roman soldiers and attacking them. They tear their garments and they beat them with rods and when they had inflicted many blows upon them, they threw them into prison ordering the jailer to keep them safe so that they could execute as the implication there.

Now look, if you don't know this about Paul, Paul was a Roman citizen and it's another law of the Medes and Persians that any Roman citizen who simply while being taken to be beaten says, I am a Roman citizen, gets a pass.

He gets to go before the council and by being a Roman citizen has the right not to be beaten. He has the right not to be beaten.

Then they come and they say, this Jew has cast an evil spirit and I'm not making money anymore. And they take him to the magistrate and they beat him and you know what he does?

Did you see it? No, you didn't see it because he doesn't say anything. He doesn't tell them he's a Roman citizen and when you're reading the text and you know that fact, you're screaming at the text and saying, Paul, just tell them you're a Roman citizen and they'll stop beating you with rods, but he doesn't do it.

[ 26 : 57 ] Matthew 5 verse 38 to 42, right? He does this all over the place actually. It is a radical witness, a radical witness to avoid your own rights.

You see, in the modern era, if there is one thing that we're sure that we possess, it is rights. You know this, again, if you read the news.

You know this if you follow some of the stories of the university life in America right now, especially. Jesus is telling us here to do something that screams in the face of modernity.

It's shocking, visible expression that when someone offends you, you forgive them. That when the culture takes a jab at you, at your race, at your ethnicity, at your religion, that you don't take a jab back.

When someone has wronged you, has transgressed your liberty, has taken something away of your happiness, of your reputation. There's a sense of debt that is created, right?

[ 28 : 10 ] And in that moment, you have two options. One option is this. When someone's wronged you and there is a debt that is owed, which there always is, you can seek repayment of that debt.

That's the easy route. You can make them suffer. You can destroy their reputation. You can destroy their opportunities. Maybe it was years ago for you tonight, years ago, but you still think about it when you lay down at night.

They're different people now, but that doesn't matter. You want revenge. The second option is this. You can forgive them.

You can forgive them and you can even let them know that you've forgiven them. But here's the thing why that's so hard. Revenge is agony.

It's absorbing the cost. There is a debt that has been accrued. And when you choose to forgive instead of seek revenge, you're taking that debt onto yourself.

[ 29 : 21 ] You're absorbing the cost that someone else should have paid. You see, justice should have been done to them, but I'm simply taking it.

I'm taking it. There is no disappearance of justice. Jesus is not saying that. Instead he's saying you have to absorb the justice. You have to take on what somebody else deserved if you want to be a radical witness for the kingdom of God.

Forgiveness is always agony. Forgiveness always includes suffering, always. Sin always entails a penalty, forgiveness always entails pain.

Joseph in tears stood before his brothers and said, you meant to kill me for evil, but God intended it for good.

I forgive you. Saul pursued David, you remember, and he wanted to kill them. And David on a few occasions had the opportunity to sneak up, you remember, right up to Saul's back.

[ 30 : 33 ] He was sleeping. He was sitting in a cave. This is my son's favorite story in his children's Bible for some reason. I don't know why. And instead, you remember what David did?

He cuts off a piece of Saul's cloak and he steps back and he says, Saul, here's your cloak, here's your sword. I could have just killed you, but I didn't because I love you.

And you're trying to kill me and I forgive you for it. So go, make peace with me. Return to Jerusalem.

And Saul doesn't, right? And he suffers for it. You have two options. We'll close with this, Les Miserables, the fantastic French novel and movie and play.

I'm going to spoil it, but if you haven't seen it by this point, we'll shame on you. Jean Valjean was in prison for 19 years and he finally gets out, but he breaks his parole.

[ 31 : 43 ] And if you know the story, you know what I'm going to say. He comes to a house seeking shelter. He's in a courtyard and a bishop and a nun ask him to come into their home.

And they give him a meal and they give him a bed and he hasn't been treated this way in 20 years. But what does he do? He steals the silver, right?

He takes all the things that are expensive in the house and he puts them in a bag and he leaves in the middle of the night. He totally undermines their hospitality and he gets caught the next day by the French police and they take him back to the bishop.

You remember this scene? It's a beautiful scene. And they say, Father, which is what they would call a bishop, is this the man who took your silver?

And the bishop says, no, it's not. In fact, I've been looking for this man. He's my guest.

[ 32 : 45 ] Come inside and he gives him another meal and another bed and he says this to him, I've ransomed your soul, Jean Valjean, and I've given it to God.

And in the face of this radical forgiveness and not seeking Lex Talionis, the law of eye for eye.

Jean Valjean steps into the garden and is faced with God for the first time. And you know that he repents. That's the first picture that the story gives us.

I want to give you one more quickly. Next we see in the story Jean Valjean and he's become a mayor and he's become the humble, loving man that we all love in Victor Hugo's novel.

And this old prison guard, Javert, comes across him. You remember? And he's a police captain now and he recognizes this man.

[ 33 : 42 ] And for the rest of the novel, Javert relentlessly pursues Jean Valjean because he knows that years and years ago, Jean Valjean broke his parole.

Now you see what the problem here is. Is it right and okay for Javert to pursue Jean Valjean? Yes. Jean Valjean committed a crime. He broke his parole and he never served the penalty for it. But what does Jean Javert not see?

That the law is not an end unto itself. You see? The law is there to serve the purpose of rehabilitation and righteousness.

We have Jean Valjean before us who's a righteous man. He's been rehabilitated but Javert wants to stick to the jot and the title of the law, to the farthest end.

[ 34 : 41 ] And so finally in a David Saul moment at the end of the book, right, Jean Valjean gets the chance actually to kill Javert. He captures him. And what does he do?

Well, you know what he does. He lets him go. And in that moment the question that confronted Jean Valjean in the face of the bishop has now confronted Javert in the face of Jean Valjean.

What do I do with radical forgiveness? And Javert kills himself. He didn't know what to do with it. He'd never seen it before.

Why not just seek what is deserved? Why not just seek the law? Why not just seek eye for eye tooth for tooth? Because the law is not an end into itself. The law Jesus is saying in the kingdom of God is transcended for a higher principle.

And that's the principle of love that someone may see your good works and turn to the one who has first loved you. You see? That's what Victor Hugo is preaching in that wonderful novel.

[ 35 : 50 ] Why should we live like this? We'll end with a Bible verse. He, he, he, the God-man, Jesus Christ, he committed no sin and no deceit was found in his mouth.

When they hurled insults at him, he did not retaliate. When he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.

To this, you, all of you, were called, Peter says. This is Peter talking to you. Because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example that you should follow in those steps, he himself bore your sins in his body on the cross.

By his wounds, you have been healed. By taking the wounds that Jesus took and not giving them back to the people who gave them to him, and by you taking the wounds like Jesus took them and not giving them back like Jesus did, others may see your good works and glorify the God-man.

By whose wounds you have been healed. Let's pray. Our Lord and God, we ask that you would make us people who don't love, love to hate, who don't love to seek revenge, but who do love justice and see the fact that Jesus Christ, the most just man, experienced the most unjust of crimes.

[ 37 : 43 ] So that we, the most unjust people, might experience the justice we don't deserve. And that we, in that principle, might forego retaliation so that others might see Jesus through us.

And we ask that you would make us like this in his name. Amen.