



Date: February 21, 2016

Title: "Forgiveness, Part 1: Revenge of Jaws"

Scripture: Proverbs 24:17-20, 29; Matthew 18:21-22

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Forgiving someone is not saying what they did is okay. Sometimes it is not okay and you're still dealing with the consequences. If your retirement savings totally evaporated because of Bernard Madoff's Ponzi scam, you don't have to say, "It's okay, Bernie. I'll be fine." Forgiving is not saying it's okay.

Forgiving is not eliminating the consequences or avoiding justice. You can forgive the person who rear-ended you because they were texting, but you still call their insurance and file a claim. They're forgiven, but they still have to cover the damages.

Forgiving is not forgetting. In good, healthy relationships, forgiving means putting it behind you. If forgive you, and I won't be bringing this up every time we have an argument in the future. But if Uncle Felix molested my child, I might be able to forgive him, but I will never, ever allow Uncle Felix to be alone with my child or any child again. Sometimes forgiving requires remembering. This helps establish boundaries so that it won't happen again.

Forgiving is not reconciliation. "Can't we just go back to how things were?" No, not always. That kind of reconciliation requires two healthy people working through the toxic aftermath of what happened and it's usually hard work and it requires a deep commitment by both people and sometimes it is not going to happen. Forgiveness does not require reconciliation. You can forgive and still keep your distance.

Those are some of what forgiveness is not. Now let's determine if this sermon is for you. Are the next few minutes nap time for you, or do you have some work to do in the area of forgiveness?

If you hear that something good happened to that person, and you're not happy for them, that's a sign that you have some forgiving to do. If you hear that something bad happened to that person and you go, "Yes!" and do a fist pump and shout "They had it coming to them!" you need a good sermon on forgiving.

If you find they're on your mind a lot, and not in a good way, that's a sign. Like a ghost, the person seems to haunt you, appearing over and over. For me, mechanically it's the sound of the kitchen stove exhaust fan. It's in the background of a dinner or a conversation and even when I'm not aware of it, it's so irritating. If you have a person who is your own kitchen exhaust fan, often unpleasantly on your mind, maybe some forgiveness is needed. If you haven't forgiven someone, you're giving that person free

rent space in your head.

To forgive is to refuse to allow someone else to take away your joy. Forgiveness is setting someone free, and then finding out that someone is you. When you forgive someone, the person who is most changed is you.

Sometimes you can get a clear picture of something by looking at its exact opposite. The opposite of forgiveness is revenge. Let's talk about Samson.

Judges, chapter 15. Samson is a newlywed. Almost since the wedding, he's been away and now he returns and wants to visit his young wife. (By the end of the wedding reception, Samson had disappeared, so she went back home to her parents'.) Samson took a young goat as a gift. (Guys, take note: next time your relationship gets tense, bring her a young goat.) Her father wouldn't let Samson see her. He explains to Samson, "I was so sure you had left your wife that I gave her to your friend. (Judges 15: 2) Is not her younger sister prettier than she? Why not take her instead?"

(What??? You have to suspend all your notions of women's rights and marriage and understand those were primitive times. Totally bizarre and unacceptable, but try to set it aside for now.)

Samson says, "This time I have a right to get even with the Philistines. This time I will really harm them." (v.3) Notice how the revenge begins. "This time I have a right..." Revenge always justifies itself. Revenge always makes it about me, it puts my ego at the very center. Samson's wife is now with the best man at his wedding; okay that hurts. But he never considers that maybe Samson disappearing for weeks right after the wedding was possibly not the wisest thing for his marriage. Revenge, however always justifies itself. "This time I have a right..."

So Samson did what any of us would have done. He went out and caught 300 foxes and used the foxes to set fire to the grain fields. The fire destroyed their crops, which destroyed their economy. It's an act of economic terrorism.

When the Philistines asked, "Who did this?" they were told, "Samson, because his wife was given to his companion." So the Philistines went and burned her and her father to death.

So Samson says, "Since you have done this, I won't stop until I get my revenge on you." (v.7) He returns to a major characteristic of revenge: Samson is the one who has just burned their entire town to the ground, but he says, "Since *you* have acted like this..." Revenge makes us blind to what we've done that contributes to the situation. Revenge focuses only on what *they* did and makes us unaware of our own responsibility.

Three thousand Israelites, Samson's own people, come and say to Samson, "Do you realize what you've started?" (v. 11) Samson replies, "I merely did to them what they did to me." Revenge always justifies itself morally. But in truth, you've lost your moral compass. You are a child of God; we don't do things that are mean, vicious,

nasty, cruel. And yet when someone acts that way to us that justifies us doing those things? Someone else's actions determine the morality of what we do? That turns you from a child of God into a puppet on a string, and guess who is pulling your strings?

Samson gets captured, but then escapes. "Finding a fresh jawbone of a donkey he struck down a thousand of them. Then Samson says, "With a donkey's jawbone, I have made donkeys of them. I have killed a thousand men." This is the major theme here. The story starts with Samson, his wife, and his father-in-law. We're not done with the story yet, but already he's killed a thousand people, not to mention the crops, with his wife and her father being burned. Where does the escalation stop? Revenge always escalates. They said something about you; you said something back, but a little meaner. Revenge never remains on a plateau. They scored a point on you, so you score four points on them.

You know you're stuck in the revenge vortex when you're unable to articulate the goal of your revenge. How will you know when you've gotten even? What are you hoping to accomplish when you get revenge and how will you know when you're done?

"I just wanted to teach them a lesson." Have you ever wronged someone and then they wronged you back so that you said, "What a clear lesson I've learned? What an excellent teaching moment!" Did someone's meanness to you ever inspire you to be a better person? Did someone's getting even with you ever cause you to say, "Oh, the world really is a just place. Right really does win!" The problem with revenge is that it makes you want something that you'll never know when you've gotten it.

Finally, revenge keeps the pain and violence in circulation. That's a major part of the Samson story: it keeps on and on and on. The story of Samson is the longest story in the Book of Judges. Because hurt people hurt people.

That's why the story of the cross has such power to change things. On the cross, Jesus says, "It stops here." When Jesus cries, "It is finished," one way to understand that is that he takes the pain and cruelty out of circulation. Have you ever noticed that in his resurrection appearances, Jesus never ever says, "Now, here's how we're going to get even with the Romans. Here's how we're going to put some hurt on Pontius Pilate, so he'll know." Jesus demonstrates and offers a new way.

Here's another honest truth about Jesus: if you decide to opt for forgiveness instead of revenge, it will cost you. When you forgive, you will bear some pain. Revenge refuses to hold that pain but passes it back. And the pain always gets bigger. Forgiveness chooses to absorb the pain and declare it over with. And that always makes *you* bigger.

How do you surrender the desire to get even? You drop the jawbone. You will need help from someone bigger than you. Forgiving requires that you give up the task of making sure things turn out even, and instead, you give up that responsibility to God. "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do," he prayed, even in his

dying moments. Do you see the bigness in that prayer? Jesus was in a mess of pain. But he chose to absorb the pain rather than rebound the pain. And he let God work out how it would turn out.

Revenge roots justice in you. You are the bearer of justice and it's up to you to right this wrong. I'm not very good at that, and neither are you. Forgiveness calls upon something bigger than you to handle the fairness.

And that will set you free. Forgiveness is about you setting someone free and finding that someone is you. Amen.

The source of this sermon was Rob Bell, in Robcast, episodes 38 – 42. You may find this material at <https://robbell.com/portfolio/robcast/>.