

The Thin Line

SLIDE 1

WHAT WE FACE

There's a thin line between justice and revenge. Political parties, activist groups, and even religious organizations walk the line of justice and revenge with every decision. Unfortunately too often, when a group feels wronged, they contribute to the never ending cycle of revenge. They easily can lash out with revenge, but then mask it with the name of justice.

There's a gut response when we're wronged. We desire justice—we want it to be right. When I'm driving and I have my daughter in the back and someone gets on my tail and then suddenly switches lanes and goes by me going 90mph—I want justice.

Retaliation is a gut response when we're wronged. I've seen some of you on 89. Someone cuts you off in traffic and the natural response is to retaliate, but those situations never end pretty.

So how should we respond when someone wrongs us?

We seek justice and often want to be the one who administers the justice. The problem with administering justice when we're the one who feels wronged is that we can often become self-centered and go off on a vigilante path thinking we're doing the right thing, but in reality, it's coming out of a place of revenge and retaliation.

THE OLD TESTAMENT LAW

God recognized the thin line between justice and revenge. A system of justice was created, much like ours today, where the punishment fits the crime. Here's a little glimpse into the system:

SLIDE 2

Exodus 21:23–25 NIV

²³ But if there is serious injury, you are to take life for life, ²⁴ eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, ²⁵ burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise.

It was a flawed system but a necessary one. It's better an eye for an eye than an escalating feud with each side going one worse than the other. It's the human response.

We know it too well in our world. Someone says something that hurts and the human response is to say something that hurts more. Emails are exchanged and people go blow for blow until it escalates and goes further. Someone attacks our character and in an attempt to defend ourselves, the human response is to find fault with the accuser.

It's not easy to live with people insulting, attacking, and searching for ways to take you down. Jesus didn't promise his followers it would be easy. Actually, he said it would be pretty difficult. He says:

SLIDE 3

John 16:33 NIV

³³ "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."

ENEMIES IN THIS WORLD

When you follow Jesus—you're going to have enemies. Everyone faces it in some form or another. However, when you're walking in step with God, you can expect opposition. Actually, I'll go as far to say that when you have people who want to see you fail, you must be doing something right.

But it's not easy. It's not easy when someone wants to make your life miserable. It's not easy when people start rumors about you or insult you. It's not easy when people mock you.

The unfortunate part is that your enemies aren't always open that they're your enemy. Sometimes it's difficult to identify your enemies, especially when it comes across that they're your friends. Eventually, they play their cards and you discover their true intentions. It's difficult when you recognize that their actions are not

from God, although many would claim that they are. Most of the time, they'll convince themselves and others that what they're doing is in the name of justice.

They try tactics that are deceptive and manipulative. They will try and rally the troops and use the divide and conquer tactic. If they can put others against you, then they can conquer you. Every tactic is an attempt to keep you in the cycle of revenge.

Jesus has a way forward

What if Jesus has a different way forward that breaks this cycle of revenge?

He gives us a way to respond when we're wronged. He says:

SLIDE 4/5

Matthew 5:38–42 NIV

³⁸ “You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ ³⁹ But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. ⁴⁰ And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. ⁴¹ If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles. ⁴² Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.

A Jewish person hearing this at the time would have thought Jesus was crazy. Israel is surrounded by enemies who have made their lives miserable. The powerful Romans occupy their land and use tactics of violence and force to get their way. Jesus comes out of left-field with this idea to not resist when they're wronged. He gives three examples:

1. He tells them to turn the other cheek when someone hits them. In the first century, striking someone with a backhanded blow was considered a significant insult. It implies that you're inferior. If a person hits back, they're only contributing to the evil cycle of revenge. Jesus says to break it is to refuse to retaliate.

In other words, refuse to contribute to the evil cycle. It's as simple as not posting that heated Facebook comment or not having to get in your last two cents in an argument. Be prepared for another blow. Be prepared for another strike, but don't contribute to the cycle.

