

‘Vengeance Is Mine’ Says the Lord

Former President Trump’s “I am your retribution” comments at CPAC have created the expected firestorm. For his loyal supporters, this was vintage Trump, as once again, he stood up boldly to fight for “us” against “them.”

To paraphrase, “They may have hurt you, but I will make them pay!” For Trump critics, this was Trump at his arrogant and dangerous worst, pledging a holy war against those who stood in his way.

To quote Trump in full, “In 2016, I declared I am your voice. Today, I add I am your warrior, I am your justice. And for those who have been wronged and betrayed, I am your retribution. I am your retribution. Not going to let this happen. Not going to let it happen. I will totally obliterate the deep state.”

To repeat those central words: “I am your retribution.”

What are we to make of this?

What immediately came to my mind when I heard these words was a passage from Romans 12.

There Paul wrote, “Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.’ To the contrary, ‘if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.’ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Rom. 12:19–21, quoting from Deut. 32:35 and Prov. 25:21-22).

To be sure, as followers of Jesus, we are to pursue justice,

which is one of the highest values in God's sight.

That's why the prophets constantly exhorted the people of Israel to plead for the cause of the widow and orphan and to stand up for the poor and the oppressed. As stated in the Law itself, "Follow justice and justice alone, so that you may live and possess the land the LORD your God is giving you" (Deut. 16:20).

Or, in the oft-quoted words from the book of Amos, after the Lord stated plainly that he had no interest in Israel's hypocritical religious celebrations, He said, "let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream" (Amos 5:24).

Justice and righteousness were the things God desired, not some empty, hypocritical religious display.

In fact, justice is so important that the Scriptures actually state that, "Righteousness and justice are the foundation of [God's] throne" (Ps. 89:14; 97:2). That is saying something!

By all means, then, as God's children, let us pursue justice on every level.

But justice is very different than retribution. Retribution is about vengeance, about settling a personal score, about hurting the ones who hurt you. Paul says plainly that we are to leave that to God. He Himself will repay, and when He does, it will be dreadful.

Again, this does not mean that it is wrong to pursue a righteous settlement in court if your business partner betrayed you or if your ex-husband stops paying alimony. And when we see inequities in the society or when we encounter acts of cruelty, we should openly oppose them and work against them.

But it is another thing entirely to have it in for someone, to

determine to strike them back (or even take them out), to seek to impose pain on them.

To say it again, that is God's business and God's prerogative. He knows how to make people pay for the wrong they have done.

And what if He decides to show mercy? What if He decides to give someone time to repent? What if His timetable (or approach) is different than ours?

Our responsibility is simple. We are to overcome evil with good. We are to repay cursing with blessing. We are to pray for our persecutors, not asking the Lord to destroy them but to save them. After all, didn't He have great mercy on us when we were living in sin and rebellion?

As for the treatment of our personal enemies, this is a command, not a suggestion: "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head." To this Proverbs adds, "and the LORD will reward you" (Prov. 25:22).

And what does it mean to heap burning coals on your enemy's head?

Commentators suggest that, "The action is interpreted as producing punishment, or a burning shame, or remorse and conversion. Of these, the best understanding is that a change of heart on the part of the enemy is produced. Moreover, there is the assurance that the Lord will reward the person who acts with such magnanimity toward an enemy" (Rowland E. Murphy).

So, rather than try to destroy our enemies or bring retribution on them, our goal should be their conversion and transformation. That is the radical Jesus way.

Of course, some of us will immediately try to rationalize our way out of this command, saying that such efforts are a sign of compromise. Or we'll create ridiculous scenarios, asking,

“So, if a killer breaks into my house, am I supposed to cook him a nice meal?”



That is obviously not what the Word is saying.

But God is calling us to crucify our flesh, to put down our carnal desires for retribution, and to make it our goal to overcome evil with good, thereby following in the footsteps of the Lord.

As for vengeance and retribution, we do best to leave that to God. {eoa}

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