

Refusal to Take Revenge

It used to be said that an ancient Celt regarded it as a sign of a strong character to hit back hard when he was hurt. When Patrick came, the Christian principle of forgiveness seemed spineless to the Irish. The Celts were not alone in this. Retaliation to defend one's honour has always been a characteristic of sinful human nature.

No system of public justice can work by non-retaliation. We can understand the public outcry when a lout who was injured while carrying out a felony was recently awarded considerable compensation by a judge. If constituted authorities do not properly punish criminals, ordinary citizens cannot be secure. Punishment in a court of law should include the restoration of the upset balance of justice.

The Law of Moses had stated, as a principle of justice: "You shall take a life for a life, an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, a hand for a hand, and a foot for a foot" (Dt 19:21). The purpose in this principle of retaliation was to limit how far legal retribution could go. An eye for an eye meant that retaliation should not go further than an eye for an eye. There is a difference between taking personal revenge and having it done by those who have the authority to impose penalties. Jesus was speaking about individual revenge. He warned that extending the Old Testament principle to personal ethics made it a charter for self-interest. He asked for an unselfish attitude, which not only refused to retaliate, but did not resist even when it would be legally right to do so. Some people have criticised Jesus' principles as a moral code that is appropriate only for slaves and other subservient people. Rightly understood, however, Jesus commends subordinating personal rights to what benefits others.

Some hold that, when Paul wrote that Christ had delivered people from the bondage of the Law, he meant only the ceremonial features of the Law, like circumcision and food laws. Rather, he meant the whole Law, including the moral law. Jesus has kept it all for us. It scandalised the Pharisees that Jesus seemed to treat the Sabbath law lightly. However, Jesus went further. In some respects He differed from the Law of Moses. One of these respects was the principle of non-retaliation. He said, "You have heard that it was said: 'An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.' But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. But if anyone slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other one to him also. If someone wants to sue you and take your shirt, let him have your coat as well. If anyone forces you to go two kilometres, go four kilometres with him. Give to the person who asks you for something; and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you" (Mt 5:38-42).

There is a legal flavour in these illustrations. If a person gave a blow on the right cheek, it was a serious insult, and could be punished by a heavy fine. The Law of Moses prevented a moneylender from taking a person's cloak as security for a loan. "If you lend money to any poor person among you who belongs to My people, you shall not act like a money-lender toward him. You shall not charge him any interest. If you indeed take your neighbour's cloak as security, you shall give it back to him before the sun goes down. For that is his only covering to wrap his skin in. In what else can he sleep? When he cries to Me for help, I shall listen, because I am compassionate" (Ex 22:25-27). A Roman soldier also had the right to commandeer a civilian as a porter. Simon of Cyrene was compelled to carry Jesus' cross, for example. Jesus is saying that, even if we have legal rights, we should not insist on them. He teaches, with His great authority, that a radical search for the true will of God should replace superficial observance of the letter of the Law. He wanted His disciples to have a different scale of values.

It seems logical that, if we should love our neighbour, we should hate our enemies. When Jesus asserted the extraordinary command to love one's enemies, He went far beyond the explicit teaching of the Old Testament Law. His ethic sharply contrasted with natural human values. The Old Testament had not said in so many words, "Hate your enemy", but it could easily be inferred from passages like Dt. 23:3-6 and Ps. 139:21-22. Jesus' extension of the command to love to the neighbour as oneself even to enemies and persecutors also went beyond what Moses or the rest of the Old Testament had said.

Paul's exhortation, "Do not repay anyone evil for evil" (R 12:17) mirrored Jesus' directive, "Do not resist an evil person." Jesus and Paul did not mean that we should discard all principles of right and wrong. There is an old saying, "He who plays with mud gets himself dirty." No matter how right we are, and how wrong the person has been who has harmed us, once we hate him and are set on revenge, the Devil has caught us, too, in evil.

There are priorities in the law of love. When a criminal invades your house and threatens the lives of your loved ones, your loved ones have a higher demand on your love than the house-invader does. If, when you overpower him while you are defending those close to you, you happen to hurt him, then the command to love the house-invader as yourself, takes over. Even though you ring for the police, you must care for him. Revenge is not your right or duty. The civil libertarians often get things wrong, but in this respect they have a point.

Those who reflect about the consequences of revenge and retaliation will appreciate that there are no bounds to the escalation of revenge. There is a tendency in sinful human nature to give back more than one has received. We saw that in the so-called religious wars in Lebanon and Northern Ireland. When we hear that Palestinians have killed several Israelis, we expect that within a day or so there will be retaliation, but that more Palestinians will die than Jews. Hatred intensifies, and violence increases. The cycle of revenge continues. For ages past clans in New Guinea had ongoing paybacks. Even today, if a motorist hits someone's pig and kills it, his first concern is to get out of the area quickly.

Paul wrote, "Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Take into consideration what all people regard as good. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with all people. Do not take revenge, dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, because Scripture has said: 'Vengeance belongs to Me. I shall repay', says the Lord. Rather: 'If your enemy is hungry, feed him. If he is thirsty, give him a drink. If you do this, you will heap burning coals on his head.' Do not be overcome by evil,

but overcome evil with good” (Rom 12:17-21).

There is wisdom in such instructions from God. The best way to get rid of a personal enemy is to turn him into a friend. What is most likely to change his spiteful attitude is an unexpected good turn, which embarrasses him and makes it difficult for him to continue the nasty cycle. “Heaping burning coals on his head” is not a spiteful attack, but the resultant burning sense of shame in him after he has received something good from someone when he had been intent on harming him.

The words, “Leave room for God’s wrath” remind us that it is not our right to carry out personal revenge. That is God’s right, and He will repay all wrong in His good time. If Christian people pray for their enemies and want what is best for them, that also includes the prayer that their enemies will repent, and, by God’s forgiveness, also escape His punishment.

There is more than sound logic in refusing to retaliate for personal wrong. The ultimate reason is that God Himself would rather forgive than punish. Jesus taught, “You have heard that it was said: ‘You shall love your neighbour, and you shall hate your enemy.’ But I tell you, love your enemies, and pray for those who are persecuting you, that you may be the children of your Father in heaven. For He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous” (Mt 5:43-45). God is kind to evil and unthankful people. Because God has forgiven us in Christ, the Gospel of peace should prompt us to be peacemakers also. Jesus continued, “For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? If you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Therefore you shall be perfect, as your Father in heaven is perfect” (Mt 5:46-48).

God’s perfection, which we should endeavour to imitate, includes His compassion and kindness to people who do not deserve it.