

Leaning in to the messy / Love your enemies

7.2: “Never payback evil with evil”

March 13, 2016

Okay guys, if you could be a superhero, who would you be? My favorite is Superman. In fact that's why this movie coming up, Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice, sounds absurd to me. Superman can kick Batman's tail with his little toe. When Andy was little (4 or 5 years old) we used to play superheroes. I was always Superman. Andy would go through the list. He'd say, "I'm Batman." Then he would come running across the room and try to knock me down. I'd crush him. Then he'd say, "I'm Spiderman." Then he'd come running across the room and try to knock me down. And I'd crush him. He'd try them all. I'd keep crushing him. One day he said, "I'm Jesus." That wasn't good. I wasn't sure that I should teach my son that Superman would crush Jesus. So I said, "Jesus would never attack Superman." And my little son said, "Well this is what Jesus could do to Superman if he wanted to." And he came running across the room and, I pretty much had to let him crush me. Oh well. From that moment on, I wouldn't let him choose to be Jesus.

So, if you could be a superhero, who would you choose to be, and why? Now for those of you who want a great body: maybe you guys would choose Thor, or Captain America; maybe you ladies would choose Wonderwoman – at least that's what most old guys who grew up with a crush on Linda Carter hope you'd choose. For those of you who like the gadgets: maybe you pick Batman, or Iron Man. For those of you who like raw power: maybe you would prefer Superman (like me), or Hulk.

But what if you had to choose a superhero based on their character? By the kind of person they were, by their mission in life? A lot of superheroes have a dark side, don't they? It's fascinating how our culture shapes its heroes. We've gone from Superman, in his fight for truth, and justice, and the American way; to superheroes whose mission is not so clear. Now Superman and Batman go to war. And the Avengers ... How many of you guys are fans of "The Avengers"? Thor, Captain America, The Hulk, Iron Man, Hawkeye, the Black Widow. I think they are great! But they have a real dark side. In fact the movie coming out May 6 is called, "Civil War."

And do you know what the name means: “The Avengers”? It’s about “pay-back.” When you avenge you exact revenge, you get even, you retaliate, you punish someone who harmed you. And that’s where our culture is, isn’t it? And we can get into that, can’t we? In fact, revenge is one of the biggest themes in so many blockbuster movies, some of my favorites are all about avenging, revenging, to retaliating. For you old guys movies like Death Wish, and True Grit – vengeance. For you Clint Eastwood fans there are bunch of them: Josie Wales, High Plains Drifter, Unforgiven. He was the king of retaliation, and pay-back. And there is Braveheart, and Gladiator; and movies like Taken (with Liam Neeson), and Star Trek: The Wrath of Khan – great flick. And did you know that according to one list of the 50 best revenge movies, the #1 revenge movie is ... The Princess Bride? It really was: #1. “My name is Inigo Montoya, prepare to die.” Vengeance is a theme that pulls us in.

There are even some pretty funny revenge memes I found.

- Here’s a cat at bath time: he says, “My vengeance will be swift and thorough.” That’s a good look for a cat.
- Here are some cows: “Old McDonald had a farm ... HAD.”
- Here’s a spider: Remember when you threw a shoe at me and I fell somewhere behind the bed? I remember too.”
- Or a mouse: “And now ... it’s payback time.” It would be better if that was a set of keys. We have a couple of those mice at our house.
- One more. This one’s a kid: “And then I will strategically place my legos in the hallway.” And you think they are so innocent!

Now, last week we kicked off the last mini-series in our study on leaning in to the messy. And this is the toughest one for us, I think. You see, Jesus had a little different perspective on the notions of vengeance, and retaliation, and getting even, and payback. Instead ... he told us to love our enemies, and then he showed us how (cross). Now that’s hard! And last week we tried to get you to admit that we’ve all got them. We’ve all got enemies: those we despise, and those who despise us. We talked about our enemies lists. The problem is, we only scratched the surface of what God tells us Jesus followers to do with our enemies. We drilled down on what Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount. He says, “You have heard the law that says, ‘Love your neighbor’ and hate your enemy. But I say, love your enemies! Pray for those who persecute you!” (Matthew 5.43-44) Instead of hating them, we are supposed to love them somehow,

and we to pray for them somehow. But there's more ... way more. And that's where we are going to pick it up today.

