

Genesis 4:23–24 (NIV)

²³ Lamech said to his wives,
“Adah and Zillah, listen to me;
wives of Lamech, hear my words.
I have killed a man for wounding me,
a young man for injuring me.
²⁴ If Cain is avenged seven times,
then Lamech seventy-seven times.”

Exodus 21:22–25 (NIV)

²² “If people are fighting and hit a pregnant woman and she gives birth prematurely but there is no serious injury, the offender must be fined whatever the woman’s husband demands and the court allows. ²³ But if there is serious injury, you are to take life for life, ²⁴ eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, ²⁵ burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise.

Leviticus 19:18 (NIV)

¹⁸ “Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD.

Psalms 94:1–3 (NIV)

¹ The LORD is a God who avenges.
O God who avenges, shine forth.
² Rise up, Judge of the earth;
pay back to the proud what they deserve.
³ How long, LORD, will the wicked,
how long will the wicked be jubilant?

Matthew 18:21–22 (NIV)

²¹ Then Peter came to Jesus and asked, “Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me? Up to seven times?”
²² Jesus answered, “I tell you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times.

*Vengeance can stir our hearts and inflame our passions. It can feel so right, so just.
But what place is there for vengeance in the Christian heart?*

I worked hard preparing to write this week’s study. I went to the movies and saw *The Avengers*. Tough job. Many of the best Marvel superheroes were there: Ironman, Thor, Hulk, Captain America. Even one I’d never heard of, Black Widow. Perhaps they created it for Scarlett Johansson; if so, it was a good idea. The movie was excellent, full of action and conflict. But there was one thing about it that threw me . . . the story didn’t seem to be about vengeance at all.

The team of superheroes didn’t seem bent on vengeance, merely protection. Two pretty different things in my mind. I thought at the end of the movie there’d be some hint of going on to seek vengeance against the bad guys. But no, none of it. Goodness, even the worst of the bad lot was offered another chance, an opportunity to repent. Really, the movie should have been called *The Protectors*. . . . Boring.

“Avengers,” I suppose, sells a lot better. It has so much more appeal to us; perhaps even more than “truth, justice, and the American way.” In the early 60’s, DC comics called their band of heroes, “The Justice League.” Marvel comics went with *The Avengers*.”

I'm pretty sure which is more marketable, considering we're still waiting for the first "Justice League" movie. Vengeance sells.

One of this year's most popular new TV shows is the ABC series, *Revenge*. The show is aptly named, as it follows the long trail of one young woman seeking to avenge the betrayal and murder of her father. The series opened with an oft-repeated quotation from Confucius: "Before embarking on a journey of revenge, dig two graves."

Though vengeance is attractive to us and though at times we cry out for it, vengeance has no place in the Christian heart or life. The Bible doesn't begin there, but it gets there. Over the span of the biblical writings, we can see the slow revealing of God's light, culminating in the revelation that is Jesus and his teachings on forgiveness. The following passages will help you to see what I mean.

Unlimited vengeance

Early in the book of Genesis there is a brief story of unlimited vengeance. Lamech was a descendent of Cain, who murdered his brother, Abel (Genesis 4). Evidently, Lamech got into a disagreement with a young man, they fought, and Lamech was injured. Proudly, Lamech told his wives how he had taken his revenge on the young man. Lamech had killed him. A killing in payback for an injury.

You hurt me; I kill you. You burn down my hut; I burn down your village. You murder my son; I kill your whole family. Unlimited vengeance. Unlimited retribution.

I only half-jokingly describe the world of Lamech as the world of Conan the Barbarian. I actually think I'm pretty close to the mark. It was the world bequeathed to us by the rebellion of the humans in the Garden of Eden and foreshadowed by Cain's murder of his brother.

Limited vengeance

And so things remain until Moses goes up Sinai, the mountain of God, to bring down God's Law. In it, God stipulated that in the event one Israelite injures another, retribution is limited to an eye-for-an-eye and a tooth-for-a-tooth (Exodus 21:22-25). No more is there to be Lamech-style unlimited avenging.

