

Path of LEAST RESISTANCE

Matt 5: 38-42

Slide – bunny



It's a pretty short bible reading and a pretty clear topic this morning. We're jumping into the middle of Jesus' sermon on the mount, and Jesus is talking about revenge.

You might remember a couple of months ago we looked at the sermon on the mount. Where Jesus talked about loving your enemies. You might also recall I mentioned Michael Hart's book called the 100. Which is a list of who he thinks have been the 100 most influential people in history. And Jesus rated down the list at number 3. Because he couldn't see that Jesus' followers were actually doing the things he taught. So over the year we'll keep coming back to it. And asking ourselves. As Christians, as Jesus' followers, do we heed his words? Do we listen to what he says. And do we act on them?

So let's take up Jesus' teaching on revenge. It's a fairly emotive topic. And plenty of people have had something or other to say about revenge. Here's a couple of sayings to get us going.

We all know this one.

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Revenge is sweet.

Can't vouch for the truth of that but that's what people say. Here's another one I suspect you'll have heard.

Revenge is a dish best served cold.

To be honest I don't understand that one.

Try this one. A bit deeper.

Revenge is a much more punctual paymaster than gratitude.

And you might be detecting a flow of thought here, the last one, you'll know this one.

Don't get mad, get even.

Now, even if you don't agree with those sayings. You'll have some insight into why people think that way about revenge.

By its nature of course, revenge is a responsive thing. Someone does something to you or someone you love. Something nasty. Something bad. Something hurtful.

And you want to respond with interest.

And we've all been there. For you, maybe your mind goes back to those kids at school. Those bullies, or worse those supposed friends. That person who said that thing. That boss. That ex-boyfriend or girlfriend. Something was done to you, said about you. That hurt. Maybe way in the past. Maybe just this week.

But regardless of who or when or where. You know that deep pain....that churns aroundand becomes that intense, desire for retribution.

There's an American anthropologist Jared Diamond. And he makes the observation that revenge is just one of those primal emotions like love or fear or grief. And so he says. We shouldn't repress it. It's not good. He says it's a positive good. He reckons we should give a freer rein to our retributive emotions:

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“The satisfactions of revenge are natural and powerful, on a par with love, so, to say we should transcend our retributive feelings is wrong. We should instead seek out opportunities to express them, for instance by attending executions. The state may have taken away the right to personal retaliation, but we can still enjoy the wrongdoer's suffering or death at a distance.

Jared Diamond

And again. You may or might not agree, but having experienced those vengeful emotions yourself at least to some degree, you can see where he's coming from.

Especially given that if someone's being executed. There's been a serious serious wrong done.

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Well let's see what Jesus has to say on the matter. Jesus is coming from a different angle. He doesn't deny that you might have those feelings. He doesn't even deny that what's been done to you was evil. But listen again to what he says about how you ought to respond.

You've heard that it was said. Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth. But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person.

And if you think enjoying an execution's a bit way out there when it comes to revenge. Surely what Jesus says is even more so. Not only does he suggest non retaliation. He even goes a bit further. And you pick that up in the first example in verse 39.

Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.

And if you're not clear there's three more examples. The same principle when someone sues you. When someone takes advantage of you. When someone wants to borrow money.

Jesus says. When someone slaps you on the face. Not only should you not take revenge. Not only should you not give sway to those natural emotions. Jesus says. Turn the other cheek. And give them another free shot. Do not resist.

Now, I thought this would be a good point to get someone up for a demonstration.

Any volunteers? Is there someone you'd like to volunteer?

Alright, we'll just have to imagine it.

Jesus says...Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.

Which in a way beggars belief. And you'll say. Surely....Jesus can't mean that literally. And you'll say. It's a manner of speaking. You'll say. It's metaphorical. You'll say. Whatever you have to say to qualify Jesus' words.. and somehow make what he's just said palatable, reasonable, doable.

Because it just seems so hard. It just seems so UN-NATURAL. To turn the other cheek.

And I'm sure we could get together after the service and say but what about this situation? What about this? What about that? And we could raise a whole heap of reasonable objections.....

But I think the biggest challenge as you listen to Jesus here..... is to not water it down. The biggest challenge is to not put so many qualifications on what he says that it just becomes a trite empty saying.

At the very least Jesus is saying his followers are to have a monumentally different attitude towards other people. And when it comes to revenge. This is how it pans out.

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Now of course, in the context of the sermon on the mount. This is no more radical than what he's just said, or what he's going to say.

Right from the start. The people who are blessed..... are a bit surprising. Because they're the opposites from the popular perception. The blessed are the poor in spirit. Theirs is the kingdom of heaven Jesus says. Along with those who mourn and the meek. And the ones who hunger and thirst for righteousness.

Which is a bit of a wake up call for the Pharisees of Israel.

Jesus says the people who'll be called the sons of God. The one's who'll be filled. Those who'll see God. Who'll inherit the kingdom. Are the ones who have a righteousness that comes from the heart, and not from the rulebook.

And you see this phrase right through Jesus says. You've heard it was said.

But I tell you.

And each time. He goes from the low to the high. From the lower standard of the law.... to what seems like the ridiculously high.

Verse 21 you've heard it was said. Don't commit murder...there's the base rule....but I tell you

.... anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment.

Down to Verse 27

²⁷ "You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery.' ²⁸ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.

And so he's setting this consistently high standard. In comparison with the requirements of the Jewish law.

And if you jump down to the last verse of chapter 5. If you go down to verse 48 here's the reason the standard's so high. It's because the measure is God himself.

Jesus says. ⁴⁸ Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

No wonder the standard's so high.

