

Taking Vengeance

2 Thessalonians 1

Sunday, September 6, 2020 at The First Congregational Church of Marshalltown, Iowa

Introduction: If justice is denied you, don't stoop to vengeance (Romans 12:19 "beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, 'Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,' says the Lord." [quote from Deuteronomy 32:35]) One of the more difficult commands of Scripture is that if justice is denied us, we are not to stoop to vengeance. The Old Testament instruction of "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" was there to make sure that punishment fit the crime. In the days of the Old Testament a person who caused an unintentional death of another person was in danger of being killed in vengeance by a relative. In the days of Jesus, the nation of Israel was an unwilling participant of the Roman Empire. Soldiers of the Empire often forced Israeli citizens to drop whatever they were doing and carry the soldier's equipment. It became enough of a problem that the Roman Senate ordered soldiers to limit this example of Israeli forced servitude to one mile. After one mile, the soldier had to let the Israeli get back to his business. Jesus taught His disciples to go two miles.

Set the stage

At the background of all this is that vengeance is not off the table. The Bible does not tell us to simply be passive and submit to all manner of injustice. Even Jesus said that if you call someone a fool, you are in danger of hell fire. In 2 Thessalonians, believed to be one of the earliest documents written in the New Testament makes much of the return of Jesus Christ in firey judgment and wrath. It is a major theme of both Thessalonian epistles, and it was here that the Apostle Paul told the fledgling church of Thessalonica to come back down from the hills and get back to work. They weren't going to get to camp out until the Lord returns. But this requires a few comments about the wrath of God.

A. Verse 5 The God of the Bible is a rejected God.

In verse four Paul mentions the patience and endurance of the Christians of this city and wrote in the next verse: "...which is manifest evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, which you also suffer;..." If brings to the fore that this letter was written by a persecuted Christian to other persecuted Christians, as was much of the New Testament. In fact, through almost all of the Bible God faces rejection by the people He created. In Isaiah the Holy Spirit is depicted as standing in the city square offering help and salvation to anyone who needs, and is rejected all around. It is a misunderstanding to think that

the Bible depicts a God who is easily angered and impatient, when in fact the Bible depicts God as exactly the opposite. God is often rejected and the Gospel of Jesus is often rejected, just ask all the Christians who are persecuted in different parts of the world today. We depend utterly on God, but much of humanity wants little to do with Him.

B. If there is no wrath, then God is indifferent to injustice.

A corollary to this is that God cannot be a God without wrath because God is not indifferent to justice, and there is much injustice in the world. I'll never forget the conversation I had with a person, someone known to be understated and sober in judgment, when she told me about her sister, murdered in her own driveway. She was certain the culprit had been her estranged husband, but his trial declared him "not guilty" due to insufficient evidence. It galled her to no end to know that her ex-brother in law had gotten away with it. It's hard to find anything to say in a conversation like that, but it happens. Several years ago journalists discovered that thousands of people in Africa were starving with tons of grain rotting at port because officials demanded, and did not receive, bribes. If there is no wrath, then God is indifferent to injustice.

Application: Unconditional love is not unconditional nice.

One application of this passage is that unconditional love is not unconditional nice. God is perfect love yet is still a God of wrath against injustice, thus when justice is denied us, we do not stoop to revenge, because the Lord has said, "vengeance is Mine, I will repay." Otherwise, we find our understanding of the Lord to be someone sweet and saccharine. It's not realistic and it's not biblical

Conclusion

Wrath is not a popular topic for sermons, but is a clear presence in the Scriptures. Jesus spoke of the wrath of God as well as the Epistles and the Old Testament. The demands of justice require that a God of justice not ignore all the injustice in the world. If we are subject to injustice, we are not to stoop to revenge, because God will judge.