Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: “It is mine to avenge; I will repay,” says the Lord. On the contrary: “If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.” Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. (New International Version-1984)

Revenge – how often have you taken it or wanted to? Ever felt satisfied, OK with getting revenge, even justified in doing it? Guilty again, right?

Someone recently suggested that part of the reason we feel that way about revenge might the “re” part of that word. The person said that the “re” reminds us that our action wasn’t the first action taken – or as children like to say, “I didn’t start it, he did.” So we tend to feel, since an uncalled for or hurtful action was taken by the other person, what we did (revenge) was only in response, and our action is justifiable.

We didn’t start it by tailgating our car, but we’re the ones who will respond by letting them pass and tailgating them until they turn off. We weren’t the employee who acted like he couldn’t be bothered to tell us the aisle number for – much less show us where in the aisle – the product we were looking for was. But it was kind of sweet and satisfying to find ourselves in that person’s checkout lane and to take out a bunch of change and slowly count out 23 pennies (and put them on the counter instead of in the clerk’s hand).

Someone has said that revenge is a dish best served cold, because sometimes people prefer to let some time go by. They wait for just the right moment for getting back at the other person.

Why do so many movies and TV shows have revenge as a theme? A character has been badly wronged and humiliated, and human nature (including your human nature and mine) likes it when the wronged person finally comes up with a way to give the bad guys their comeuppance – especially if the payback matches what the bad guys did.

“And what’s really wrong with that?” people say. “Doesn’t the Bible say, Eye for eye, tooth for tooth?” It does (Deut. 19:21). So it might be a little confusing and somewhat frustrating this morning to hear that the Bible also says, Do not take revenge.

The reason? God says, It is mine to avenge. Simply stated, payback is God’s department. It’s in God’s job description, not ours, just as payback is not our children’s job.

When we parents find that one of our children took revenge on a brother or sister, we are not pleased; and it’s not because we don’t believe in justice or payback or punishment for wrongdoing. But parents believe that they have been called to administer family justice and give out punishment – not their children; and those parents are absolutely right.

When we think about getting revenge against someone who has wronged us, know that God is as offended by sins as we are, because that person has gone beyond the line of one of God’s commandments. And know that God will not let that go.

God says: I will repay. Not “I might repay” or “Sometimes I repay” or “I repay if I’m aware of the wrong that was done,” but I will repay. When someone sins against you, God will repay them for what they have done. A holy and just God who is on record – his own record – as hating punishment – not their children; and those parents are absolutely right.

Maybe he will punish them almost immediately by having a police officer pull them over for tailgating. By the way, this is where the Bible’s Eye for eye, tooth for tooth principle applies. It applies to governments, whom God has appointed as his representatives to carry out justice. God has not given a similar command to individuals.

Maybe God will punish wrong-doers not far down the road, as their boss sees repeated examples of their bad attitude and fires them. Maybe the repayment won’t seem to ever come as they go through life. But even then you can be sure that there will be payback. It will be in eternity and will be much worse and much longer than payback we could have come up with for the damage and hurt they caused us.

God will repay. But before we start rubbing our hands or pumping our fists at that, remember that God is talking about repaying people who have sinned against him and us. But you and I have also sinned against God and other people and done it a lot.

Our verses tell us to leave room for God’s wrath. and we generally take that to mean: Get out of God’s way when it comes to revenge; step back so God can do his thing; but so many times we have opposed God and gone the way of seeking revenge ourselves, which gives the words, leave room for God’s wrath, another application.

In the last book of the Bible an angel talks about a person who opposes God and says that person will drink of the wine of God’s fury, which has been poured full strength into the cup of his wrath (Rev. 14:10).
Two chapters later, regarding someone else who goes against God, another angel says that God gave her the cup filled with the wine of the fury of his wrath (16:19).

God’s wrath or anger over sin doesn’t come in a liter bottle that makes you feel more than full. No, our sins have filled the cup much fuller than that. It’s not a 64-ounce Big Gulp that you really can’t finish. Hear what God said to the Prophet Jeremiah, Take from my hand this cup filled with the wine of my wrath and make all the nations to whom I send you drink it...Then tell them... “Drink, get drunk and vomit...” (25:15,27)

It’s an ugly picture, but it shows us that when God pulls the plug on his wrath, it will come out in such an overwhelming rush and amount that drinking it will be more than a person can swallow and keep down.

If the thought of stepping up to the spigot God’s wrath, his deserved revenge and repayment for your sin, is frightening, imagine how Jesus felt as he stared down an enormous cup of suffering filled to the brim, not only with your sins, but also with the sins of every person ever. We have an idea of how he felt. Just the thought of it drove him to his knees in Gethsemane Garden. It caused him to say that he was overwhelmed with sorrow and to literally plead with God to find a way to avoid having him drink the cup of God’s wrath. (Mt. 26:36-44).

It’s often said there was no other way, but there was another way. The other way was for Jesus to push the cup away and to say, “Father, give this to those whose sins have filled it up.” But Jesus knew we couldn’t drink that cup and survive, so for three hours on the cross he drank and drank, choking on God’s wrath, barely able to get enough air for an anguished cry (Mt. 27:46): “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

And then it was over – for Jesus and for you and me. God had carried through on his promise to repay sin, but he had shown his great love for us by having his Son Jesus drink it in our place. And because Jesus did that, your cup is empty, and you are forgiven.

Yes, it is God’s to avenge, but it is also his to show the mercy and grace that gives us peace, and it is ours to live and talk in ways that show that mercy and grace to others. Notice that Paul urges us to avoid the temptation to take revenge, but he doesn’t say that we should take no action at all. Instead, he says, If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.

Don’t misunderstand. Paul isn’t saying, “Treat the person who wronged you so nicely that he feels like a total heel. He’ll hate that!” That would make us guilty of revenge, wouldn’t it? Rather Paul is saying, “Show your enemy the love and forgiveness that God has shown you. When you do that, the contrast between his action and your reaction will cause his conscience to more clearly and painfully accuse him of his sin.”

The goal of this? Paul says, Overcome evil with good. Perhaps in fear the person who hurt you will come to you for answers—and if he does, you can tell him how Jesus lived a perfect life in place of sinners, continually responding to and overcoming evil with good, like when he turned down James and John’s suggestion that he take revenge by calling down fire on Samaritans who didn’t welcome him (Lk. 9:51-56), and when he prayed for the those who had put him on the cross (Lk. 23:34). You can maybe tell your wondering former enemy that Jesus drank the cup of God’s wrath, and perhaps that person will believe and become a brother or sister in Christ.

“Repay” and “revenge” are popular and tempting, but don’t go there. They’re bittersweet. Redeemed, restored, forgiven are sweeter and more satisfying things by far and will be forever. Drink those things up and in and share them with others so things are sweeter and more satisfying for you and them. Amen.