This eye-for-an-eye stuff always seems so harsh to modern-day Christians. And it should; it is very harsh and not Christ-like at all. But in a world marked by unlimited vengeance, an-eye-for-eye is real progress. Vengeance can be taken, but only in measure equal to the harm inflicted.

It isn't that God changes over the span of Scripture, but God has revealed himself over time, culminating with the arrival of Jesus. God's teaching of limited and equivalent retribution could be heard and understood in the ancient world more than three millennia ago, even if it was often ignored.

"Vengeance is mine, I will repay"

Even while God's people are taught to limit their vengeance, God begins to take vengeance off the table entirely. The oft-quoted verse above, "vengeance is mine," is taken from the KJV translation of Romans 12:19, where Paul is quoting Deuteronomy 32:35. Here, God takes vengeance to himself. It is to be God's work, not that of his people.

This too may seem harsh but the important thing to see is that, as in Psalm 94, God has taken vengeance off the list of our potential responses to being hurt. If we thirst for revenge, we are to leave the revenge in God's hands. This is a powerful idea and counter to the way many people embrace revenge, but even this is still not the end of

God's revelation of his desires. A heart that harbors vengeance, even if it is not acted upon, is still a heart poisoned by hate.

"Not seven times, but seventy-seven times" – Unlimited forgiveness

In our final passage, from Matthew 18, Jesus closes the circle. Lamech was avenged not seven-fold but seventy-seven fold. Jesus tells Peter that when we are wronged we are to forgive, not seven times, but seventy-seven times (or seventy times seven, as the Greek here is ambiguous).

So, Jesus has turned unlimited vengeance into unlimited forgiveness. We are to forgive today, and tomorrow, and the next day, and the next day until it takes hold of us, until we no longer even thirst for revenge, for payback. It may take seemingly countless "forgivings" for it to become true and authentic and genuinely offered, but so be it. We are to forgive those who hurt and harm us. Forgive. Period.

One of our 2008 sermon series was on some of Jesus' parables. One parable was about forgiveness, following directly on the heels of Jesus' command to Peter in Matthew 18. I suggested we think of forgiveness like breathing:

Take a breath. A deep one . . . deeper. Now hold it. Keep holding it . . . longer. How long can you hold it? One minute? Two perhaps? Breathing, indeed living, requires us to breathe out as well as breathe in. I remember from my brief flirtation with circuit weight training that it was important to learn the proper way to breathe while struggling to lift the weight. Inhaling was easy, but remembering to exhale was very difficult. I'd just keep holding and holding my breath as I strained to move the weight smoothly and in rhythm.

Forgiveness is like breathing. It must be breathed out as we breathe it in. Forgiveness received is forgiveness that must be passed on. When we are forgiven but refuse to forgive, it is like trying to take in a breath and hold it rather than breathing it out.

Jesus tells his disciples a parable about a servant who was quite ready to be forgiven, but wanted to hold on to it, forgetting to breathe out. Jesus' parable goes like this:

A king was settling up accounts with his slaves. There is one slave who owes the king a lot of money. So much money that it certainly would have conjured up visions of astounding wealth, for it would take the average laborer 15-20 years to earn a single talent and the slave owes the king 10,000 talents!¹ To settle up as best he can, the king orders that the slave and his family be sold as well as all the man's possessions. But when the slave falls on his knees and begs for mercy, the king forgives all the debt – all 10,000 talents. All of it. One could hardly imagine a more gracious act.

One would think that being the recipient of such forgiveness would forever change a person. Yet, this same slave refuses even to be patient with a fellow slave who owes him a small sum, no more than a few weeks' wages.. Seemingly forgetting, though probably just not caring, about the grace shown himself, the forgiven but unforgiving slave has the debtor thrown into prison. When the king learns what has happened, the slave's original debts are reinstated and he is tossed into prison where he will stay until he can repay the 10,000 talents – which he will never be able to do.

