

I was known in college as The Escalator. It happened after my friend Shane pranked me - he hid a doorbell in my ceiling tiles and waited until the middle of the night then started ringing it over and over. Apparently watching me stumble around my room trying to discern where the "ding dong" was coming from was hilarious.

A few weeks later, Shane left for Spring Break without locking the door to his dorm room. I couldn't help myself. I emptied his room of furniture, giving it all to guys in other rooms. I even gave some of his posters to other people. I unbunked his beds and rearranged all the books on his bookshelf (he was a little OCD). I left him a message to find when he returned: "Now we're even." I left his room smug. Justice had been served.

Of course, it wasn't justice. I had escalated the prank war. I exercised not justice, but revenge, and the scales were anything but even.

What's the difference between Revenge and Justice? Justice says, "You ruined my night, so I'm going to ruin yours." Revenge says, "You ruined my night, so I'm going to ruin your week." Justice says, "An eye for an eye." Revenge says, "You took my eye so I'll blow your brains out." Justice is about fairness. Revenge is about wounded pride and image.

Revenge is tricky. In the abstract, we all agree revenge is wrong. But we understand the impulse, and when it comes to someone who has wronged us or someone we love, revenge feels right. But Revenge is wrong. Revenge doesn't overcome evil. Revenge actually creates *more* evil through unequal retaliation.

That's why we look to justice - eye for an eye. Fairness, not revenge. What's maybe surprising is that, for followers of Jesus, even justice is insufficient. Jesus commands us to forgive in the face of evil. Forgiveness does what justice cannot. Forgiveness overcomes evil and creates space for the possibility of genuine repentance and restoration.

This is why Paul commands followers of Jesus to be a people of forgiveness and generosity. **[Scripture Slide]** Turn or click with me to Romans 12. We're in a series called FREE OF CHARGE based on the work of theologian Miroslav Volf. He insists that our ability to forgive is grounded in God's generosity toward us. In the first three weeks, we saw that we are givers because God is a giver and we are made in God's image.

Last week, we began building on the foundation of generosity. We saw that forgiveness is a special kind of gift, one we give only as we have received it from God. When we forgive, we name the offense, then release the offender from it.

Romans 12 begins with Paul's plea for us to live as "living sacrifices" to God. He goes on throughout the chapter exploring what it looks like to be a living sacrifice, and he ends with instructions on how to face evil. For those Christians Paul was writing to, this evil was everything from the small evils we experience in relationships with those we love to the big evil of the oppressive Roman Empire. For Paul, all these evils have the same source, and the

response of God's people to them is always the same. Let's read what he says, beginning in verse 17:

Never pay back evil with more evil. Do things in such a way that everyone can see you are honorable. Do all that you can to live in peace with everyone. Dear friends, never take revenge. Leave that to the righteous anger of God. For the Scriptures say, "I will take revenge; I will pay them back," says the Lord.

Instead, "If your enemies are hungry, feed them. If they are thirsty, give them something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals of shame on their heads." Don't let evil conquer you, but conquer evil by doing good. -- Romans 12:17-21

Never take revenge. Instead, respond to your enemies with generosity! Give them good gifts that contribute to their flourishing! To respond to wrong with more wrong is to be conquered by Evil. Paul says, instead, conquer evil with good!

[Lady Justice and her Scales] That makes sense when it comes to revenge, but how is justice insufficient? The very idea of justice is one of equality, of balanced scales. This is the "eye for an eye" mentality that's been the ground of human justice systems since it first appeared in Hammurabi's Code nearly 4,000 years ago. A version of this same idea shows up in Moses' law in the Old Testament as well.

This version of justice is called "retributive justice" and it's why our Lady Justice holds scales. The idea is that evil disrupts the balance of the world, and the offender must be punished such that balance is restored. So you take an eye, an eye is taken from you. Our culture has a complicated legal code that takes lawyers arguing over what is truly "fair", and a judge who finally decides how the guilty offender will pay his debt to society. Will it be with a fine? With community service? Jail time?

The problem with retributive justice is that it does not overcome evil. At best, justice *contains* evil. It puts a fence around it and says, we're not going to let this go any further. But retributive justice is essentially a transaction. It says, "You owe this, you pay this."

Retributive justice looks *backward* at the offense. It is not concerned with rehabilitation. Lady Justice doesn't care if you are going to offend again in the future. She doesn't care if the victim or the offender are flourishing. She cares only that the scales are balanced, that this particular offense has been paid for.

And that's all philosophical. It doesn't take into account that our systems of Justice are comprised of humans, and are therefore biased and fallible because we are biased and fallible. It doesn't take into account that some offenses can never be made right. Tell a victim of sexual violence that anything can make her experience balanced. Tell the family of a person killed by a drunk driver that some sort of cosmic scales have been balanced. Tell child soldiers there is a price that can pay for their lost childhood.

[Lady Justice w/ no blindfold and no scales, arms open wide in embrace] Justice is insufficient to address the real pain of our world. Instead, God insists we be a people of forgiveness. By choosing to forgive, to release the offender from their real debt to us, we overcome evil. We swallow it up, as one theologian puts it. We refuse to allow sin, evil and injustice to define us or our enemies. We refuse evil a foothold in our lives.

In forgiving, we imitate the God who was crucified, who bore *our* sin to free us. Forgiveness leads to freedom, for those who are wronged and for those who wrong.

As nice as that sounds, it doesn't *feel* very good, especially in light of the real evils we experience in our world. We hear "forgive them" as "just forgive them," as though it's easy simply to quit being angry, hurt or afraid and just "let it go".

