

“... first dig two graves.”

Matthew 5:38-48 | 2/19/2017

It's a standard movie plot: A vulnerable hero is wronged or hurt. He or she gains strength from their anger at the injustice and sets out to get revenge. In the end, the villain is vanquished, justice is done and the credits roll.

Revenge fantasies are so common in the movie industry that they have become a genre of their own. *John Wick* goes on a rampage of death when a thug steals his car and kills his dog. Jason Bourne returned in 2016 after a nine-year absence to take his wrath out on the people who ruined his life. And who can forget *Carrie* (1976), based on the Stephen King novel, in which a bullied high school girl gets her revenge albeit at the cost of her own life?

We love the idea of retributive justice. It appeals to our sense of fairness and the idea that everyone finally gets what they deserve. And yet we have a quote from Confucius, “Before you embark on a journey of revenge, dig two graves.”

Some psychologists suggest that revenge fantasies are actually good for us. They're products of an emotion called "embitterment" -- a feeling produced by victimization coupled with the desire to fight back. Because the person feels helpless, however, it leads to *fantasies* of revenge or aggression. Psychologists think that these revenge fantasies actually serve as buffers against the negative feelings associated with victimization, which is why people love revenge movies. We don't have to actually do anything vengeful; it's the feeling of justice that counts.

We've all had these fantasies, albeit on a smaller scale -- I would hope -- than a blockbuster action thriller. You imagine getting back at the idiot who cuts you off on the road, for example. You might envision an elaborate plan of retribution on a boss who unjustly reprimanded or fired you. You may harbor plans of revenge over the actions of an ex-spouse. Point is, we tend to run to revenge fantasies whenever we sense an injustice has been done.

Jesus warned us, however, that even harboring such fantasies can give birth to actions -- bad decisions -- which, in turn, can lead to our own destruction. In this section of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus reframes the retributive justice of the law of Moses and calls his disciples to turn *from "embitterment" to embodiment of the way of the kingdom of God.*

"You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,'" says Jesus, pointing to the law of Moses and its judicial system (Exodus 21:24). Unrestrained revenge was ruled out by the law codes of many other ancient Near Eastern cultures, and the commandment of God was already designed to limit retributive justice to the severity of the crime committed.

But rather than merely restating a law that gives the plaintiff the right to ensure that the offender gets at least what he or she deserves, Jesus overrules even that law for his disciples. For Jesus, it was about rejecting any kind of retaliatory violence. Jesus wanted his disciples to reject the revenge fantasy in favor of the redemption factor for both the offended and the offender.

Revenge is all about getting back at the one who hurts us. Jesus, however, calls his disciples to lean into the hard work of redemption through suffering love. Disciples of Jesus aren't to go about asserting their personal rights when affronted, but instead, they are to respond in terms of the good and needs of the other, even when that other commits evil against them.

The examples of Matthew 5:39-42 would make for a very different kind of movie than we're used to. In a Tarantino movie, for example, a backhanded slap across the right cheek would warrant an epic beat down in return. That kind of slap was an ultimate insult in Jesus' day -- a forceful dismissal of one's personhood. But rather than retaliating, Jesus urges his disciples to "turn the other" cheek also (v. 39).

If you are "losing your shirt" in a court case, the standard movie response would be to find some hotshot lawyer to turn the tables on your accuser or, failing that, to set about ruining them in some other way. Jesus tells his disciples, however, to "give your cloak as well," meaning that they should prefer the shame of being naked to getting revenge (v. 40).

The Roman law of *lex angaria* said that if a Roman soldier told you to carry his pack or another burden you had to do it, for as much as a Roman mile, which equates to about 4,850 feet. Jesus urged his disciples to pick up the burden willingly and even go an extra *mille passus* as well (v. 41).

When you walk a mile with your enemy, and then another, you might not only walk with your enemy, but *talk* with your enemy. And who knows what might come of that?

Some argue that these commandments of Jesus actually turn his disciples into doormats for evil people who will take advantage of them. We're culturally conditioned to fight for our rights. No wonder that Jesus' approach seems unrealistic and even dysfunctional to many.

But rather than seeing these actions as signs of weakness, Jesus asserts that they're positions of strength. The way that Jesus confronts evil is not through violence, but through nonviolent resistance that will confound, shame and disarm the aggressor. Jesus' commandments are thus a foreshadowing of his own actions on the cross and of the kind of cross-bearing discipleship that is required of his followers. We do not trust in our own abilities to set things right, in other words. Instead, we trust in God's ultimate justice.

So Jesus asks us to do something counterintuitive: love those unlikely to be loved. Love the poor, love your enemy, love the co-worker, love the conservative, love the liberal, love the person least like you. This is the love of God. And if this love is extended to us, who are we to not extend it to others -- even those who have sinned against us (v. 48)?

Bottom line: *We are not to dish out to offenders what they deserve.* For, indeed, this is not how God has dealt with us. Instead, we're to be the embodiment of Christ in forgiving and loving them.

We don't deal with evil by indulging in revenge fantasies, but by living the vision of God's offer of love and redemption to all. Jesus demonstrated this all the way to the cross, refusing to take revenge and, instead, offering his forgiveness and love to those who nailed him there. He overcame evil with suffering love; he overcame evil with good.

I can think of one movie that does take a different approach. In the first *The Lord of the Rings* movie, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Frodo laments it was a pity that his uncle Bilbo did not kill Gollum, a miserable, murderous thief, when he had the chance. Gandalf replies, "It was pity that stayed Bilbo's hand ... Many that live deserve death. And some that die deserve life. Can you give it to them? Then do not be too eager to deal out death in judgment."

Next time you're watching a movie, ask yourself how this situation might have been handled differently by a disciple of Jesus. What would happen if the hero chose vision over violence? Redemption over revenge? And then take it down to a personal level: Who are the people in your life over whom you fantasize about revenge? How would the situation be different -- how would you be different and your enemy be different -- if you chose love instead?

This is the kind of action hero that Jesus is looking for.

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