

Rejecting Revenge: The Radical Call of the Redeemer — Pastor Sherwin Kwon

Thank you all. It's really a joy and a privilege and a treat for me to be here. So thanks for having me. And I want to talk to you about a topic that I think is really important for our lives, for our witness as well as followers of Jesus Christ. And I want to start off by sharing a story, something that happened not too long ago. One day we were walking the streets of South Philly, the neighborhood where we live, and me, my wife, and my four kids were just crossing the crosswalk. And a biker came speeding towards us very quickly. And perhaps it was his irritation or frustration at having to slow down. He had generated a lot of speed and having to slow down now for a very slow family crossing the walk. He decided not to slow down. And so close to top speed, he veered around us, but narrowly missing my little son just by an inch, causing him to be really startled and jumped to the side. And so you can imagine I decided in that moment to call out to him and offer some constructive criticism I'll put it that way.

And without missing a beat, he just turned his head to me and cursed me and my family, and he kept on going. And in that moment, a powerful He finally just washed over me. I was just gripped by this very primal, overwhelming urge. And the urge was to gently put down my bag, sprint after him on foot, and just get him. And I'm here to tell you I didn't do that. But I wish I could say the reason I didn't do that was because cooler head prevailed. I wish I could say that the reason I didn't do that was because I decided to let him go. But the only reason I didn't do that was he was on wheels and I was on foot. I have dad strength, but I don't have young man speed like I'm sure some of you do. So that's why I let him go.

But I share that because what I was overwhelmed by in that moment, it is something that I have no doubt every single one of you has felt before, perhaps recently. It's one of the single most universally relatable, one of the most common emotions, feelings, experiences that a human being can have every time, every place in history. It's something that pops up in everyday little moments. It's something that can last in our hearts and our minds if we let it for decades. It is something that can be one of the hardest things that we may have to deal with in life, if that's part of your story, the story that God gives you. And unless we deal with it, it can really derail our lives. And I'm talking about revenge. Just revenge. And I'd like to talk to you today about it, but more specifically, what I want to do is talk to you about what Jesus said about that. And the passage that you heard Jess read, let's hear some of that again.

Matthew 5, these are the words of Jesus. "You've heard it was said, an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. But I say to you, do not resist the one who's evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. And if anyone forces you to go one mile, you go within two miles. Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you."

Now, what is Jesus teaching us here? What is he saying? Well, to begin with, he teaches us about how people back then thought about revenge. And he quotes in verse 38, an Old Testament law that's cited in several places in the Old Testament, "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." And it's a law that pertains to cases where some damage is done, maybe two

people get in a fight and one person gets really hurt, or somebody's property or livestock is accidentally injured. Cases where something wrong has been done by a wrongdoer, this law was put in place back to limit and restrain retaliation and revenge. That was the point of the law.

So for example, one of the great stories, I think, in history of just crazy revenge and retaliation is Genghis Khan. Genghis Khan was a 13th century Mongol ruler who, after an insult, he was just assaulted by a neighboring king of a neighboring kingdom, Genghis Khan retaliated by launching a massive military campaign against this nation, laid waste to their cities and towns, massacred their population, and practically wipe them off the face of the Earth. That was Genghis Khan. And to restrain the inner Genghis Khan that's in all of us, that's what this law was, an eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth. The point of it was to limit people in doing what we're so prone to do whenever we are wronged or when we suffer loss at the hands of somebody else: to seek revenge. When we were wronged, that desire to get even, that desire to, oh, you're going to pay for what you did, that desire is so strong that can utterly be unleashed to degrees that are inappropriate. And so eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth. It's a principle that the retribution and compensation to somebody I hurt, a victim of mine, the retribution and the compensation should be equivalent to the amount of the injury sustained. So it's not like an eye for a tooth, but it's an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. That was the purpose of the law to restrain. What do you mean?

But in Jesus' time, that law was known, but the heart of the law was twisted. Indeed, in that time, in Jesus' time, when the law was quoted, it was often quoted to tell people, Hey, you can go up to this amount. You can get your tooth. Go get your eye. Go get what belongs to you. So it became some way to justify revenge, a way to justify it to the maximum allowable degree. And by contrast, how does Jesus want us to think about revenge? Well, he says, in contrast, "I say to you, do not resist the one who is evil." And what does that mean? And he unpacks that by giving us four mini stories, four mini illustrations. The first one is this. "If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also." Meaning, in life, I want you to be so completely non-retaliatory, so not vengeful, that you not only refrain from payback, you not only refrain from getting even, but you're also willing to absorb even more. This is the words of Jesus.

Secondly, in verse 40, Jesus says, "If anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well." Meaning, not only be willing to let go, but also be willing to let go beyond what they ask, beyond even what they may be entitled to. Thirdly, Jesus says, "If anyone forces you to go one mile," you don't want to go, but they force you to go a mile, right? And you do it and you feel like you've met the end of your obligation. I've done what you've asked me. I've gone the mile with you. Jesus says, "go with him, two." Not only oblige somebody with what they ask, which they may not even deserve, but go beyond even what they ask, further into what they don't deserve.

