
Escalated Retaliation

When I was a kid, my brothers and I would sometimes have arguments that involved the escalation of physical violence. If I hit my brother, he would hit me back, not once but twice. While hitting me, he would say, "Once for doing it, and once to get you back." If I did the same to him using the same reasoning, I could hit him four times. He could then retaliate by hitting me eight times. We never made it that far, but after thirty rounds, if we persisted, we would be hitting each other more than a million times.

The act of retaliation is rarely equivalent to the act that provoked it. If soldiers from one country kill 25 civilians in another country, the second country might retaliate by killing 28 civilians in the first country. That escalation of retaliation is a lot slower than what my brothers and I practiced, but there is still escalation. Eventually both sides will end up annihilating each other, if retaliation is allowed to continue.

In the Old Testament, we see laws that follow the rule, "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." From our perspective, we might find these laws rather harsh, but historians tell us that these laws were remarkably more just and fair than most of the law codes of that era. For example, in many legal systems, a rich person, if he received a minor cut on his leg at the hands of a poor person, could retaliate by stabbing the poor person in the belly. And, if a poor person lost his hand because a rich person cut it off, that poor person could do nothing. The legal code of the Bible said that regardless of status, someone who received a minor cut from another could go not escalate the injury, on the one hand, and on the other hand, no one was except from retribution. We would say that this kind of law is just and fair. Jesus took this law a little further and said that if someone should happen to slap us in the face, we should turn the other cheek so that they can slap us again. (Matthew 5:38ff). What Jesus is suggesting is not completely fair, but in a completely opposite way of what is normally practiced when there is elevated retaliation. Jesus himself practiced this when he was arrested and crucified. He could have retaliated, but he allowed his oppressors to take his dignity, his possessions, and his life. He turned the other cheek, although he was fully able to annihilate those who took his life, and he could have done so with a snap of his fingers.

As our culture moves rapidly away from its Judeo-Christians roots, we see it returning to the pre-Old Testament situation. In some reading I have been doing about the "wokeism" I have discovered that escalating retaliation is become an acceptable way of dealing with problems. Wokeism has been around for more than half a century, but its manifestation has changed rapidly over the last decade or so. When wokeism (probably not identified by that name at that time) first came on the scene, it was a movement in which those who had fewer opportunities because of their skin colour, gender, or ethnicity asked that these inequalities be removed. Affirmative action resulted in laws which were meant to limit or possibly eliminate discrimination. As Christians we must affirm the early efforts of those who identified themselves as "woke," because we recognize that all people bear the image of God and all people must be treated fairly.

Wokeism continued to develop, and instead of simply raising awareness and calling for change in laws and attitude, became much more militant. Wokeism today encourages people to identify as being oppressed

(and there seems to be a race to become the most oppressed) and then encourages people to fight against their perceived oppressors by fighting back. In order to achieve equity, however, one must do more than just fight to become equal; one must fight to conquer and overcome and overpower. Thus, it became the practice in some institutions to give priority in hiring practices to those who are identified as “oppressed,” while ignoring someone who might be equally or better qualified. On a more militant level, it is common practice to identify certain segments of the population as “oppressors” simply because of their skin colour or gender. Even saying something negative about those who identify as “oppressed” earns one the label of “bigot.” Hate language laws tend to side with those who identify as “oppressed,” and if the same language is used against someone who is perceived as an “oppressor” nothing is said. What has happened is that the very values identified as being problematic by wokeism have become the tools used by wokeism today. What has changed is not the culture but the ones who are the oppressors and the oppressed.

By moving away from Judeo-Christian values, retaliation becomes an acceptable way to respond to oppressors.

Now, before we all start pointing the fingers at others, we also might pause and think about what is happening in the United States. President Trump signed a number of executive orders in which he hopes will change the direction of the United States. Many Christians, along with large segments of the population, hail his signatures as being a big step in the right direction. But is what he is doing too big of a step? To put it another way, is his reaction (fueled by the desires of many Americans) a “once for doing it, once to get you back” approach? Is his response an escalation of retaliation? I don’t know enough of the facts to pass judgement, but from the rhetoric I hear, there is a strong sense that the right needs to take back what it perceives it has lost, and it is willing to go to great extremes to do so. If someone is acting in this way, is this not also playing by the same rules as radical wokeism?

We must carefully consider the teachings of Scripture. The Old Testament says that we may take an eye for an eye and a tooth for tooth, but we may go no further. We might call this fair retaliation (not escalated retaliation). Jesus won’t allow for even that as he calls us to turn the other cheek, allowing ourselves to be oppressed and even abused as a witness to God’s grace. It seems that it might be a good time for those who name themselves as followers of Jesus Christ to take a hard look at Matthew 5:38ff and ask ourselves how we can best respond to the situation we find ourselves in today.

Some are saying (or at least hoping) that the pendulum has started swinging the other way, and they are happy to give it a little push to get it swinging faster. But so doing, it could well swing far too far the other way, creating a whole new set of problems. The pendulum, we might say, is what is happening in this world. But citizens of the Kingdom of God have been called out of this world, and we are called to a new way. The act of turning the other cheek stops the pendulum from swinging altogether. It puts a damper on escalating retaliation and stops it in its tracks.

As the values of Judeo-Christianity rapidly disappear from the western value system, as followers of Jesus Christ, we have a duty to maintain the values of Jesus and not participate in the ways of the world. I don’t know what that looks like, exactly, but to me it does not take the form of retaliation. If I read my Bible correctly, the Christian response ought to be one of humility and sacrifice, and I hope to learn what that looks like for us in our current situation. Perhaps we can think about this together.

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