

Avenging Ourselves, Self-Defense, and Subjection to Authority – Part 1, Avenging Ourselves

Avenging one's self is not an act of self-defense. It is an act of retribution. It is wrong for any man, Christians included, to avenge themselves. The desire to avenge ourselves results from hatred and anger. Jesus reiterates the truth that we are never to seek retribution. Vengeance belongs to the Lord. In time, He will settle every wrong that His people have suffered. In Re.6.9 there is an heavenly scene where those who had been murdered at the hands of lawful authority (the horsemen) cry out to the Lord to avenge their deaths.

Re.6.9 ¶ And when he had opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of them that were slain for the word of God, and for the testimony which they held:

10 And they cried with a loud voice, saying, How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth?

The bulk of the witness of Scripture referencing the deaths of the saints is not of the independent or mob-related acts of violence, but almost always concerns their wrongfully death by the powers of lawful authority. For example, in the book of Revelation the deaths of the saints is always at the hands of lawful authority. This authority is literally spoken of as kings, or the same is represented as beasts, or horns. The saints of God did nothing to warrant capital punishment. Follow through a number of examples from Scripture which teaches the evils of retribution.

First, avenging ourselves creates a vicious cycle of violence. In Jud. 14.20-15.8 Samson, because he was a judge in Israel, was justified for avenging himself of the Philistines. He was God's ordained authority for Israel. But as individuals we are forbidden to seek retribution for wrongs suffered.

Jud.14.20 But Samson's wife was given to his companion, whom he had used as his friend.

15.1 ¶ But it came to pass within a while after, in the time of wheat harvest, that Samson visited his wife with a kid; and he said, I will go in to my wife into the chamber. But her father would not suffer him to go in.

2 And her father said, I verily thought that thou hadst utterly hated her; therefore I gave her to thy companion: is not her younger sister fairer than she? take her, I pray thee, instead of her.

3 And Samson said concerning them, Now shall I be more blameless than the Philistines, though I do them a displeasure.

4 And Samson went and caught three hundred foxes, and took firebrands, and turned tail to tail, and put a firebrand in the midst between two tails.

5 And when he had set the brands on fire, he let them go into the standing corn of the Philistines, and burnt up both the shocks, and also the standing corn, with the vineyards and olives.

6 Then the Philistines said, Who hath done this? And they answered, Samson, the son in law of the Timnite, because he had taken his wife, and given her to his companion. And the Philistines came up, and burnt her and her father with fire.

7 And Samson said unto them, Though ye have done this, yet will I be avenged of you, and after that I will cease.

8 And he smote them hip and thigh with a great slaughter: and he went down and dwelt in the top of the rock Etam.

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This is like the feud in the back hills of Kentucky between the Hatfields and the McCoys. Avenging is giving *tip for tap*. It is blow for blow. Hit me and I'll hit you. It is retaliation. It is an action done intentionally to punish another because he did something to wrong me. That is the meaning of *avenging ourselves*. The word of God warns His people in all ages against avenging themselves.

Le 19:18 Thou shalt not avenge, nor bear any grudge against the children of thy people, but thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself: I am the LORD.

Ro 12:19 Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord.

Second, in Mt. 5.20-42, in Jesus' day there was a religious sect in Israel called the Pharisees. They had perverted the word of God on several points. Jesus addressed some of these points in this chapter as He instructed His disciples. He prefaced this section with this warning to His disciples: *Mt 5:20 For I say unto you, That except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven.* There are six errors which follow this warning to His disciples. Each are indicated with words to the effect of, '*ye have heard that it was said.*' (Mt.5.21, 27, 31, 33, 38, and 43) And what does this say? If the righteousness of these religionists is the best that we can do we have a serious, spiritual defect. We haven't the grace of God working in us. It is the fifth error which refers to avenging ourselves.

*Mt 5:38 Ye have heard that it hath been said, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth:
39 But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also.
40 And if any man will sue thee at the law, and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloke also.
41 And whosoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him twain.
42 Give to him that asketh thee, and from him that would borrow of thee turn not thou away.*

Christ teaches us against *personal retaliation* for any injustice suffered. The words *An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth* are what the LORD spoke to Israel, and are recorded in three places in the Old Testament. (cf. Ex.21.24; Lev.24.20; Deu.19.21) There the judges of Israel were to be depended upon to settle such matters. For this reason Mt.5.38-42 directs the disciples to defer personal retaliation for any injustice suffered. Every example Christ cites in this place must be interpreted in that context. Look at each citation.

- There are only two examples in the N.T. of anyone being smitten on the cheek. Both Christ and Paul suffered an injustice at the hands of *someone* hiding behind a badge of authority. (Mt.26.67; Acts 23.3) We should not seek revenge against him.
- An injustice was maintained by the court against us. We should not retaliate against that person.