Fourthly, "give to the one who begs from you, do not refuse the one who would borrow from you." Jesus is saying, don't exercise the right to refuse. But even beyond that, give. And you put that all together. You put it all together and you sum that up. There's a negative thing that Jesus wants his people, us, to not do, and something positive that he does want us to do. Jesus says,

when people wrong you, do nothing, do not a single thing out of a spirit of revenge. When people wrong you, do nothing to them with a hint of retaliation or revenge. And not only that, not only do you refuse revenge on them, Jesus says, go further and give to them what they might not deserve, your kindness and your goodwill. Jesus is saying, and these are the words of our savior, he is forbidding revenge and retaliation from his people, and he's commanding good, goodwill and kindness, even to those who wrong us.

This is the commands of Jesus. Now, that raises a question, does it not? Does Jesus want us to be doormats? Isn't there a danger in turning the other cheek that we just invite people to run all over us and just walk all over us? And the answer to that is no, because you look at the example in life of Jesus himself. Jesus all the time resisted evil. All the time, he opposed evil. He all the time named evil for what it was and called it out. In our lives as well, oftentimes when we are wronged, it may often be our duty to confront, to rebuke, to stop it, to call people to account, to set boundaries. Very hard, harsh things we may be called to do. But the point is this, that whatever it is that we do, we never do it with the slightest bitter revenge in our hearts. That we never do anything to gratify the bitterness, to gratify the urge to chase down that biker, we never do anything to gratify that bitterness we feel from being wrong. We never pay back people for what they've done. We are not allowed to if you're a follower of Jesus Christ. We're not allowed to respond with hate, contempt, retaliation, or revenge. We are only allowed to respond out of love and goodwill. Sometimes with love and goodwill that they may not take as love and goodwill, but nonetheless, in the ways we might need to respond, we are to do so, even pitying them for their brokenness more than we are lamenting our injury and our loss. That's the heart that Jesus wants us to have.

So Jesus doesn't want us to be doormats, but he wants us to be anvils. Anvils that no matter how many times a hammer falls on it, the anvil doesn't hit back and it doesn't change. Anvils who renounce and forego the various forms of revenge and retaliation, physical retaliation, just getting them physically for what they've done to us. Verbal retaliation, attacking the minds and feelings of those who wrong us to punish them with bitter and demeaning words. Even social retaliation, seeking to lower their standing in other people's eyes to harm their reputations because we're mad at them and we want to see them hurt for how they hurt us. But to sum it all up, what Jesus wants of us is the people who so completely refuse revenge, so not consumed by that, that we never retaliate, that we never return evil for evil, that when injured, we refuse to think of ways to get even, but instead think of the highest welfare of those who wrong us.

That's what Jesus wants, and that is the standard. Now, that is a lot easier said than done. It's one thing to say and talk about turning the other cheek, but what do you do when the biker narrowly misses your son and he turns and insults you rather than acknowledging and apologizing? It's easier said than done. And God knows that. Jesus knows that, which is why Scripture doesn't just give us a standard. The Bible offers to us a Savior who loves us, who is with us, and is at work in us to help us. And Jesus helps us in a couple of ways. And these are uniquely Christian resources.

The world can talk about, turn the other cheek. As Christians, we have a savior who actually strengthens us to do so. How so? Well, when we're wronged, we get our eyes on Jesus. We lift our eyes to him. This is really important because when you and I are wronged, we may think and feel that no one gets it. No one understands. Like the outrage I have, the bitterness I feel, you don't get it. If you had been through what I had been through, you'd feel exactly the way I do, but you haven't. That's why you don't. You don't get it. You don't understand. But you got to realize as a believer in Jesus Christ that those very words can never be said to Jesus. Jesus totally understands because he totally went through it. 1 Peter 2, "he committed no sin. Neither was the seed found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return. When he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to the one who judges justly." Jesus was slandered, he was reviled. He was so hated. Jesus was so hated by people that people literally lurked around him, hearing his words, paying very close attention to all his words, not to take notes, but to figure out a way to trap him. To get him in trouble, to get him killed. And Jesus, at the end, we know that he was sold out by a confidante. He was abandoned by his friends. He was brought up with false charges, charges that stuck. He was wrongly convicted, stripped naked, physically beaten, publicly humiliated before people in the worst torturous death execution possible: a Roman cross, a death stick.

And how did Jesus respond to all that? Never once did a hint of revenge come out of his lips. Never once did he repay evil with evil. He was so not bitter. He was so not retaliatory. In fact, on the cross, we see the opposite. We see mercy flowing from him for the very ones who were killing him. He prayed, "Father, forgive them. They know not what they do." He's pleading for the Father to have mercy on the ones who are murdering him. This is Jesus.