One of the most remarkable testaments in our lifetime to the power of forgiveness has come out of the end of apartheid in South Africa. Surely, its end could only come by

¹This is a good time to remind ourselves that Jesus' parables are not meant to be utterly realistic depictions of life. They are teaching tools. We aren't to worry about how a slave could assemble wealth that would rival Bill Gates.

means of violent revolution and the spilling of much blood. Surely the blacks of South Africa would demand revenge for the abuse and oppression that had been dished out to them by the ruling whites. Yet, led by Bishop Desmond Tutu, South Africa went the route of the Truth and Reconciliation Commissions. There, the truth of abuses could be told in the open. There reconciliation and peace could be found. It is a remarkable story. It is a story of genuine superheroes.

The Challenge of Forgiveness

In his commentary, *Matthew for Everyone* (in the St. Andrew library), N. T. Wright tells a story that speaks to the challenge of forgiveness.

Many years ago I was working in a student community. I sometimes assisted in leading worship or preaching for one particular group of students. They were theological students, training for ministry, but shared their accommodation with others from a wide range of subjects—and with a wide range of ideals and standards. I had agreed, some while before, to preach at a midweek service in which the assigned reading, as I knew long in advance, was the passage we're now looking at. What none of us knew was that it was going to be frighteningly relevant.

That week there was a near-riot. Some of the other students living in the residence had been behaving very disruptively. They were making it almost impossible for their colleagues to sleep at night, to study during the day, or to have any peace and quiet. Most of the students didn't even like to invite friends round because the place was so unpleasant. A difficult atmosphere developed as some of the Christian students simply wanted to 'forgive' the troublemakers, in other words not to deal with the problem, while others wanted to make an angry protest, to demand their rights to live in peace and to insist that the disruptive students were dismissed or at least suspended.

So on that weekday lunchtime, at our regular service, you could have heard a pin drop when we heard Matthew 18:21–35—the passage now in front of you—the main reading. And my heart was thumping as I stood up to preach about it.

It's a long time ago, and sadly I can't find the notes of what I said. But the lesson of the story is so massive and obvious that I don't really need to look it up. There are several ways of putting the point. Every time you accuse someone else, you accuse yourself. Every time you forgive someone else, though, you pass on a drop of water out of the bucketful that God has already given you. From God's point of view, the distance between being ordinarily sinful (what we all are) and extremely sinful (what the people we don't like seem to be) is like the distance between London and Paris seen from the point of view of the sun. And so on. We can all relate to that.

The key thing, as I have already said, is not that one should therefore swallow all resentment and 'forgive and forget' as though nothing had happened. The key thing is that one should never, ever give up making forgiveness and reconciliation one's goal. If confrontation has to happen, as it often does, it must always be with forgiveness in mind, never revenge.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Since this is a series about superheroes of the comics and the movies, do you have a favorite among the pantheon of Marvel heroes. Spiderman? Ironman? Hulk? Why do some appeal to you more than others? How much of ourselves do we see in these superheroes?
2. Why do you think we find vengeance so appealing? Why is it such a popular theme in movies, TV, and books? Do you agree with Confucius's advice: "Before embarking on a journey of revenge, dig two graves."? Do you have stories from your own experiences about the dangers of vengeance/
3. Share some of your own stories about the power of forgiveness. What do these stories have in common? Have you ever been surprised by the outcome created by forgiveness? How so? Why do we find it so difficult to forgive? Why are we so often insistent that forgiveness must be preceded by an apology? Do you think that forgiveness can create a repentant heart? How might this be?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

This week, we'll look at some of the Bible's stories of the power of forgiveness.

<p>Monday, Genesis 45:5-14 & 50:15-21 Joseph (of the many-colored coat) forgives his enemies.</p>	<p>Tuesday, 1 Samuel 24: 8-12 & 26:21-25 David forgives Saul for trying to kill him.</p>
<p>Wednesday, Mark 2: 1-12 Jesus forgives the sins of a paralytic. This would have been shocking to those watching – who can forgive sins but God?!</p>	<p>Thursday, Nehemiah 9 The people of God gather to confess their sins to a forgiving God (v. 17 contains a well-known description of God's forgiveness and love).</p>
<p>Friday, 2 Corinthians 2:5-11 Paul urges the Corinthian church to forgive and call home someone who had done something bad enough to be removed from the church.</p>	<p>Weekly Joys and Concerns</p>

