

“One of Life’s Most Subtle Temptations”

Dealing with our Desire for Revenge

July 11, 2010

1 Samuel 24

Matthew 5:38-45

Romans 12:14, 17-21

A Sermon preached by

Pastor Rob Fulton

First United Presbyterian Church

Bellefontaine, Ohio

Now, though he was LARGE in stature, King Saul was SMALL in character. There’s just no two ways around it! He was SO small, in fact, he couldn’t bear to see someone else rise above him, either in position OR in popularity. And because of that, Saul made David’s life miserable, as we saw two weeks ago, forcing him to become a fugitive in the wilderness of Judea. Living off the land...sleeping in caves...hunted, haunted and hounded both day and night, David was constantly on the edge of death at the hand of Saul and his army who gave David hardly a moment’s rest. As 1st Samuel tells us:

So David stayed out in the wilderness, hiding in the hill country of Ziph.

Saul tried to find him every day to kill him, but God did not turn David over to him.

(1 Sam. 23:14)

But lest you think David was out there all alone in the wilderness, let me assure you, he wasn’t...not by a long shot! Not only was God with him, but he was also accompanied a whole band of other people whom Saul had “done dirty” over the course of his reign as king. Again, listen to how the Bible describes it:

So David fled from Saul and went to a cave near the town of Adullam.

And all kinds of people who were oppressed or in debt or dissatisfied with Saul went to him, about four hundred men in all, and David became their leader.

(1 Sam. 22:1-2)

Israel, you see, was aching under the rule of King Saul. He had overtaxed the people, conscripted their men to fight his many wars and had generally been anything BUT a benevolent kind. And to top it all off, he was a madman, given to wild fits of rage and depression, and the people were suffering the consequences. So when they heard that Saul was giving the SAME kind of treatment to David, the killer of giants and champion of men, they began flocking to him. And David became their leader...sort of like Robin Hood and his band of merry men hiding out in Sherwood Forest and fighting against the injustices of the corrupt Sheriff of Nottingham! David trained them to fight...but NEVER against King Saul. For all of Saul’s anger and resentment toward David, David ALWAYS remained loyal to the King and refused to turn against him, even though Saul constantly sought to get rid of David. No, instead, David and his army fought against Israel’s enemies who were constantly attacking villages and towns and people within Israel’s borders. David was, in fact, HELPING Saul...though Saul, in his paranoia about David, thought David was building an army to OVERTHROW him and claim his throne.

Well for years...not just months, mind you, but YEARS, King Saul made it his goal to get rid of David and what he perceived to be the band of outlaws who had gathered around him. Time and time again, he sent out his troops in an effort to capture David so that he could be brought back to Saul so that Saul himself could kill him. But each time, the Scriptures tell us, “God did not deliver David into Saul’s hand.” Instead, he simply hid out in the rugged Judean desert, a wilderness area of mountains and caves and deep ravines.

Well, on one occasion, after David had once again escaped Saul's troops, David and his men went and stayed at a place called En Gedi. Now En Gedi, which means "the spring of the goats," was a perfect hideout for David. I've been to En Gedi a couple of times now, most recently when Janet and I were in Israel for a course called "Hiking the Holy Land" a little over a year and a half ago. From what they tell me, it hasn't changed much since the days of David. It's a beautiful oasis in the middle of a desert wilderness where freshwater springs and waterfalls flow, lush vegetation grows abundantly and countless caves dot the rocky limestone cliffs high above the Dead Sea. Today, it's a wonderful nature preserve, but in David's time, it was a perfect place to hide. It provided protection and water and a natural lookout spot where he could see anyone who was coming from miles around. So David and his men took refuge among the rocks and caves of En Gedi. And when Saul heard that David was at En Gedi, he took three thousand of his best soldiers and went looking for David and his men.

Now, in case you think the Bible isn't real, but is some kind of idealized, "prettied up" story of life, let me assure you, it isn't! It's a very REAL book about very REAL life with all the sordid details left in. And our story for today is living proof!