I want to read you what the apostle Paul had to say about loving your enemies – some of the most direct and annoying words in the Bible. He says, “Never pay back evil with more evil. (Don't go there ... ever. Instead, he says,) “Do things in such a way that everyone can see you are honorable. (In other words,) Do all that you can to live in peace with everyone.” Then he says it again, “Dear friends, never take revenge.” (Don't you hate that? Don't do it! He says,) Leave that (revenge) to the righteous anger of God (who is the only one who can make it right 'righteously'). For the Scriptures say, “I will take revenge; I will pay them back,” says the Lord. (You leave 'payback' to me.) Instead, “If your enemies are hungry, (you) feed them. (Huh?! If they are thirsty, (you) give them something to drink. (Really?! Because,) In doing this, (he says) you will heap burning coals of shame on their heads.” (And guys, that doesn't mean quite what you think it does.) (Romans 12.17-20)

So apparently this proclivity for vengeance was a big problem back then too. It was a big enough problem that both Jesus and Paul tackle it head on. You see, even God followers wanted to be the avengers back then, and we still prefer the path of vengeance today. But God says, “There is another way ... a better way.” ... Now if you are not a Jesus follower, you don't have to try it God's way. In fact, you might even think that God's way sounds kind of wussy, maybe even immoral. But if you are a Jesus follower, guys, we are called to be different ... way different. And this is one of the differences he expects us to live out.

Now there's a guy in the Bible who kind of showed us how to do it. His name was David, and his enemy was a guy named Saul. I'm going to walk through a part of their story so we can pull out some guidelines for dealing with our enemies. Some of what David did will just blow your mind.

Now just to kind of get a running start, before there was a nation called Israel, there were just a bunch of Israelite tribes. They wanted a king to pull their tribes together and to fight their enemies, so God chose a very gifted man named Saul. He was chosen by God. But understand, sometimes men who are chosen by God, and gifted by God, turn out to be

real jerks. Sometimes our gifts take us further than our character can sustain us. Did you get that? Sometimes our gifts take us further than our character can sustain us. You've seen it a lot. You're watching it in politics right now. Leaders can get into real trouble when their integrity doesn't keep pace with the momentum created by their giftedness. Some guys (and some ladies) are way more gifted than they are mature – and that can create some really big problems. It did for Saul.

So as we walk through Saul's story his character flaws emerge: he is impatient, he's arrogant, he is incredibly self-centered; and ultimately, even though God made him king, he just disobeys God's clear instructions. The deeper we dig into his story, the uglier Saul gets. He's a jerk: which is a technical term for someone who is self-absorbed, and mean-spirited, and who doesn't care who gets hurt as long as he gets what he wants.

And then there is David. As Saul becomes more and more of a jerk, God anoints David to be the next king of Israel ... when Saul steps down ... or dies. Can you hear the tension in what I just said? Now there are now two men anointed by God to serve in exactly the same capacity. One of them — a jerk — is already serving in the role. And the man God chose to be next is waiting for his moment. These are two men on paths that are sure to collide.

They first meet when David is hired to play music to calm Saul when the King is troubled. Apparently was a Steve Smith kind of musician and apparently music would calm the savage beast inside Saul. So David would play this thing that was kind of like a harp and he'd sing for the king, to calm him down.

They meet next when this giant named Goliath threatens Saul's armies. You know the story. The Israelites are all terrified of Goliath ... except for David, who takes him out with slingshot, then cuts off his head. There is an interesting note at the end of that story. After David kills Goliath Saul asks, "Who is that kid?" Even though David had been singing for Saul, this jerk king didn't care enough about him to know his name.

But all that is just a backdrop to get us to the part of the story I want to dig into. After David kills Goliath, Saul puts David to work and every task he

gives David, David does well. No matter the job; he does it with excellence. He does his best, for the jerk he has been anointed to replace. That had to be hard, didn't it? To do your best to serve the man God picked you to replace? Now you would think Saul would be pleased with David's service; but remember Saul is a jerk. Instead of being pleased, Saul becomes jealous. In fact, one day when David was playing music for the king, just out of the blue, with no provocation, and no warning, Saul takes a spear and he throws it at David! Would that get your blood pumping? And then Saul did it again! Twice David ducked; twice Saul missed.

Let me ask you: What do you do when someone throws a spear at you? What do you do ... you've been there. Somebody lies about you. Someone threatens you. Someone calls you names. He puts his finger in your chest. He attacks your weight. She scratches your car. What do you do, how do you respond, when you are attacked? I'll tell you what you want to do. You want to pull the spear out of the wall and throw it back! You want to retaliate. But ... if you are a Jesus follower... And if you remember how Jesus told you to "love your enemies and pray for them," you hesitate. And if you remember what the apostle Paul told us to do. He says, "Do not repay anyone evil for evil" ... then you take a deep breath ...

