

## **“Vengeance is Mine”**

Deuteronomy 32: 34-35; Romans 12: 18-21

August 9, 2015

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### **I. Introduction**

So, I've had an unusual number of people who have approached me this week to say that they were looking forward to this Sunday's sermon, and they all had a little twinkle in their eye because they knew we were talking about vengeance. And vengeance is an attractive topic, right?

If you happen to go to YouTube and type in the phrase "vengeance is mine," you will get an overwhelming number of movies and videos and music videos that pop up celebrating and reveling in the process of taking vengeance on someone. Hundreds of movies, everything from *Dirty Harry* to a very iconic Japanese film called *Vengeance is Mine* celebrate the process of wreaking vengeance on someone who has wronged us vicariously, music videos, stories. We, in our society, almost fetishize the process of vengeance-taking. We love to know that the bad guy is going to get his or her comeuppance at the hands of the person who has been wronged.

We're in the middle of a sermon series that I have called "I do not think that means that you think it means," which is a wonderful line from a great movie called *The Princess Bride* in which a character repeatedly misuses a word. And what we're doing over this month of August is looking at some scripture phrases that are often either misquoted or misused and then unpacking their origin and what they're really about. We started off of course last week looking at the phrase from the book of Genesis, "The Lord watch between me and thee while we are parted one from another." And we're following up this week with this wonderful phrase from Deuteronomy, "The vengeance is mine,' sayeth the Lord."

### **II. The thirst for vengeance**

All of us on some level have a thirst for vengeance. It's a very natural reaction. When children begin to have conflicts with one another, the first thing that you hear them say is, "That's not fair." We're looking for fairness. We want our own justice. When someone attacks us verbally or emotionally or physically even, our immediate reaction is to lash back out at them and that's a very natural instinctual reaction that probably is very deeply rooted in our instinct for self-preservation and survival.

It also is a reflection of a desire for justice inequity in the world. There's a certain elemental rightness when a persecuted person gets to turn the tables and exact vengeance on the persecutor. And I will certainly admit that there have been plenty of movies that I have seen where the good guy did win and the bad guy got punished but

the good guy didn't actually punish the bad guy and that leaves me feeling unresolved. I wanted to see the good guy not only win but actually get to inflict the punishment on the bad guy. There's an unattractive, I'll admit, personality piece of me that feels unresolved when that happens. But of course, the passage from Deuteronomy is not a passage that is elevating and celebrating the process of vengeance. The passage in Deuteronomy is God saying to us, "Vengeance is mine," which means it's not yours. "Vengeance is not for you. Vengeance is my prerogative," says God. And we know that on some intellectual level but we still get so caught up in the emotions of it.

I was actually reading a sermon this week on this passage, "vengeance is mine," and I found a sermon on a website called *Desiring God*. And while the preacher started off very clearly noting that vengeance is God's, he moved very quickly from acknowledging that into a long description of what that vengeance looked like. So, his sermon points -- and I'm quoting his language here -- he says, "The final wrath of God is eternal, having no end." Point two, "The final wrath of God will be terrible, incredible pain." Point three, "And the wrath of God will be well deserved, totally just and right."

Now, I've got say as I read that, he seemed to be having a lot of fun enumerating all the ways that God's wrath was going to be inflicted on us, and I have to say, if you're having that much fun, you sort of probably missed the point. It also struck me parenthetically that if you're creating a website called *Desiring God*, I'm not sure that's the tack you want to take. But that's not my business, that's his. But the point is, even if we know theologically and intellectually that vengeance is God's, we still have a hard time letting go of that deep, emotional desire for it. So, why does the scripture teach us that vengeance is such a dangerous thing to seek after?

### **III. Dangers of vengeance.**

One of the reasons I think is that it is very clear the scripture understands that when we engage in seeking vengeance, we very often become the very people that we are seeking vengeance upon. That the anger and the hatred and the thirst for some retribution take seed in who we are and we start to become that thing that we hate. You see this in a lot of wonderful stories and art over history and history itself.

In Charles Dickens' wonderful story, *A Tale of Two Cities*, Dickens recounts the story of the French Revolution, and Dickens in all of his stories is very profoundly sympathetic for the under classes in his society, very sympathetic for the desperate need of the peasantry that is being trampled on by the aristocracy. But in the story after the revolution occurs and the aristocracy is overthrown, Dickens is very clear to draw quite a powerful and disturbing portrait of the peasants who are now in charge and are gleefully beheading the aristocracy with the same callousness, the same lack of care that the aristocracy had had for them. They have in many ways become the very thing that they hated. And not coincidentally, Madam Defarge who is arguably the villain of the story, has a lieutenant who has no other name than *The Vengeance*. That's what she's called, *The Vengeance*.

The 4th Century monk and theologian Pelagius wrote, "The enemy has overcome you when he makes you like himself." I like that quote. "The enemy has overcome you when he makes you like himself." And the process of vengeance is a process of becoming like the thing that we hate.

Which is why, of course, Paul is so wonderfully clear in this beautiful passage from Romans, that we can't overcome evil with evil. We've got to overcome evil with good and with love. "Do not be overcome by evil but overcome evil with good," he says, which is the second piece of why vengeance is so counterproductive. Because what Paul tells us is that when we can overcome that need to exact vengeance and engage the persecutor, engage our enemy with love and kindness and generosity of spirit, we start to change who they are. So, instead of them changing who we are, our mercy and love changes who they are.

