

BIBLE STUDIES FOR LIFE

Sermon Series: Pressure Points

To be used with: Session Five, The Pressure of Retaliation

Sermon Title Possibilities:

Room for Revenge?

Best Served Cold... or Not Served At All?

Scripture: Matthew 5:38-42; Matthew 26:50-54, 65-68

Connection to Unit Theme: While small groups are studying Pressure Points from the book of James, this sermon series is examining pressure points in the life of Jesus. As a human being, Jesus faced every pressure we face, and on a much deeper level. And since Jesus is the only perfect human being that has ever existed, we know that He never once caved in to pressure in any of the areas we are studying. How interesting that James was Jesus' half-brother, which means He had a front-row seat to how Jesus dealt with pressure.

Introduction:

One of the most highly rated TV shows of the last couple of years is ABC's *Revenge*. It is a trashy nighttime soap opera about a beautiful young woman whose father was unjustly imprisoned (and later murdered in prison) when she was a child. Now, as an adult, she has returned to the Hamptons to destroy the lives of everyone who was involved. And also, apparently, to wear expensive clothes, go to lavish parties, and do all the things people in trashy nighttime soap operas typically do. I'm not recommending the show. But there is a reason it's so popular. Revenge sells. From *Kill Bill* to *True Grit* to *Star Wars* to *The Count of Monte Cristo*, stories of people who are driven by revenge touch something deep within us. We all want to see justice done for past wrongs. We all have fantasies of seeing someone who has hurt us get what's coming to them. You've heard the phrase, "Revenge is a dish best served cold." The implication of that phrase is that revenge is sweeter when the revenge-seeker is patient—biding his or her time, waiting until all the pieces are in place, and then striking.

But as Christ followers, we have to ask the question, "is revenge really a dish best served cold, or is it best not to serve it at all?" In small groups this week, you have been talking about the pressure of retaliation. It's ironic that the main point of the session is "When someone wrongs you, respond with patient endurance." Because the world would probably agree with the "patient endurance" point, provided you will eventually get some sort of payback. Is that what the biblical writer meant when he told his audience of young Christians who were being persecuted, "You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts, because the Lord's coming is near." In other words, what are we being patient for: the right time for us to carry out revenge, or the right time for God to carry out His plans?

As we have throughout this series, we're going to look at what Jesus said and did as our example. Let's first look at what Jesus said in Matthew 5:38-42. Then we'll look at what Jesus did the night He was arrested and put on trial, and undoubtedly faced the pressure to retaliate.

[Read Matthew 5:38-42]

1. Reject What Is Acceptable: Jesus' teaching here about turning the other cheek is the fifth of six times in the Sermon on the Mount in which Jesus took traditional interpretations of the law ("You have heard it said") and gave a radical reinterpretation for His followers ("But I say to you). In this case, the issue was the limits of retaliation. The Old Testament teaching of "an eye for an eye" was intended to set a ceiling on how much someone could retaliate. When Moses

gave the Israelites this standard (Exodus 21:24; Leviticus 24:19-20; Deut. 19:21), keep in mind that previously there had not been any limits to revenge. Someone puts out your eye in a fight? You put out both of theirs. You lose a tooth in parking lot brawl? Burn their house down. “An eye for an eye” wasn’t the minimum. It was the maximum of what was acceptable.

But this didn’t mean it was required. This is where Jesus changed the game. For Jesus’ followers, mercy and grace are appropriate ways to respond to those who have wronged us. You know the definitions: Mercy is withholding punishment from someone who deserves it. Grace is lavishing gifts on someone who doesn’t deserve it. Jesus suggests that this is how we can and should respond to those who hurt us. Why? Because that is how God has responded to us.

2. Respond With Grace

Jesus gave three examples of “going the extra mile” when it comes to our enemies. In fact, one of them is where we actually get our phrase “go the extra mile.”

- *Turn the other cheek.* According to the NIV Study Bible notes, the Greek verb here implied slapping someone in the face as an insult more than enduring physical violence. His point was that it was better to endure being insulted twice than to escalate the violence [Note to pastors: this is helpful in offering a word of counsel to people in abusive relationships. Women who are being physically abused shouldn’t interpret this verse to mean they have to stay and take it.]
- *Give them the tunic and the cloak.* The tunic was an inner garment. The cloak was an outer garment. Old Testament law prohibited someone from taking a man’s outer garment (Ex. 22:26-27) since it provided protection from the elements. But Jesus taught His followers that their security and protection would come from their heavenly Father, and not from the clothes they had in their closet (Mt. 6:28-31)
- *Go the second mile.* In Jesus’ day, a Roman soldier had the right to press any Israelite into carrying his pack for him up to one mile. But when they are representing Jesus, the Christian citizen goes above and beyond what is required.

All of these are grace responses. Remember our definition of grace: a gift to one who doesn’t deserve it. Every time we respond with grace instead of revenge, we remind ourselves of what Christ did on our behalf. And we also show Christ to a watching world.

3. Remember Christ’s Example

Jesus didn’t just present an abstract ideal to His followers. All of this would come across as pretty empty and unrealistic if He hadn’t acted this way Himself. So let’s end our time together by paying attention to what Jesus actually did when He was in a situation in which He could have lashed out and taken revenge.

[Read Matthew 26:50-54, 65-68]

Let’s just put aside any interpretation of Jesus as a weak pacifist who let people walk all over Him. His words in verse 53 are an incredible picture of strength under control. Jesus did not seek revenge or retaliation because He knew that there was a greater purpose to what He was going

through. Had He called “ten thousand angels” to come to His assistance in the garden, Scripture would not have been fulfilled, and our redemption would not have been made possible. In the same way, if we take matters into our own hands when someone else is mistreating us, we may be short-circuiting a bigger plan has in mind for us.

Conclusion: The reason there is pressure to retaliate in the first place is because we don’t want anyone to think we are weak. But when we pay attention to Christ’s example, we understand that the refusal to retaliate shows more strength than lashing out against someone does. Maybe you have been holding a grudge against someone for a long time, and you are just waiting for the right time to take him down. Let me encourage you to keep on waiting. Romans 12:19-21 says,

Friends, do not avenge yourselves; instead, leave room for His wrath. For it is written: Vengeance belongs to Me; I will repay, says the Lord. But If your enemy is hungry, feed him. If he is thirsty, give him something to drink. For in so doing you will be heaping fiery coals on his head. Do not be conquered by evil, but conquer evil with good.

[Romans 12:19-21 HCSB]

Revenge isn’t a dish best served cold. It is best not served at all.

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