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- Roman soldiers forced the man of Cyrene to bear Christ's cross to the place of execution by the authorities. (Mt.27.32; Mk.15.21) Someone abuses his power over. Do not seek retribution. And finally,
- We suffer an injustice from someone to whom we *lent* something. Do not repay evil.

In short, when the disciples of Christ suffer injustices do not seek revenge. The Lord Jesus teaches us not to take matters into our own hands. Mark this: *personal* retaliation comes from hate, wrath, anger, and enmity. This is what distinguishes retribution from self-defense. In an act of self-defense there is no hate, wrath, anger, and enmity involved.

Our Lord reset the truth of God's word. The Scribes and Pharisees made the Israelites a bunch of rebels. This caused the nation of Israel much trouble during the time of Roman domination. (Acts 5.34-37, Theudas & Judas of Galilee) Our Lord subjects His people, His disciples, back to those in authority. By so doing He maintains the original intent of the Law which deferred acts of vengeance to the judges.

Three, Christians have right to seek redress by civil authorities. Being a Christian does not exempt them from the protections afforded them under the laws that govern society. Twice the apostle Paul used his protections as a Roman citizen. (Acts 22.28) In Philippi, which was a *Roman colony*, because the authorities had wrongfully beaten him being un-condemned, he *demande*d that they come and personally release him from the prison that they had committed him to. And they did come and release him. (cf. Acts 16:37-39) Paul had legal protections as a Roman citizen that had been violated. There is no doubt in my mind that Paul could have done much more. Again later, being held for a couple years under house arrest in Caesarea, seeing the ill influence that the religious leaders had over the Roman authorities, he finally made an appeal to the highest court in Rome, Caesar. (Acts 25.11) He was granted his appeal. (Acts 25.12) However, even appeals to the proper authorities do not guarantee that justice will be done. (Mt.5.40, *if any man will sue thee at the law, and take away thy coat ...*) In the end, Paul suffered martyrdom for the gospel of Christ at the hand of God's ordained authority. The Lord will avenge the wrongful death of Paul.

Fourth, a number of examples can be cited proving that personal acts of retribution were wrong. The Scriptures show how the apostle Paul threatened the high priest on one occasion. In Acts 23.2-5 the high priest had commanded him to be smitten. Paul responded to him by saying, *God shall smite thee, thou whited wall: for sittest thou to judge me after the law, and commandest me to be smitten contrary to the law?* Paul knew that he was wrong and quoted Scripture which condemned this act. (Acts 23.4, 5) See also 1Sa.25.26, 32, 33, 39 where Abigail was used of the Lord to keep David back from sinning by avenging himself.

King Saul hated David. David has done nothing against the king. David was a faithful servant and aid to the king. Though he suffered wrongfully at the hands of his king he *refused to avenge himself* by laying his hands upon him, though he had opportunity to do so. David said to king Saul,

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1Sa 24:12 The LORD judge between me and thee, and the LORD avenge me of thee: but mine hand shall not be upon thee.

13 As saith the proverb of the ancients, Wickedness proceedeth from the wicked: but mine hand shall not be upon thee.

In Luke chapter 18 a widow woman in Israel was being wronged by someone. Rather than avenging herself she properly resorted to a judge in the city that had the authority to resolve her wrongful suffering. She sought the right course of action for settling this matter. But what if the judge decided against her? By the word of God she could do nothing more. She must suffer the wrong. (*if any man sue thee at the law, and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloke also.*)

Lk. 18.2 Saying, There was in a city a judge, which feared not God, neither regarded man:

3 And there was a widow in that city; and she came unto him, saying, Avenge me of mine adversary.

...

7 And shall not God avenge his own elect, which cry day and night unto him, though he bear long with them?

In the nation of Israel the LORD set up cities of refuge to protect its citizens from shedding innocent blood. (Nu.35.11, 12, 15, 22-24; Jos.20.3-9)

Ex 21:13 And if a man lie not in wait, but God deliver him into his hand; then I will appoint thee a place whither he shall flee.

This death was an accidental death. It was not the result of hatred, ambush, or enmity. (Nu.35.22) Avenging the accidental death of this man would be to shed innocent blood. To protect the innocent in such an instance there were appointed in Israel cities of refuge. In these cities the *revenger of blood* may not come to avenge that death.

In conclusion, avenging not ourselves is not just a Christian concept. A properly governed society is discouraged by its laws against taking matters of this sort into their hands. Victims that become vigilantes can be punished by the law. No matter what the world does, Jesus instructs us to order our lives according to His word. When we receive wrongful judgments from those who should have done right, never retaliate. When those in authority render unjust judgments we must suffer the wrong. Jesus Christ will right every wrong that His children have suffered. He has the last word. Until then,

1Pe 4:16 Yet if any man suffer as a Christian, let him not be ashamed; but let him glorify God on this behalf.