2. Then Jesus gives a courtroom example. He says that if someone wants to wrong you by taking your shirt, give them your cloak as well. The outer garment was the more important possession because it wasn't only used as a cloak but also bedding to sleep in open fields. Jesus is saying that the believer should be willing to give up the more prized possession. Break the cycle. Be extra generous to your enemies. Sometimes it's better to give up your pride than it is to be right.

3. The third example he gives is that when you're forced to go one mile, you should go two. Roman soldiers had the right to recruit others to carry their equipment for them. The Jewish people despised it because it was humiliating. It was an act of power and force by Roman soldiers over others. Jesus gives the picture of a believer offering to carry the load even further if the soldier wishes. Go the extra mile for the people who wrong you. It's the only way to break the cycle of revenge.

This teaching goes completely against the standards of society. It's just as relevant now as it was then. We live in a world where the punishment should fit the crime. We live in a world where people need to get put in their place. So, why go above and beyond to those who want nothing more than to harm us? Here's why:

SLIDE 6/7

Matthew 5:43–45 NIV

⁴³ “You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ ⁴⁴
But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵ that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.

The reason we should go above and beyond for our enemies is so that we may be children of God. It shows the patient love of God who wants Israel to shine his light into the world so that everyone will see that he is the one true God. The church isn't chosen to be God's special people while the rest of the world remains in darkness. No, the church is chosen to be a light to the nations.

The way that we choose to love our enemies and to love our critics shows the love of God to a world that only knows retaliation and revenge. The goal is to love our enemies so that we may be called children of God.

I know that my daughter reflects the character of her father. She copies every move that I make. I take mom's hat and put it on the dog and so she takes the hat and puts it on the dog. I know down the line the way I talk to her mom is the way that she will talk to her mom. The way that I respond to hard times is the way that she will respond.

In the same way, as children of God we're to reflect the character of God. Notice it says God makes the sun rise on those who do good and those who do evil. God sends the rain on those who are living the right way and those who are wicked in their ways.

God's own actions are to bless his followers and his enemies. When we love our enemies, we're showing the world Jesus. That's what separates Jesus from the rest of the world. He goes on to say:

SLIDE 8/9

Matthew 5:46–48 NIV

⁴⁶ If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? ⁴⁷ And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? ⁴⁸ Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

The ability to love even our enemies shows the true mark of a Christian. If we can't love our enemies, what separates us from everyone else? Jesus is saying that even the tax collectors, even the groups that would take advantage of others for their own profit love those who love them.

He's saying even evil people greet one another with love. Greetings were big in this culture because the type of greeting a person received showed their status in society. It's a big deal in our society. Its not being fake to greet your enemies, it's that you should treat them with dignity and respect. That's one way to love your enemies

- Story of my basketball girls picking up their opponents

We're to return evil acts with love. I've heard it said like this:

“To return evil for good is devilish; to return good for good is human; to return good for evil is divine.”

One way to practically love your enemies and to return evil with good is to:

1. Pray for your enemies

It's not easy to pray for those who want to see you fail. It's not easy to pray for your critics. It's not easy to pray for those who insult you or even worse seek to harm you.

Jesus did it for his enemies when they put him on a cross. They insulted them. They mocked him. They tortured him. Before he took his last breath he cried out and prayed, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they are doing."

Three years ago a terrible evil act of hatred took place in South Carolina. A person filled with hate and darkness killed nine African-Americans in their church. They opened up their lives to him in their Bible Study and he returned good with evil. Even in the darkness, the families of the victims returned the evil act with good—it was a glimpse of heaven on earth.

The daughter of one of the victims told the shooter: "I forgive you. You took something very precious away from me. I will never get to talk to her ever again. I will never be able to hold her again, but I forgive you, and have mercy on your soul. ... You hurt me. You hurt a lot of people. If God forgives you, I forgive you." – Nadine Collier.

The world already has enough people out for revenge. As the church, we need to step up and point the way forward and give the world signs of heaven on earth. It starts with a life of prayer. Pray for your enemies and those who seek to persecute you.

2. Love your enemies with good deeds

There's a story that Pastor Rod Loy shares about a South African missionary couple who lived with the Somali people of Northern Kenya. They lived and ministered with love to the community for many years.

