



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

Transformed Retaliation (1)

Romans 12.14, 17-18

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Introduction

In *The Untouchables*, the 1987 movie retelling of the story of Eliot Ness, Sean Connery played a tough veteran cop named Jim Malone, adviser to Kevin Costner's Ness. In a memorable scene early in the movie, Malone schooled Ness on how to beat Al Capone.

Malone: You said you wanted to get Capone. Do you really wanna get him? You see what I'm saying is, what are you prepared to do?

Ness: Anything within the law.

Malone: And *then* what are you prepared to do? If you open the can on these worms you must be prepared to go all the way. Because they're not gonna give up the fight, until one of you is dead.

Ness: I want to get Capone! I don't know how to do it.

Malone: You wanna know how to get Capone? They pull a knife, you pull a gun. He sends one of yours to the hospital, you send one of his to the morgue. *That's* the Chicago way! And that's how you get Capone. Now do you want to do that?¹

Notice two things about Malone's method.

1. We don't find it surprising and may even approve. It's fighting fire with fire.
2. It's not just the *Chicago* way; we see it all the time.
 - a. In sports: we love it when our team evens the score from the late hit, the flagrant foul, the hit batsman, etc.
 - b. On the highway: we just have to respond to the rude driver who cuts us off, follows too close, etc.; sometimes, escalation leads to tragedy.
 - c. At work, shopping, out to eat, etc., we give rude people "a piece of our mind" — or worse.
 - d. Geopolitically: country A offends; B must retaliate; but will it escalate?

So, what Malone called the "Chicago way" is really the *human* way. The dilemma for you and me, however, is that it is not the *Christian* way.

Some cannot comprehend that. Most of us get it, but keep looking for an exception, lessening the demand. But always, when we return to Scripture, there it is: transforming, living-sacrifice people don't practice retaliation—at least not "Chicago way" retaliation. Let's study together.

Principle Presented (12.14, 17-18)

When persecuted, we are to bless (14).

1. "Bless" is εὐλογέω (*eulogeō*).
 - a. Greeks stressed the literal meaning: "to speak well of" and so to "praise" or "eulogize."
 - b. The Hebrew background was stronger: deriving from the Jewish idea of God blessing his human creatures, "bless" was used "in the sense of bestow grace or peace, sustain and prosper (as in the classic formulation of the Aaronic benediction--Num. 6:24-26)."²
 - c. To bless another is to call on God to bestow favor, to give a particular blessing. That's what Paul says to do to those who persecute and curse us!
2. That goes against the human way, captured in the word "curse" (καταράομαι, *kataaraomai*), "to call on God to withhold his favor (both specific and providential), and, possibly, also to act as a power for ill in the life and circumstances of the one cursed (e.g., 2 Sam 16:5-13; 2 Kgs 2:24)" (Dunn, 744).

Verse 17 repeats and expands the point.

1. "Repay no one evil for evil." As stated, this is more in line with traditional Judaism than the deeper elaboration of the point by Jesus (Matt. 5:38-48; Luke 6:27-36--see Dunn, 747); but Paul's elaboration takes us even farther beyond this good beginning.
2. "Give thought to do what is honorable [right-NASB] in the sight of all."
 - a. "Give thought" (προνοέω, *pronoeō*) means "to think beforehand." The sense is proactive: "provide for."
 - b. "In the sight of all" (ἐνώπιον πάντων ἀνθρώπων, *enōpion pantōn anthrōpōn*) echoes Proverbs 3:4 and 2 Corinthians 8:21, both of which speak of what is right in the sight of God/the Lord; the sense of our text parallels that and calls implicitly for the same standard.
3. The issue is what pleases God--indeed, what characterizes God.
 - a. People will generally recognize that as good (even when they don't do it).
 - b. It was always the standard for Christ's followers (1 Pet. 2:13-17).

Verse 18 amplifies the point: seek and pursue peace, be active participants in showing the way of God.

1. Implied is the forethought from v. 17: we have to analyze the situation and people, thinking about and looking for ways we can do good.
2. Yes, there are some who will not agree to peace--as Paul acknowledges with his double qualification. That's part of the real world.
3. Paul calls them to understand that some things cannot be compromised for the sake of peace and to think through their reaction ahead of the crisis.

Pointers for Practice

1. Being peace-agreeable is not the same as being a peacemaker (see Matt. 5:9).
 - a. The teaching about thinking ahead cannot be minimized.
 - b. Too often, our failures in faith come because we react instead of thinking ahead and formulating a better response.

2. Jesus practiced what he preached—for the good of all (including you and me!) (1 Pet. 2.21-23; Heb. 12.3; Luke 22.31-34; 23.34).³
 - a. Do we live God's love, or merely talk about God's love (see Rom. 12.9)?
 - b. Remember, "love" (ἀγάπη, *agapē*) is not primarily about feelings, but about seeking what is best for the other person.
 - c. Our goal must always be to seek what is good for others, not what makes us feel better in the short term.
3. Do you see the pattern that gives rise to the words of our title?
 - a. We are not called to *no* retaliation, but to a *transformed* retaliation that actively responds to evil with good.
 - 1) When cursed, we are to do more than just not answer in kind; we are to bless.
 - 2) When victimized by evil, we are to do more than just not look for ways to settle the score; we are to strategize good things we can do for the evildoer.
 - b. *That* is transformed living. *That* is Christ's way.

Exhortation

Unfortunately, we struggle not to be like the four energetic boys whose mother reported how a sermon on turning the other cheek got their attention. The preacher stressed that no matter what others do to us, we should never try to get even. That afternoon, the youngest came into the house crying. He told his mother he had kicked one of his brothers who had kicked him back. "I'm sorry that you're hurt," his mother said. "But you shouldn't go around kicking people." The tearful boy replied, "But the preacher said he wasn't supposed to kick me back."⁴

It would be great if we lived in a world where everyone understands that they aren't supposed to kick back. Jesus' example and teaching call us to quit kicking back no matter what anyone else does. Easy? No. Possible? If we submit to his transforming work.

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Notes

¹ <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0094226/quotes>. Accessed September 11, 2013.

² James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 9-16*, Word Biblical Commentary 38B (Dallas: Word Books, Publisher, 1988), 744.

³ Notice especially Luke 22.31-34 where we read that Jesus knew ahead of time that Peter would deny him, but prayed for him to grow stronger in faith and serve to strengthen his brothers. The "Chicago" (human) way would neutralize (to put it mildly) a betrayer before he had the chance to betray.

⁴ Jane Vajnar, in Edward K. Rowell and Bonnie L. Steffen, eds., *Humor for Preaching & Teaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1996), 146.