That's because we misunderstand forgiveness. We treat forgiveness as an emotion. To forgive is to quit feeling bad. Dr. Phil says that "**Forgiveness is a choice you make to release yourself from anger, hatred and resentment.**" But that's not what forgiveness is when God forgives and it's not how we should forgive. When God forgives, God doesn't decide to quit being mad at us because he took it all out on Jesus. Issues like Sin and Forgiveness aren't emotional issue for God at all. God doesn't need to go to anger management.

Rather, as we saw last week, on the Cross, God names and condemns sin. But rather than condemn us, God takes the consequence of sin onto himself. God dies for us, and by dying for us, invites us to die with him. When we crucify ourselves with Jesus, God releases us from guilt. God condemns our sin, then releases us from guilt.

This is forgiveness. Forgiveness is not anti-justice because in naming the offense, in condemning it, we agree with the claims of Justice: this is wrong. This is harmful. This is toxic.

But then we release the offender from the guilt. We refuse to repay evil with evil. We refuse to contain evil with justice. We overcome evil with forgiveness.

Some of us are thinking, "Wait, that's not fair." We're thinking specifically of someone who has wronged us, a deep wound we carry, and the idea of letting go of our demand for justice sounds unjust.

Well, we're right. This is profoundly unfair. This is profoundly unjust. But as we have seen throughout this series, Justice is not God's primary motivation. God's essential nature is self-giving love. The Cross is profoundly unjust. On the Cross, the God who owed us nothing and had done nothing wrong took the full weight of our sin onto himself and died for us.

We look at what God did on the Cross and call it Good News. To receive God's love and forgiveness is to surrender our demands for retribution. We cannot receive God's forgiveness

unless we agree with God that justice is insufficient, that we *need* not judgment but mercy. If we need mercy, so too do those who have wronged us.

Forgiveness trumps justice. Mercy trumps judgment.

But let's not think forgiveness automatically means forgetting. That could be dangerous - to forgive an abuser but continue to live with him. To pretend the affair never happened. To allow a serial offender to roam free and unfettered.

And that's true. There's a difference between forgiveness and discipline. It's often the case, especially in our imperfect world, that forgiveness has to be partial and incomplete. Someone may need to be restrained because they're a danger to themselves and others. A relationship may have to be terminated, or at least limited, for a time. An unrepentant victimizer may need to be kept from society or their victims. We may need to create some space between us and the person who hurt us, at least until we can see the fruit of repentance begin to ripen.

But if we are a forgiveness people, our concern is not "payback". It's not an evening of Justice's Scales. We are concerned with restoration. Our goal is the good of all people involved, both the victims and the victimizers. Whatever penal system we have will be organized not around "serving your time" but around healing and becoming a whole person who contributes to the common good.

On a personal level, our commitment to forgiveness is about opening space for repentance. Think about a time you've been the offender. Often the weight of our guilt and shame keeps us from saying we're sorry. We don't even know how to begin to apologize, let alone repent of our actions. Guilt and shame trap us in condemnation.

When we are trapped, forgiveness sets us free. When someone gives us the gift of forgiveness, we begin to see the way toward repentance. The light of love pierces the cell of our condemnation and we find a path toward hope and restoration.

[Emma's Story from Free of Charge]

The end goal of our forgiveness is not justice. Not repayment. But restoration and reconciliation. Friends, when we were still God's enemies, God forgave us so that we could repent and be welcomed into God's life. If we are to receive God's good gift, we must extend that same forgiveness to others - even to our enemies.

The end goal of forgiveness is forgetting. In reflecting on Jesus' work on the Cross, the author of Hebrews quotes the prophet Jeremiah. Through Jeremiah, God promised, **"I will forgive their wickedness and I will never again remember their sins."** -- Hebrews 8:12

Through Jesus, God condemns our sin, and then God forgets it. For God, through Jesus, it is as though we have never sinned.

Through Jesus, God treats us as sinless. God *forgets* our sin. No shame, no condemnation, no judgment, not even *memory*. We stand before God righteous through Jesus.

Friends, when we forgive, we give to offenders the gift of living as though they had never committed the sin. This is a gift. It cannot be earned. It can only be given.

Revenge cannot overcome evil. It only creates more evil.

Justice cannot overcome evil. It only contains evil.

Only forgiveness can overcome evil. Only forgiveness sets us free. Only forgiveness opens up the possibility of repentance. Only forgiveness opens up new worlds of possibility to us.

If we want to overcome evil in our in our culture, we cannot advocate revenge. Us vs. Them only creates more evil.

If we want to overcome evil in our relationships, in our vocations, we cannot seek justice. Eye for an eye only contains evil.

If we want to overcome evil in our homes, in ourselves, we must forgive. Only forgiveness overcomes evil by swallowing it whole.

And we can only forgive insofar as we have been forgiven. We stand before God as sinners condemned in our transgressions. We stand before God with hands soaked in blood.

God does not seek revenge on us. God does not give us what we deserve. God condemns our sin, then takes it on himself. God dies for us and invites us to die with him that we might be released from the guilt of our sin. God sets us free that we might be a people of forgiveness, redemption and reconciliation.

Communion + Examen

[Communion Slide] We approach the table as sinners condemned. We find loving release from our guild

1. In the last week, how have I shown grace through forgiving?
2. In the last week, where have I sought justice or even revenge?
3. When in the next week will I be tempted to seek justice or revenge?
4. How can I forgive this week as God has forgiven me?