And maybe you remember the example of one of the greatest God-followers in the Bible: David didn't retaliate; he didn't try to get even. Do you know the problems of retaliation? It never comes out even. Saul threw his spear and he missed. If David had thrown it back, do you think he would have tried to miss, too? No, David would have tried to stick him to the wall. That's what retaliation does. She calls you names; you hit her. You up the ante. He attacks you; you poison the kids towards him. It's never about getting even — you don't want even; you want to get way out ahead! And here's bigger problem. Listen: when we repay evil for evil we end up like the one we despise. When someone throws a spear at us, we are tempted to become a spear-thrower too. We get dragged down to their level.

So David doesn't retaliate. But that bugs us! "But he said..." Yeah, I know. It really stung, didn't it? "But...but if you knew what she did to me..." I believe you. "Well, I'm just not made that way. I'm not made to

sit back and take it.” Well, neither was David. He was a warrior, he was a fierce warrior, the kind who could slay giants. But he never retaliated in kind when Saul threw his spears.

The apostle Paul teaches us, “Never pay back evil with more evil. (Don’t go there ... ever. Instead, he says,) “Do things in such a way that everyone can see you are honorable. (In other words,) Do all that you can to live in peace with everyone.” (Romans 12.17-18)

It really is an amazing story; David is a remarkable young man. He is serving a man who despises him. He is serving a man he has been chosen by God to replace. And he does his very best to serve his enemy well. Is that counter-cultural? Would that blow their minds? Listen to what the Bible says about David. It says: “Whatever Saul gave David to do, he did it — and did it well. So well that Saul put him in charge of his military operations.” (1 Samuel 18.5) Can you imagine that? The King hates him; the King is jealous of him; but David has conducted himself with such honor that the King still trusts him enough to promote him? It’s an incredible story!

And yet Saul doesn’t soften -- in fact he throws another spear -- so David chooses to run. It wasn’t his only option. He was in a position to fight back – he was in charge of military operations -- but he chose to run. Why would a man of courage, a giant slayer, a man anointed by God to be the next king, a man with power, a man the people would follow ... why would he run? You see, David understood there would be no peace as long as he and Saul were in the same room. What is huge, I think, is that David chose to leave rather than lead a rebellion. He could have. He easily could have rallied the people around him, and I think he could have ousted the jerk. Instead David chose the path of peace. He removed himself. He gave up comfort, family, and the applause of others to create distance rather than conflict.

So David goes on the run. He becomes a fugitive, literally running for his life. But Saul gathers his army and goes to search for David in order to kill him. Now it’s kind of interesting that David starts out as a fugitive alone. But as time passes, more and more people find him; people who hate Saul and love David. And now David has two tasks: he has to keep on eluding Saul, and he has to provide for the people who join him.

Which brings us to one of the most Hollywood stories of the Bible. This is a story 5th grade boys absolutely love. The Bible tells us that David is hiding out at a place called Ein Gedi, kind of an oasis in the desert near the Dead Sea. (1 Samuel 24.1) It was a great place to hide: It was remote, there were hundreds of caves, there were lookouts where you could see anyone coming. So it says “Saul chose 3,000 elite troops from all Israel and went to search for David and his men near the rocks of the wild goats.” (1 Samuel 24.2) Picture this: 3000 soldiers searching every nook and cranny of these cliffs.

Here’s where the story gets weird. It says, “There was a cave there and Saul went in to relieve himself...” (1 Samuel 24.3) Which tells us that this is probably not about #1; this is about #2. Saul is needing some privacy to take care of some serious business. What Saul doesn’t realize is that this cave is a lot deeper, a lot bigger than one could tell from the outside. David and his men were hiding in the back of the cave. (1 Samuel 24.3b) So Saul is all by himself – rather exposed. He takes off his robe and he lays it aside where it won’t get messy, oblivious to his enemies who are watching him.

And David and his men get ready to lean in to the messy. That’s humor. Actually, the guys who are with David are stoked. It says they whisper to him, “Can you believe it? This is the day God was talking about when he said, ‘I’ll put your enemy in your hands. (David) You can do whatever you want with him.’” (1 Samuel 24.4) “This is your chance! This is the moment we’ve been waiting for. Kill Saul and it’s over! You’ll be King! Do it! Do it!”

Would you do it, if you were David? Think about it: This has all the makings of a God-thing. God had promised David that someday he would be king. David had proved that he was the kind of man who deserved to be king; Saul was a jerk. I can’t think of one thing that could make this more of a God-ordained opportunity, can you? So David creeps up so quietly, apparently intending to take Saul’s life. His men are watching from the recesses of the cave, knowing that if David is successful, life as they know it will change instantly.

But as David gets closer and closer, the tension inside of him gets bigger and bigger. And in for some reason, David paid attention to that tension.

