

## How to Get Even

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When someone wrongs us, there is a natural human urge to get even—usually by returning the injury upon the perp. But the Bible shows a better way.

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*“Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, ‘Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,’ says the Lord. Therefore ‘If your enemy is hungry, feed him; If he is thirsty, give him a drink; For in so doing you will heap coals of fire on his head.’ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Rom. 12:19-21).*



The history of humanity is one long, sad story of people getting even with each other. Spouses, neighbors, co-workers, politicians, and even brethren are offended by something said or done to them and seek to return the favor to the offenders.

By definition, “getting even” involves an asymmetrical liability between two parties in a relationship. One party perceives a debt owed by the other and seeks to balance the books by “getting even.” The objective is to return to a state in which the debt is settled and neither party owes the other.

Or at least, that’s the theory. In practice, there are two ways to seek this balance.

The first approach—and by far the most common—is to exact revenge. Return the wrong. Strike back. Repay in kind. Do unto others as they have done to us. The problem, of course, is that we are

poor judges of balance, and our revenge—driven by anger or hatred—almost always ends up tilting the imbalance the other way. The debt is not removed but reversed.

Revenge is therefore *cyclical*. It is also terribly *destructive*. A good example of this is the story of Samson and the Philistines in Judges 15. Notice the motive driving the behavior of both parties:

*Samson*: “Since you would do a thing like this, I will surely take revenge on you, and after that I will cease” (v. 7).

*Philistines*: “We have come up to arrest Samson, to do to him as he has done to us” (v. 10).

Naturally, neither party found satisfaction in their paybacks, so the cycle of violence went on and on, until the day Samson and thousands of Philistines died together in a mutually destructive showdown.

Sound familiar? Marriages break up, churches crumble, and nations beat each other into a bloody pulp, because people are determined to make sure the other guy gets what’s coming to him. But all it accomplishes is to multiply the misery among everyone.

Paul advises another approach: *Return evil with good*. Instead of exacting revenge, simply forgive the offense and respond with genuine kindness. To forgive means to “release from debt.” When we forgive someone who has wronged us, the balance is settled. We get even by a deliberate decision to cancel the debt. There is no risk of creating a new imbalance that might trigger further reaction. Both parties in the relationship are now truly debt-free.

But we recoil against that option. It looks like we’re letting the bad guy get off scot-free. If the one who wronged me is not repaid in kind for his offense, isn’t he getting away with his crime?

When we think like that, we betray our own small mind. We forget that “vengeance is Mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” God keeps a good set of books, and someday He will make everything right in His own way. Nobody will ever get away with anything.

At His trial, Jesus had both the right and the power to strike down His accusers for their outrageous abuse of justice. But He refused to exercise that right. He knew God would take care of it in His own time. Instead, He showed unconditional kindness by dying for them. He asks us now to do the same when we face injustice. We get even, not by returning evil, but by returning good.

— David King