

Five Petitions: #3 For We Ourselves Forgive

<p>LUKE 11:1-4 (NRSV) <i>He was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples."</i>² <i>He said to them, "When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be your name.</i></p>	<p><i>Your kingdom come.</i> ³ <i>Give us each day our daily bread.</i> ⁴ <i>And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.</i> <i>And do not bring us to the time of trial."</i></p>
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It's been relatively quiet in the Middle East for a few days; but, in a typical week, world news covers an Israeli air strike in the Gaza Strip—in retaliation for the bombing of an Israeli synagogue—which was in retaliation for Israeli shelling of a Palestinian settlement on the West Bank—which was in retaliation for the Palestinian kidnapping of three Israeli teenagers—which was in retaliation... And it goes all the way back to 1948: retaliation after retaliation after retaliation.

And, while the Jewish people are held in contempt in the Middle East and Eastern Europe, they have the sympathy of much of the Western world.

After all, they're God's chosen people, and six million of their number were exterminated in Hitler's gas chambers. Russian Jews, the largest concentration of Jews, were relocated time after time from. If you've seen "Fiddler on the Roof," that story is set in one of those relocations. So, the Jews had the Sympathy of much of the Western World.

In the peace talks after WWI, parts of the Ottoman Empire were handed over to the French and parts were handed over to the British—including Palestine, which they governed under a League of Nations mandate from 1920 to 1948.

The British strictly limited Jewish immigration into Palestine; but after WWII, there was pressure to lift those restrictions. When the League of Nations mandate ended, the British left town in the middle of the night.

With the British gone, David ben Gurion led an unprecedented number of Jews into the area and set up Kibbutzim—small collective communities. In reality, many of them were armed camps from which raids were made into surrounding Arab villages—Jews taking back their Promised Land. After President Truman recognized the Nation of Israel in May of 1948, the military conflicts increased, and Israeli forces eventually occupied almost all of Palestine.

And those Palestinians had the gall to fight back! How dare they! Many people still blame them for the ongoing cycle of retaliation that continues today.

In 1981, on a crisp May morning in Jerusalem I was on a 2nd floor balcony just off the dining room of our hotel, waiting for our group to gather for breakfast and enjoying a cup of coffee with our Christian Arab guide, Gabriel Mota.

The balcony overlooked the Old City wall built in 1541. Gabriel pointed to a

house about a half-block, on the other side of the wall. He said, "That house was my father's house; and his father's before him, and his father's before him. But in 1949—I was five years old—these people came with their guns and drove us out of our home. They drove everybody out of their homes. My father tried to fight them, and they shot him. He was crippled for the rest of his life."

Here's the thing: many people believe that was OK—that those Palestinian people should voluntarily have given up their homes and their government and their culture, and let the Jews come in and take over the land they had occupied for 1900 years, because, after all, they were God's chosen people, and this was the land God had given them—their Promised Land.

Chosen people or not—Promised Land or not—I cannot see God's hand in the way that went down; nor do I see any direct connection, other than ethnic, between the state of Israel today and Israel of the Hebrew Scriptures.

In fact, I can't see God's hand in the way it happened the first time—about 3,000 years earlier—when "Joshua fit the battle of Jericho." Same kind of thing: Jews moved into the territory and took over or destroyed people's homes, and those people had the audacity to fight back. How dare they!

So, am I questioning the Bible? Contradicting it? No. But I am questioning centuries of interpretation of the Bible, because I've begun reading it through the lens of Jesus of Nazareth. Through that lens I discover a fresh understanding of the nature of God. Jesus; the "Word-become-flesh" (John 1:14). Jesus: "The visible image of the invisible God" (Colossians 1:15). Jesus: the one who taught us to pray, "*And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us.*"

Our society no longer regards the Golden Rule as the supreme code for moral conduct. The prevailing mantras are "Do unto others as they do unto you" or worse "I don't get mad, I get even!" We did not learn those ethics from Jesus. Jesus taught non-retaliation, nonviolence, doing good to our enemies, overcoming evil with good, and leaving vengeance up to God.

"An eye for an eye" is stated three times in the Law of Moses¹, and is expanded in subsequent texts: "tooth for tooth, life for a life, burn for burn, foot for foot" and on and on. It was meant to replace the existing pattern of unlimited retaliation with a law of *limited* retaliation: "no more than an eye for an eye..." It was meant as a standard for judicial sentencing. But, if it ever was honored, by Jesus' time it had been abandoned. The vicious, unending cycle of retaliation and hate continued—and it continues today. But Jesus took even the law of *limited* retaliation to a new level.

Read those Old Testament passages through this lens:

¹Exodus 21:22-25; Leviticus 24:17-22; Deuteronomy 19:15-21

(LUKE 6:28-38 NRSV) *"But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, ²⁸bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. ²⁹If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. ³⁰Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. ³¹Do to others as you would have them do to you. ³²"If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. ³³If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. ³⁴If you lend to those from whom you*

hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. ³⁵But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. ³⁶Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. ³⁷"Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; ³⁸give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back."

Jesus taught not only to reject retaliation, but even to work for the good of those who seek to harm us. Paul takes it a step further: "Overcome Evil with good" (Romans 12:21) Ridiculous! Right?

When Jesus was arrested, He didn't retaliate. Where did that get him? At His trial He didn't retaliate when slapped and beaten and spit upon. Where did that get him? As He hung on the cross, he didn't retaliate. He prayed, "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:24). Forgive. There's that pesky word again: *"And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us."*

Israel ignored Moses' law of limited retaliation. Where did that get them? The world ignores Jesus' teaching of non-retaliation. Where has that gotten us? If we turn the other cheek, quite likely it'll get slapped, too; and the crowd will laugh and chant, "Hit him again!" But the cycle of retaliation will have been broken.

Only one response can break the cycle. Retaliation feeds itself and extends the evil—repeating it over and over. A penal system of justice punishes it, but doesn't undo its effect. Only forgiveness can overcome it: when the injured party takes the hit and doesn't return it—refuses to allow it to go any further.

Gregory Boyd writes, "Any peace achieved by violence is a peace forever threatened by violence, thus ensuring that the bloody tit-for-tat game will be perpetuated."²

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who knows a thing or two about forgiveness because he's seen a thing or two about forgiveness, said, "Forgiveness is not an occasional act, it is a constant attitude."

Mahatma Gandhi said, "The weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is the attribute of the strong." Maybe you thought following Jesus would be easy?

² Boyd, op. cit. location 336.