He paused just long enough to allow what was bothering him to really bother him. And somewhere between leaving his hiding place in the back of the cave and Saul's unprotected backside, it dawns on him ... He's just a few seconds away from a decision that everyone would applaud, but in that moment he gains clarity. "Wait a minute," he thought. "Wait a minute. I'm about to murder the king. This can't be right." After all, who put Saul on the throne of Israel to begin with? Who made Saul king? God did. How smart is it to try to replace what God has put in place? How smart is it to do evil to eliminate evil? This isn't right. This isn't God's plan for me. I can't kill the king even if the king is trying to kill me. So, in spite of the pressure ... Can you imagine the pressure? In spite of the pressure, in spite of the expectations of everyone around – and that's where we get into trouble sometimes – in spite of what I'm sure felt like common sense, he changed his course.

Now, there's something here we need to think about. There's a lesson here for all of us. The truth is, despite how things looked, David had no guarantee. David had no idea of what the outcome of his decision to kill Saul would be. He had no idea that 7 chapters later a random arrow shot by a random Philistine archer on the field of battle would find its way through a seam in Saul's armor and mortally wound him. That Saul, who didn't want to be killed by the enemies, would fall on his own sword. If David knew what would happen, it certainly would have made that cave episode a lot easier, wouldn't it? God shows up and says, hang in there David. If David had known that 7 chapters later the Philistines would take care of Saul ... wouldn't that have made things a lot easier? But that's not how life is. We don't know. That's why we pay attention to the tension. That's why we dare not take matters into our own hands. That's why we must ask ourselves every time we are faced with a tough decision, is there a tension that deserves my attention.

And before it was even written, David lives out what the apostle Paul teaches us: "Never pay back evil for evil ... Never take revenge." (Romans 12) You see, there's more going on than what his men could see. Here's what I mean: While David is sneaking up on Saul, he feels this tension building in his spirit. And he weighs the moment. On the one hand there is a unique opportunity – almost God choreographed, it seems. And he has the right to get even. This guy had tried to kill him repeatedly. This guy was on a mission to kill him right now. He has the right to retaliate.

And he could rationalize that it was God's will. God had told him that he was the next king. And his friends, all the people are counting on him – they are pushing him, they are counseling him that this is a God thing.

But on the other hand ... On the other hand ... It was still murder, and murder is a violation of God's heart. And on the other hand ... Saul is still the King. And no matter how big a jerk he is, God had made him king, and it was up to God to unmake him king. And the truth is: once you throw a spear back, you become a spear-thrower too. You become what you hate.

So it seems like David paid attention to the tension, and he determined to wait – which is hard. You see, when opportunities line up with our prayers and our passions it is difficult to exercise restraint. But guys, an open door is not necessarily an invitation from God. There are things that look like God-things, and feel like God-things, and are called by others God-thing, which are not necessarily God-things. And revenge never is. So David says to his men, “God forbid that I should have done this to my master, God's anointed, that I should so much as raise a finger against him. He's God's anointed!” (And) David held his men in check with these words and wouldn't let them pounce on Saul. Saul got up, left the cave, and went on down the road” (still hunting David). (1 Samuel 24.5-7)

Do you remember what the apostle Paul was trying to teach us? He says, “Dear friends, never take revenge.” (Don't you hate that? He says,) Leave that (revenge) to the righteous anger of God (who is the only one who can make it right 'righteously'). For the Scriptures say, “I will take revenge; I will pay them back,” says the Lord. (You leave 'payback' to me.) Instead, “If your enemies are hungry, (you) feed them. (Huh?! If they are thirsty, give them something to drink. (Really?! Because,) In doing this, you will heap burning coals of shame on their heads.” (And guys, that doesn't mean quite what you think it does.) (Romans 12.17-20)

So, which superhero would you choose to be, if you picked by character? And here's what's mind of cool: You have been given a super power. Most of us just don't realize how powerful it is. When you allow God into your life, He comes in. He really does. The Bible says we have the gift of the Holy Spirit, who is the indwelling presence of God. And the Holy Spirit enables us to do some amazing things — things that are simply impossible without Him.

- Things like overcoming evil...with good.
- Like, giving us the capacity to fight off the urge to retaliate.
- Like, enabling us to see the path to peace when no one else does.
- Like, empowering us with self-control ... restraint that is utterly otherworldly.
- Like, calming the urge for revenge that wells up within us.
- Like, helping us see His timing.
- And helping us remember that we don't have to make things happen on our own.
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I'm not promising He will change your enemy...but He can! But what I am promising is that his Holy Spirit can change you. And ... it's worth it.