This is exactly what this odd phrase, "pouring coals on the enemy's head," is about. If you're like me, that's an uncomfortable sounding phrase because it just sounds as though Paul -- and Jesus used the same phrase also, that Paul and Jesus are encouraging us to be passive-aggressive, which is we're going to get back at our enemies so you can get back at them by hitting them or striking them or you can get back by being nice and then you humiliate them. But that's not what this image is about. This image actually quotes Proverbs 22 which is an image of the priest is the temple, and the priest is the temple when they were offering incense before the throne of grace would pour the incense over the hot coals, over the burning coals, and the burning coals released them, the wonderful smell of incense that gets offered up to God as a gift.

So, the image is not pouring burning coals on top of someone's head to burn them. The image is that as we engage in acts of love and generosity with the people who do us wrong in the same way that the burning coals free up the incense to be a gift to God, our great offering of grace frees up our enemies to be their best selves as they offer themselves to God. So, the image is not punishing the enemy. The image is helping the enemy be who God has created them to be.

There's a wonderful line from a Samuel Wesley hymn, John Wesley's father who is also a hymn writer, and Wesley writes, "So, artists melt the sullen ore of lead by heaping coals of fire upon its head; in the kind warmth, the metal learns to glow and pure from dross, the silver runs below." Again, this beautiful image of the coals being a purifying agent who help our enemies become who God has called them to be. So, vengeance makes us like our enemies, love makes our enemies like us, like even better like God.

#### **IV. Living out a new way**

So, how do we start to counterbalance this deep need that we have for vengeance with this very clear call to avoid that? One, I want to suggest if you're at all like me, it is very easy to get caught up playing out scenarios of vengeance in your head

against those who have wronged me or wronged people I love. It's not an attractive characteristic, again I admit, but it's very easy for me to play through scenarios about how so-and-so gets their comeuppance and gets what's coming to them. And dear friends, while it often feels like the thoughts that play in our heads have a life of their own, we actually have control over them. We can channel how our minds are moving. We can stop negative cycles of thinking.

So, when we get caught up in those patterns of thinking through thoughts of anger and vengeance and violence, we can stop that. We can interrupt those thinking, that mode of thinking. We can distract ourselves. We can pray and invite the Holy Spirit to come in and help us move our minds and thoughts in different directions. Because part of what happens, part of the appeal of violence is that it takes root in us and as we start living out of those fantasies, there's a greater and greater chance that they become realities. So, just stop the thinking. Move our thoughts into a different avenue and let God release us from the power of those thoughts.

The second thing is, as I mentioned, we live in a society that in many ways fetishizes violence and vengeance, and while we can argue and believe that watching movies that celebrate vengeance, listening to music that celebrates vengeance, while you can argue that that doesn't really affect who I am, I can keep some distance, the reality is that the media we absorb shapes who we become. It just does. It's muscle memory. If we fill our minds and eyes and ears with thoughts and images of vengeance and violence, that starts to become more normal for us.

I am not in any way suggesting that we should live in a society that limits what we watch but I am suggesting we can self-limit. We can choose to fill our minds and hearts with images and ideas that build us up rather than appeal to our most basic instinctual dark side. That's a choice we make. We decide whether or not we're going to watch *Dirty Harry* or not or turn to a different channel. We have control over that and all of the media impacts who we are and how we engage one another in the world. So, you all know me, I'm not being prudish about this. I'm just saying we all eat junk food, we just don't need to live off of it, right? So, bring some intentionality to the media that we consume.

Lastly, I want to suggest that we as a national community could stop practicing vengeance as a national policy, and I'm talking about obviously the death penalty. Dear friends, it's so clear. We all know that the death penalty in our country is inequitably and unjustly applied. It is applied in profoundly discriminatory ways. We know that. We also know that as wonderful as our justice system is, as a powerful a model as it is for the world, it still makes mistakes. And when a justice system makes mistakes and you have the death penalty, people die tragically and unnecessarily. We also all know that the death penalty provides no deterrent to crime. The statistics on this are crystal clear. There is no deterrent value to the death penalty. We also know there is no economic value to the death penalty because it costs our system more to execute someone than to imprison them for life. We also know that there's some

pretty interesting and dramatic studies that for families who have been the victims of crime, seeing the perpetrators executed provides little to no emotional comfort.

So, I want to suggest the only reason we have a death penalty, the only reason we have a death penalty, is our need for vengeance. That's it. And we saw that in a lot of the conversations in the media this week around the trial of James Holmes and you heard the prosecutor in that case say that death would have been the just response. Now, I get that emotionally. I completely understand the desire to see someone experience the ultimate punishment for the crimes that he committed. I get that emotionally. But the only reason the death penalty makes any sense is because of this deep need to extract vengeance. And the scriptures are so clear that that's not who we are called to be. That when we as a society engage in the quest for vengeance, we as a community become that thing that we abhor and we fall below the high calling that God has laid on us. It's time that we made the decision that makes sense and abolish this across our country.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

“Vengeance is mine,” sayeth the Lord. It's a line that gets echoed and trumpeted in multiple ways, from churches, in movies, in literature, as a way of solemnizing our own desire for vengeance. But our scripture passage is clear that what the verse is about is a reminder that vengeance is only God's and that whenever we seek to take God's role, something is bound to get fouled up. Rather, this verse and Paul's wonderful words from Romans are an invitation to us to allow God to bring out the best in who we are as we turn away from violence and offer love and reconciliation to those who are our enemies and in that way also bring out the best in them.

Amen.