Their baby son strangely became sick and every day the sickness progressed. Eventually, at the age of two, the little boy died and their family lost their child without any answers.

The parents eventually discovered their son was slowly poisoned to death by people in the community. These missionaries lost their son to the people who they lived with and loved on. They learned that there were enemies in the

community who were hostile to Jesus and the church and they were trying to get them to leave.

In an incredible act of love, the father said at the funeral: “You think we’re going away, but we’re not. Every time you walk by this grave, it will remind you there was a father who loved you enough to let his son die here so you can know the love of Jesus.”

The family chose to love their enemies in a profound way. They decided to stay in the community to continue to minister to the needs of the people and to love their enemies with good deeds. Scripture says this:

SLIDE 10

1 Peter 2:12 NIV

¹² Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.

When we decide to love our enemies and to go the extra mile for them, we point to the presence of God in our world with the hopes that they will turn and give their hearts to Christ.

Jesus didn’t only talk the talk, he walked the walk. Jesus asks nothing of his followers that he hasn’t faced himself. Jesus was betrayed by the people he ministered to. Judas handed over the Son of God for 30 pieces of silver. The large crowd came to Jesus with swords and clubs and Judas told them:

SLIDE 11

Matthew 26:48 NIV

⁴⁸ Now the betrayer had arranged a signal with them: “The one I kiss is the man; arrest him.”

So Judas comes to Jesus and greets him with a kiss. He greets him, but only has evil intentions for Jesus.

SLIDE 12

Matthew 26:50 NIV

⁵⁰ Jesus replied, “Do what you came for, friend.” Then the men stepped forward, seized Jesus and arrested him.

Jesus turns the other cheek, he takes the cloak off his back, he goes the extra mile and he turns to his enemy and says do what you came for. He greets his enemy and calls him friend. This is a picture of the love of God toward his enemies. Jesus is waiting there not wanting any to perish, but to have eternal life. So he calls his enemy, FRIEND!

Then one of Jesus’ followers reached for his sword and strikes the high priest and cuts off his ear.

SLIDE 13

Matthew 26:52 NIV

⁵² “Put your sword back in its place,” Jesus said to him, “for all who draw the sword will die by the sword.

In other words, people who live with a life that only knows retaliation and revenge will live that way and also die that way. Yet, didn’t this disciple of Jesus pull out the sword in the name of justice. After all, his savior, the Son of God, was falsely accused and was going to be put to death! Jesus responds:

SLIDE 14

Matthew 26:53–54 NIV

⁵³ Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels? ⁵⁴ But how then would the Scriptures be fulfilled that say it must happen in this way?”

Jesus knew that he was in a greater story with a script already written. He knew God is actually in control. Even if it seems like the enemy has won. Jesus broke the cycle of revenge when he willingly went to the cross. Jesus walked the thin line. If he didn’t resurrect from that grave then the cycle of revenge would have proved to be too strong. That’s not how the story ended. Jesus Christ rose from the grave and defeated the power of retaliation and the power of revenge with the power of love.

My heart for our church is that we would show Christ to the world by the way we love our enemies. My heart for our church is that we would flood a broken world with the love of Christ. My heart for our church is that we would break the cycle in our homes, our workplaces, and our schools. By the grace of God, I pray that the spirit of revenge and retaliation would never find it's place in our community, in this church.

The evidence is all around that the Spirit of the Lord is here. Let the evidence be the way we love our enemies. The Spirit of the Lord breaks the cycle. Let's show the world what it means to experience heaven on earth.

Father, your spirit breaks the cycle of revenge and retaliation. Your spirit gives us a new way forward one that is bursting with love and creativity. Your spirit points a way to restore a hurting world with broken relationships. I pray in the name of Jesus you would give us the courage to break the cycle of revenge and retaliation in our lives and in our relationships. I pray for those who have been hurt by the vicious cycle of revenge that they would experience your healing presence. I pray your spirit would fall fresh on them because they need your presence.

Lord, let us be a light to the people around us. Let us witness to the powerful name of Jesus by the way we treat those who seek to harm us.