

The Silence that Hurts

We're looking at the topic of retaliation from Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount. I've asked the question, "Is retaliation ever an appropriate response when we believe that we've been wronged by another person?" In my first article on this topic we looked at the life of Joseph from the book of Genesis. We saw that Joseph didn't choose to retaliate even though his brothers had sold him into slavery in Egypt. Joseph learned something that all God's people must learn, i.e., God is sovereign over everything and he has a more glorious purpose in the events that make up our lives that we can ever completely understand.

Last time I introduced the principle of self-denial. We looked in some detail at Jesus' words, "Do not resist the one who is evil." We saw that Jesus could not be teaching in this passage that we're never to resist certain evils. But we're to operate on a principle of self-denial, i.e., seeking to put others ahead of ourselves. The apostle Paul writes, "See that no one repays anyone evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to everyone." (1 Thessalonians 5:15) In this article, I want to look more at the principle of self-denial by exploring what it means to have an attitude of self-denial. Our attitudes inform our actions for good or for ill. It's important that, by grace, we're seeking to have a proper heart attitude toward those who've done us harm.

I want to mention again briefly an aspect of the life of Joseph that gives us an example of this truth. During the famine, when Joseph's brothers first learned who he was and that he had become second in command to the Pharaoh of Egypt, their father, Jacob, was still living. Later, when their father died, the brothers who had harmed Joseph became extremely worried. "When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, 'It may be that Joseph will hate us and pay us back for all the evil that we did to him.'" (Genesis 50:15) You can immediately see how this type of faulty thinking is inherent in our sinful condition. It's sad when we can only think of self-preservation rather than self-denial. Once again, Joseph's response to his brothers did not excuse their sin toward him but his heart attitude of self-denial showed God's work of grace in his life: "Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today." (50:19-20) Notice that Joseph's heart attitude of self-denial produces actions of kindness. "I will provide for you and your little ones." (50:21)

Think with me for a moment about ways in which you may have wrongly responded when someone harmed you. As Christians, we know that we're called to forgive, but very often our forgiveness is unbiblical. We may not say these words, but our actions seem to be, "I'll forgive you, but I don't ever want to speak to you again!" This is not genuine forgiveness! Our revenge or retaliation can take many forms. We may not actively seek to harm someone physically (and I hope we never do), but how many times have we simply stopped speaking to someone as an act of seeking to get even for what we believe they've done to us? Treating someone with this type of wicked heart intent ignores the reality of Christ's love for his people.

“While we were still sinners Christ died for us.” (Romans 5:8) Rather than having a Christ-like attitude, wicked heart attitudes produce actions that often look like this: “You’ve hurt me so I’ll retaliate by avoiding you whenever possible.” This is an act of “silent revenge” and it’s very harmful to us and to others as well as being dishonoring to God. Sadly this retaliation toward others by giving them the “silent treatment” can often happen in the home between spouses and even between those in Christ’s Church. When we act this way, rather than self-denial, we’re really only thinking of ourselves.

All of us have been mistreated at one time or another, sadly even by our brothers and sisters in Christ. And yet, we must not live as if holding on to our, so called, “rights” is the most important thing. This type of testimony harms the cause of Christ. As with the apostle Paul we must say that we will, “....endure anything rather than put an obstacle in the way of the gospel of Christ.” (1 Corinthians 9:12)

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