In the midst of his mad rush for vengeance, King Saul (putting it as delicately as I know how) had to "answer the call of nature." So he goes into one of the caves in the region in order to have a little privacy as he relieves himself. But instead of entering just ANY old cave, he walks right into the cave where David and his men were hiding! Talk about being vulnerable! It's bad enough for a king to be SEEN at such a moment, doing what comes naturally, but to be caught LITTERALLY with your pants down in the presence of the enemy – man, Oh man!

Now, if you ever want to check out a person's "worldliness" versus their "Godliness", just ask 'em what you should do when your enemy is vulnerable. Unless he or she is a "person after God's own heart," I can almost double dog GUARANTEE you they'll say you should strike while the opportunity is HOT!

And that's EXACTLY what David's men said! *"Hey! Here's your big break, David! Saul's been after you for years! Now's your chance to get rid of him once and for all! He's RIGHT THERE! Kill him while he's vulnerable! This is God's way of providing you the opportunity to become king, just like he promised you would!"*

It's what I like to call "the Devine Justification argument!" When we really want to justify our reason for doing something WE want to do, we claim it's GOD'S WILL! *"It's GOD'S WILL Saul came in this cave this cave, David! God PUT him here so you could finally get rid of him! God WANTS you to kill him! Here's your sword! Go kill him!"*

So what did David do? He crept up behind Saul, ever so quietly, his sword drawn and ready to strike. And then...and THEN...and THEN...*"he cut off the edge of Saul's robe without Saul knowing it."* Now, imagine this scene with me, if you will. There's Saul, on his haunches, squatting down, thinking he's all alone there in the cave, and all the while, totally UNKNOWN to him, David is sneaking up behind him ready to do him in. And yet, when the moment comes for David to plunge the sword into Saul, he just can't DO it. His conscience gets the better of him. So instead of KILLING Saul, David silently cuts off a piece of his robe.

And yet, even doing THAT, the story tells us, caused David a guilty conscience. Instead of GLOATING in what he had done...instead of thinking how WONDERFUL it was that he had restrained himself from KILLING Saul, David felt GUILTY, for heaven's sake. His CONSCIENCE began to hurt, of all things! I mean, what's the big deal? Who CARES about a piece off Saul's robe? So his hem wasn't level anymore! Who's going to notice!

Well, the truth of the matter was that DAVID was going to notice because he knew GOD was going to notice! David, you see, had fallen victim to one of life's most SUBTLE temptations...REVENGE! No, he hadn't KILLED Saul...that's true...and he should get credit for that! He was too much a man after God's own heart to do THAT! But he had, even in a very small, insignificant way, gotten REVENGE on Saul, none-the-less. He'd gotten CLOSE enough to kill him, but he'd only cut off a piece of his robe instead. But even that small bit of revenge caused David to feel terribly guilty!

You see, when you really try to walk in the ways of the Lord, as David certainly TRIED to do, you try to come to terms with even the SMALLEST of details. So it BOTHERS you when even

something LITTLE keeps you from being a person after God's own heart. Someone lashes out at you and you snap back with a snide comment...and suddenly, your CONSCIENCE begins to hurt! Somebody whose "done you wrong" finally gets what's coming to them and you can't help but be happy about it...but then, guess what, you begin to feel GUILTY about it all! Someone's gotten the better of you...gotten ahead of you time and time again – at work...at school...on the team...in the club – but then, for whatever reason, they fall from their pedestal and you cheer. But then you know, in your heart of hearts, that you shouldn't FEEL that way. Oh, its not that YOU'VE done something overtly wrong. YOU didn't strike them down with the sword of vengeance and anger. But even those little feelings of glee over someone else's misfortune...even those little tit-for-tat "digs" at someone else's expense...even that little bit of satisfaction you feel when your enemy finally falls, they are ALL part of one of life's most subtle temptations – the desire to GET EVEN...to have REVENGE...the desire for VENGEANCE! And for those of us who are seeking to be "people after God's own heart," they just aren't right. Yea, they may only be little things. They may do no real harm. But they start us on a stead downhill slide that we often cannot stop until we find ourselves drowning in a cesspool of revenge.

David knew it wasn't right...and WE know it's not right. "*Vengeance is MINE*," says the Lord. "*I will repay!*" (Rom. 12:19) So David put his confidence in God and refused to do harm to King Saul.

