

JUSTICE VERSES REVENGE VERSES FORGIVENESS

Romans 12:19, Ecclesiastes 8:11

By Raymond White

Whenever we say the word revenge in any context, we think of it as bad. While justice, on the other hand, we think of as good — unless justice is targeted at ourselves then justice is bad and forgiveness is good.

My problem with these two words, justice and revenge, is that it's hard to see a sensible distinction between them. Why is justice good and revenge bad? What's the difference? Both are getting even, exacting retribution, restoring balance — aren't they?

The only difference I've ever noticed between the two is that justice has society's approval while revenge is personal. Other than that, they are the same thing. In other words, if society and the law approve an act of retribution, then the retribution is justice which is good. But if society and the law do not approve, then the retribution is revenge which is bad.

What's in view here is consensus — the agreement or common consent of society to take retribution against crime or other misbehavior.

Here's the point: Retribution, by its very nature, is necessarily drastic. And because it is, if we're going to do it, we feel the need to agree together that it's the right thing to do. Because it is drastic, we want to assure ourselves that it is appropriate, and what assures us that retribution is appropriate is common consent, or social consensus. And that, we call law.

This is necessary. Without social consensus, i.e. law, we can end up with blood feuds such as the Hatfields and McCoys of West Virginia.

In the novel "The Corsican Brothers" by Alexandre Dumas, the notion of vendetta (a fancy word for revenge) was the ethical code that drove families to kill each other. What they needed to stop the madness was a new French law that would make vendetta illegal, which is what the story is about.

We need law and courts. Why? To exact justice, of course, but also to reign in justice so that retribution is *only* justice and not an endless cycle of revenge and ever escalating vendetta.

We need a justice system to restrain violence, or the fabric of society unravels. Christians sometimes criticize the Mosaic law's "eye for an eye" justice as being harsh without compassion. That's an unfair criticism. What's harsh without compassion is the "eye for a loaf of bread" justice that was commonly meted out then, and in some places even today. If you've read about the horrors of honor killings for example, you will have a sense of unjust justice.

There is another reason why revenge is generally bad, and that's because sometimes revenge is not revenge at all, but an act of criminal violence pretending to be revenge. A perpetrator may say, "He did this to me so I got even." Well, maybe. Or maybe he's lying and just trying to masquerade his crime. Determining the facts is the job of courts, and they are tasked to get it right. That's why the ninth commandment:

Exodus 20:16 Thou shalt not bear false witness ...

Law is powerful, God gave it real teeth, law can punish and law can kill, and with God's blessing. That is why God put this bridle on it: no perjury allowed.

Does the Bible speak about this distinction between justice and revenge? Yes, it does — in one of the most misunderstood and misapplied verses in the Bible

Roman 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.*

What does this verse have to do with justice? Isn't it about forgiveness? Most people think this verse is about forgiveness, but they're wrong.

True, the Bible says a lot about forgiveness. That's a major part of the Christian faith. Jesus said, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." Stephen said, "Lay not this sin to their charge." But that is not the point of this verse in Romans 12. Here is what the verse says.

[1] AVENGE WHO?

The verse says "avenge not *yourselves*." It does not say don't avenge others. I certainly have the right to forgive the man who murders me, but that does not give me the right to forgive the man who murders *you*. I can forgive a debt that is owed *to me*, but I have no right forgiving debts that are owed *to you*. Do I? Think about that. Can I forgive you of the mortgage you owe your bank? Or the taxes you owe the IRS? I think you'd have trouble convincing either your bank or the IRS that you shouldn't have to pay them because I forgave your debts.

If you are a murder victim, you have every right to demand justice. Now, Stephen did not demand justice but that was his choice. You might not be as forgiving as Stephen. Whether you forgive or not is *your* decision to make, not my decision to make for you. It is not my right to let your murderer off the hook and call it Christian kindness. That's not kindness at all, that's judicial abuse which too many judges and juries are guilty of.

I remember hearing a story of a young missionary girl who traveled to Africa and was murdered by four thugs. The government there arrested the four and sentenced them to die. And they would have, but the girl's parents, in their mis-application of Christian love, traveled to Africa and demanded that the four be released. And they were.

Here's the problem: *they* were not the murder victim, someone else was, their daughter. Justice was appropriate and those parents had no right to do what they did. I would like to know if those four thugs have murdered since then. More missionary girls perhaps? If so, where's the justice for them?

[2] WHOSE WRATH?

"Give place unto wrath" is generally understood to mean God's wrath. In other words, don't avenge yourself, let God avenge you.

What kind of forgiveness is that? — to say, "Go get 'em, God. *You* avenge me." Jesus and Stephen would wince at that kind of thinking. Forgiveness is not transferring the job of vengeance to God, it's asking God to acquit them.

And besides, there is no reason to believe that “wrath” means “God’s wrath.” It might mean that, but it might not. It could just as well mean, “Let someone *else* get even for you.” Just who, is not made clear, not yet anyway.

[3] WHOSE VENGEANCE?

Now to the point. What exactly does “vengeance is mine; I will repay” mean? Most Christians think “vengeance is mine” means that God in heaven will exact some kind of vague retribution like a cold perhaps, or business failure, or a divorce, or wait for the final judgment to exact vengeance, or maybe not at all, ever. Nothing like that is true.

To understand what “vengeance is mine” means, we must first understand that the Greek text does not include chapter headings. The words “Chapter 13” in your Bible do not occur in Paul’s inspired letter, they were added by modern translators to make reading easier for us. This is so obvious that it seems silly to have to mention.

You might ask, so what? The so what is that there is no separation between chapters 12 and 13, or any other chapters. The letter flows continuously from beginning to end without chapter headings. That’s the way Paul wrote it and that’s how we should read it. The problem is that chapter headings disturb the flow and alters the meaning. Read properly, straight through, we get an entirely different meaning.

Here’s the text taken together, well, enough of it to get the true sense of it.

***Roman 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. **13:1** Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God. **:4** For he is the minister of God to thee for good. But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain: for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil.*

This is not two subjects: forgiveness and civil law. This is one subject: civil law.

Who are the “higher powers” and who is the “minister of God”?

The “higher powers” are not God and his angels, but the government and its ministers; that is, the courts and its officers: the judge, the jury, the police, and the executioner. Each of those is a “minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath.” That is why he, “beareth not the sword (or gun or noose) in vain.”

Therefore, when God says, “avenge not yourselves” and “vengeance is mine,” he doesn’t mean don’t seek or expect justice, he means don’t be a vigilante seeking revenge, but instead use the courts to seek justice. That’s what the courts are for, why God created them, to be his ministers to avenge you so you do not have to avenge yourself. In other words, rely on the law and the legal system to exact justice.

[4] YOUR TURN

Christians particularly need to understand this when they are called to jury duty. A Christian juror might easily think, “I’m a Christian, so I should forgive this thug and acquit him even though he is guilty of battery or rape or murder.”

Such misplaced forgiveness is not an act of kindness but an act of injustice, and a juror who does that makes himself an accomplice of the criminal's crimes. Further, such judicial foolishness makes society, not a kind and gentle place but a vicious and cruel place. That's why God gave us law and courts, to reduce, as far as possible, crime and all its myriad forms of violence. If we set justice aside for the sake of forgiveness, the world will become a far more evil place than it already is.

Ecclesiastes 8:11 Because sentence against an evil work is not executed speedily, therefore the heart of the sons of men is fully set in them to do evil.