And so the cross of Jesus Christ, the greatest display of non-revenge the world has ever seen, the Christian can never say, no one gets it. No one understands. But indeed, as Christians, we know that our savior, when he commands us to not take revenge, the command is coming from somebody who does get it. It's not coming from somebody who has no idea what it means to hurt, no idea what it means to be wronged the way we've been wronged. Jesus himself sees, knows, understands. We can trust his commands. He gets it. We can listen to him.

We get our eyes on Jesus. But also when we're wronged as Christians, we follow in his steps. We follow in his steps. Years ago, there was a heavy snowfall overnight, and my kids wanted to go out into the yard. And so we put on all our gear and we went out. But the problem was there was so much snow, and my kids were very little at the time. They couldn't navigate it. The snow was coming up to their hips almost. So how do they get to their yard? Well, what I did was, and I went ahead of them in my snow gear in my boots, and I deliberately planted these big boot prints in the yard to the path to the playground where they wanted to go. I went ahead of them and I called them, okay, you see, guys, where I stepped? You see the prints? Hop into the footprints. Follow me in this way. And they did with their little boots and their little legs, they were clambering into the bootprint to the next one. And that's how they made their way to the playground where the slopes were, where they wanted to go sledding.

And that, if you're a follower of Jesus Christ, it is a picture of your life as well. When you suffer wrongdoing, every time you up for wrongdoing, what is happening? What is happening? This is really important because whenever we're wronged, a spirit of revenge can say, there's no way that God wants me to have this life. There's no way that this was supposed to happen. This was not part of the script, God, right? And that can fuel the bitterness and the revenge. But the Christian believer knows this, "to this you've been called," 1 Peter 2, "because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example that you might follow in his steps." For the Christian believer then, when we suffer wrong, every time you have suffered wrong, you know what's happening? You are following your captain. You're following your savior, and you're just hopping into the footsteps of the one who went before you. You are experiencing in that moment union with your savior. Your savior who's leading you, your savior who's calling you to know him.

When we experience wrong, the first point I said before, he understands, he gets it. But even beyond that, when we experience wrong, you know what happens? When we look to Christ and seek to follow him and to not take retaliation, we are actually beginning to learn more about him. We're experiencing a fellowship of His sufferings. We're getting to know him better. We're getting to know the depths of his character, his love for us better. That's what is happening. So when we're wrong, we follow in his steps. Revenge is a stiff arm to Jesus. It's a refusal to know Jesus in these ways.

Now, for the sake of time, I'm just going to get to the last story. There's a lot of other stuff I wanted to talk about, but I trust the Lord. I'm going to get to the last story. The story I want to share is a story by Corrie Ten Boom, who was a Christian woman, a Dutch Christian, whose family helped hide Jews from the Nazis during World War II. Her family was discovered, and they were sent to a concentration camp in Germany. Their whole family, Corrie, along with her sister, Betsey. And though Betsey died there, Corrie eventually was released. And after the war, Corrie traveled around Europe sharing her story and sharing about her obedience and love and her faith in Jesus.

And in her book, *The Hiding Place*, she describes how during one of her speaking engagements in Germany, she recognized one of the former guards at the Ravensbruck concentration camp where she was kept. And this guard who had been responsible for the suffering and deaths of countless prisoners, including her sister, Betsey. And Corrie describes a moment that he came up to her after her talk. And I'm just going to quote what he said, "You mentioned Ravensbruck in your talk. I was a guard there, but since that time, I have become a Christian. I know that God has forgiven me for the cruel things I did there, but I would like to hear from your lips as well," his hand came out. "Will you forgive me?" "And I stood there," she says, and could not. "Betsey had died in that place. Could he erase her slow, terrible death simply for the asking? It could not have been many seconds that he stood there, hand held out. But to me, it seemed hours as I wrestled with the most difficult thing I ever had to do in life. For I knew I had to do it. The message that God forgives has a prior condition that we forgive those who have injured us. And still, I stood there with a coldness clutching my heart. But forgiveness is not an emotion. I knew that, too. It's an act of the will, and the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart. Jesus, help me, I pray silently. I can hold out my hand. I can do that much. You supply the

feeling. And so woodenly, mechanically, I thrust out my hand into the hand, stretch out to me. And as I did so, an incredible thing took place. The current started in my shoulder, raced down my arm, sprang into our joint hands, and then this healing warmth seemed to flood my whole being, bringing tears to my eyes. I forgive you, brother, I cried with all my heart. For a long moment, we grasped each other's hands, the former guard and the former prisoner. I had never known God's love so intensely as I did then."

Look to Jesus Christ, he can help you. And let me close in prayer. God, we look to you, we look to your son, and we ask you to help us in Jesus to let go the bitterness, to let go the years of anger, the darkness, the secrets, the fears to help us to move on with our lives, trusting that you yourself will make all things right. Whoever they are, whatever they've done, God, we pray that you would help us in our hearts to not do to them as they did to us. Would you please forbid any hatred or bitterness or vindictiveness to rise in our hearts? Keep our eyes on Jesus, our savior, over and over. We look to you. We pray in Jesus' name, amen. Thank you very much for this. Thank you.