Now, as the story continues, Saul finishes what he came into the cave to do and heads back out to his troops who have been standing guard at a discrete distance outside the cave...completely unaware, of course, of what has just happened to him IN the cave. But following right BEHIND him is DAVID, clutching that piece of Saul's robe in his hand. So intent is David in righting the wrong between him and Saul that he DARES to call out Saul's name...alerting not only the KING of his presence, but the king's 3000 cracker-jack soldiers as well! No REMEMBER that Saul has given orders to his troops to KILL David the moment they lay eyes on him!

But notice what David does next. He BOWS DOWN before his king! And then he says to Saul:

*"Oh my king, WHY do you listen to those who say I'm trying to harm you?
I am NOT trying to kill you. If I were, I could have done it just now in the cave.
But instead, I simply cut off a piece of your robe to PROVE to you I mean you no harm.
Revenge is GOD'S responsibility, not mine!"* (1 Sam. 24:9-15)

Now, lest you think David was parading his righteousness before Saul, let me assure you, he wasn't! David wasn't that kind of person. But neither was he going to let Saul go on with his murderous plans to kill him without Saul knowing the truth. "*I COULD have taken your life, Saul, but I didn't! I COULD have struck when you were most vulnerable, but I didn't! Instead, I will let God judge between me and you.*"

And then, notice Saul's response. Saul was HUMBLED. He couldn't believe his ears and began to cry. And then he said to David,

*"You're a better man than I am David, for you have repaid me good for evil.
You have been wonderfully kind to me, for when the Lord delivered me into your hand,
you didn't kill me. Who else in the world would have let his enemy get away when he
had him in his power? May the Lord reward you well for the kindness you have shown
me this day. I know now that YOU will one day be king. So promise me this!
Promise me in the Lord's name that you will not hurt my children or my children's
children so that my descendants may live forever in the land of Israel."*

"And David promised what Saul had asked!"

And then Saul took his troops and went back home. And David and his men went back to their hiding place. (1 Sam. 24:16-22)

Now, let's be honest here! I wish I could promise you that each and every time you refuse to take revenge...each and every time you give up your feelings of ill-will toward someone...each and

every time you “talk it out” with the person you’re having a conflict with, the outcome will be as positive as it was between David and Saul. And I wish I could assure you that every time you do what is right, your enemy will see the error of his ways as quickly as Saul and everyone can go home with smiles upon their faces. But I CAN’T! I can’t make that kind of promise of give you that kind of assurance because it often doesn’t happen that way. You know it and I know it.

But even without that assurance, it is STILL important to do what is right in the eyes of the Lord! How your enemy will respond is between that person and God. It may be IMPOSSIBLE to make him change his mind. She may DIE believing some lie about you. But deep down inside your heart of hearts, where it really matters, YOU will know that YOU have done what is RIGHT in God’s sight because you have REFUSED to give in to revenge. You have TRIED to set the matter straight.

And lest you think that the Bible has sugar-coated this story to make it seem like everyone lived happily ever after because David refused to take revenge...let me assure you, that was NOT the case. When Saul gave up his quest to kill David and went back home, notice carefully that David did not go back home WITH him. Why NOT? after all, David was Saul’s son-in-law. he was married to Saul’s daughter. He was a member of the royal court. He was the commander of Saul’s troops. But the story tells us that David and his men went BACK to their hiding place. WHY?

Because David was no FOOL. Because David was REALISTIC. And though he had refused to take REVENGE on Saul...and though he had TRIED to make amends with Saul, he still KNEW Saul – all too well. Because, you see, before too much time had passed, Saul was right back to his old ways and was trying to KILL David all over again.

So had David’s refusal to give in to the temptation of revenge been for nothing? ABSOLUTELY NOT! David had done what was right in the eyes of the Lord! The rest of the story was in God’s hands!

Now, let’s leave the ancient scene between David and Saul and see what truths might be brought back into our lives today. There are, it seems to me, three helpful principles we can draw from the David story to help us deal with this most SUBTLE OF temptation we ALL feel from time to time to get even...to seek REVENGE.

First of all, it may sound cold or callous to say it, but EXPECT TO BE MISTREATED. From time to time we will ALL have someone who “does us dirty”...who treats us badly...who accuses us falsely...who judges us harshly. The same nature that beat in the heart of Saul beats in the heart of every person, yours and mine included. So EXPECT to be treated unfairly every now and then.