So when it comes to revenge. It's the same thing. You've heard it was said. An eye for an eye.

Which was the law. There it is in Leviticus.

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Leviticus 24:19-20 ¹⁹ If anyone injures his neighbor, whatever he has done must be done to him: ²⁰ fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth. As he has injured the other, so he is to be injured.

But just like the law for murder and the law for adultery. By itself...the law if you like restrains badness rather than promoting goodness. It's like the speed sign on the side of the road ...it sets limits on what you can do. Because you can still be lustful. But not guilty of adultery. You can still hate someone, but not be guilty of murder.

And as far as revenge goes. There needs to be justice. But revenge is more than just getting even isn't it. And the law puts a limit. The law says an eye for an eye. But no more.

What the law does. Is what laws always do. It restricts excess. An eye for an eye restricts excessive retribution.

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You know what revenge is like. You push me I shove you. You blow up my house.

That's how it works. Revenge escalates. Revenge is getting even with interest.

In 2004 Ashley Carpenter from Bournemouth in the UK admitted slashing nearly 2000 tyres on 548 cars over a 10 day period. He went on his rampage of revenge because he was splashed when a car drove through a puddle. He said he wanted to send a message to drivers.

Revenge tends to escalate.

Then there's the bunny. You might have been wondering.

In a place called stockport, England again. In March this year. Katey Barber was left behind in the house with the kids...while her mum and her partner and her sister...went off on a trip. Katie was upset. So she got revenge.....by setting fire to her sister's bunny rabbit. That's him there.

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“22 year old Katey laughed as the rabbit squealed in pain after she threw burning paper into its hutch and locked the door. “

Now there’s no shortage of revenge stories around. But I guess the bunny story is a good one to illustrate the unmeasured, pointless, senseless nature of revenge.

The story went on to say

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.....Bunny is now terrified of human contact, has permanent scarring and had to have an ear partly amputated.”

And it doesn’t matter what level it’s on whether it’s personal or national, the cycle’s the same. It goes ‘round and ‘round.

And it’s not that hard to see the problems of revenge.

It’s not just Jesus. Even Confucius says Before you embark on a journey of revenge, dig two graves.

Revenge is a deceptive, illusory trap. You think you’ll feel better. You won’t. You think you’ll settle the score. You’ll fuel the fire. In you and in them.

And the law limits it. But Jesus sets a whole new standard.

He says. Don’t resist.

He says turn the other cheek.

Now it's interesting because the eye for eye law wasn't a personal response, it was a law for the judges to enforce. But he's not calling for a new national law here. Jesus is calling for individuals. To voluntarily act on his words.

Someone injures you in some way. Don't strike out in anger. Don't payback. And even more. Don't set your defences. Don't withdraw. Which can be a form of revenge anyway. But show good-will...by making yourself vulnerable and open to them.

If someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well.

Now if you're thinking self preservation. You can't even contemplate that.

In Jesus' time the Romans were the occupying force. And the Roman soldiers could force anyone to carry their military hardware. So here's what kingdom of heaven people do. You're forced to go one mile. Go two. Go the extra mile.

And give to the one who wants to borrow from you. And it's interesting the phrase there. Don't turn away.

⁴² Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.

Which is the principle in every one of the situations Jesus has pointed out. Instead of revenge. And instead of self defence and turning away. There's a turning towards the person.

Turn towards them. And show the other cheek, turn towards them....give them your cloak, turn towards them...to go the extra mile.

And you'll say but what if you get treated like a doormat?

And you'll say but maybe they'll just exploit me?

Andmaybe....you will. You might be right.

But Jesus doesn't qualify his statement.

And I'm sure you're just as good as me. I'm sure you can come up with some extreme example to refute what Jesus is saying.

You say what if someone breaks in and robs my house? Does that mean I have to leave the door open the next day? Surely not?

And you use the extreme example..... so you don't have to do what Jesus is saying at all.

But I don't think Jesus is telling us to be doormats.

Think about it this way. The doormat doesn't have a choice. But you do.

And what does it say to people when you go that extra mile by choice? What does it say to someone who you continue to love by choice, instead of lashing out?

When it's by choice. It's a sign of strength. And it's a pretty powerful thing.

Phillip Yancey in the book the Jesus I never knew writes about Martin Luther King.

He says..

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“Against all instincts of self preservation, he stayed true to the principle of peacemaking. He did not strike back. Where others called for revenge. He called for love. The civil rights marchers put their bodies on the line before the sheriffs with nightsticks and firehoses and snarling German Shepherds. That, in fact, was what brought them the victory they’d been seeking so long.”

It’s a Dog eat dog world. But if you’re confident enough, secure enough. Not to act in your own interest. And humble yourself. It’s a powerful thing.

If the goal’s self preservation. It’s not a great strategy. But that’s not the goal. The goal’s to be like God. Be perfect as your heavenly father is perfect.

Which is a good thing to aim for in itself. The kingdom of heaven belongs to people like that Jesus says.

And of course more than that it’s redemptive as well. That’s the kind of attitude. The kind of radically different behavior God uses to add people to his kingdom.

That’s the way God acts towards us in sending his Son.

The fact of Jesus coming at all.... is the evidence of God turning towards the evil ones he knew would wound him. Jesus goal..... wasn’t self preservation.

And the good news is that even though God could have rightly and justly acted towards us with revenge. He turns towards us in Jesus and through his vulnerability, by his wounds....offers eternal life. So it’s to us in Jesus in the first place. And then through us by his strength. And by his Spirit....that we can imitate him. And act that way to others.