SECONDLY, since mistreatment is inevitable, ANTICIPATE YOUR FEELINGS OF REVENGE. Now, I’m not saying give IN to them. I’m not saying RETALIATE. I’m saying ANTICIPATE the feelings that will naturally well up in your heart because you are human and human nature says “strike back”...“get even”...when someone has done you wrong. Handling the urge for revenge doesn’t come easily...or naturally. Which is why Jesus’ teaching is so revolutionary: *“Do unto others as you would HAVE them do unto you...not as the DO unto you.”* Rare is the person who will not retaliate...or at least WANT to. So ANTICIPATE the feelings of revenge that well up inside of you and be ready to deal with them.

The THIRD thing to remember when tempted to revenge, however, is to REFUSE TO GIVE IN TO THE TEMPTATION. Revenge will never get you ANYWHERE...except perhaps into a never-ending, forever escalating war of tit-for-tat. So DON’T give in to it! That’s why David came out on top. His men said, *“Go get him, David!”* And I’m convinced he almost did! But at the last second, he knew it wasn’t right and instead of plunging the knife in Saul’s back, he cut off a piece of his robe instead. He REFUSED to give in to revenge!

But that, of course, is easier said than done, now isn’t it? So something else is needed as well. And that, I believe, is PRAYER. When the feelings of revenge well up inside you and you are tempted...SORELY TEMPTED...to lash out...to strike back...to get even – whether it’s with words...or fists...or a gun...or a cold shoulder...or a stab in the back – WHATEVER it is that we use for revenge – that is PRECISELY when we need to ask for God’s presence in our hearts so that we DON’T give in to the temptation to get even. RARELY can we do it on our own. But with God’s help...with God’s strength and presence and guidance...which we call the Holy Spirit...I’m convinced we CAN resist.

If you are resentful of the way someone has treated you...if you're holding it against that person, hoping to retaliate or get even in some way...you need to ask God to FREE YOU from that bondage. The secret, plain and simple, is FORGIVENESS! Claim God's power to forgive through Jesus Christ. Begin by asking God to forgive you for ALLOWING those hateful feelings of bitterness to grow within your heart...and then ask to take the bitterness and resentment you've been storing up within you and drown them in the great sea of God's grace and mercy and love.

Okay now, you may be sitting there about now thinking to yourself: *"Alright already! I've heard the message! DON'T SEEK REVENGE! I get it! So why doesn't he just sit down and be done with it, for heaven's sake?"*

And I'll say back to you, *"Okay, I WILL sit down."* But before I do, let me just say that before this day is done, I can pretty much guarantee you SOMEBODY will SAY something or DO something that ;will push your hot-button...that will rub you the wrong way...that will make you angry...or hurt your feelings...and before you know it, the temptation to seek revenge will once again come knocking at the door of your heart. And you'll WANT to get even...you'll WANT to pay 'em back...you'll WANT to get your licks in...or take 'em down a peg or two...giving back to THEM as good as THEY'VE given to you. It is such a SUBTLE temptation.

So let me just say it to you ONE MORE TIME:

DON'T DO IT!

Remember what the Apostle Paul wrote:

Ask God to BLESS those who persecute you! Yes, ask God to BLESS them, not persecute them. If someone has done you wrong, do not repay him with another wrong. Do everything in your power to live in peace with everyone. Never take revenge, but instead let God handle it. Do not be overcome by evil. Instead, overcome evil with good! (Rom. 12:14, 17-21)

Which, in reality, is not much different from what Jesus said, now was it?

*Do not take revenge on someone who has done you wrong.
Instead, love your enemies and PRAY for those who persecute you!
(Matt. 5: 39, 44)*

When one of life's most subtle temptations begins to creep up on you, like David, refuse to give in to it! Let GOD take revenge if revenge is due! Trust me on this one! You'll never regret forgiving someone who doesn't deserve it!

This document was created with Win2PDF available at <http://www.win2pdf.com>.
The unregistered version of Win2PDF is for evaluation or non-commercial use only.
This page will not be added after purchasing Win2PDF.