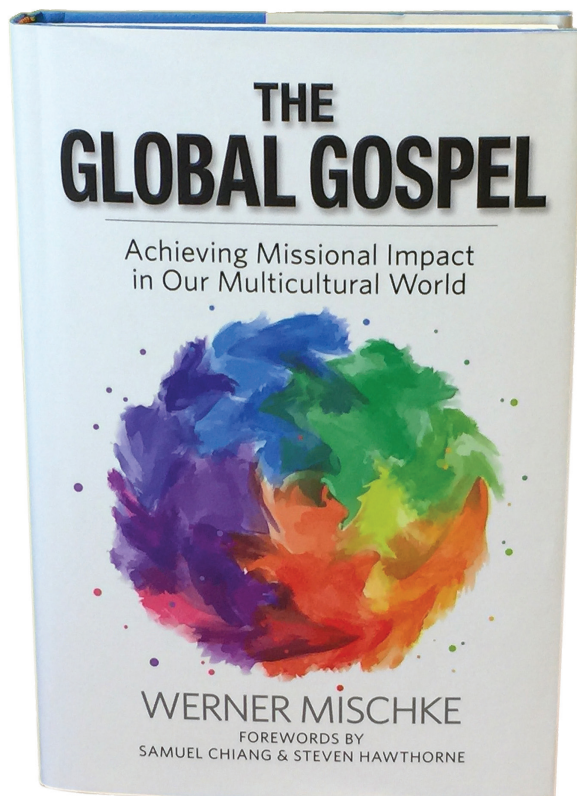


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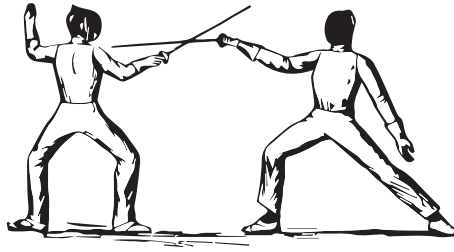
Chapter 2.4:
“Honor/Shame Dynamic #4: Challenge and Riposte”



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Honor/Shame Dynamic #4: Challenge and Riposte

Why is this important?

- Reveals honor competition as an ever-present dynamic in the drama of Scripture.
- Gives a specific four-part structure to the honor competition characterizing the confrontations between Jesus and the Jewish religious leaders.
- Magnifies the extent of Christ's victories—along with his superior intelligence and humanity—in his honor competition with the religious leaders.
- Contributes to an explanation for the seemingly unending cycle of conflict and violence in some honor/shame societies, such as the Middle East.
- Gives insight to the radical nature of Jesus' upside-down honor code.

Definition

“Riposte” is a term used in the sport of fencing, meaning “a quick return thrust following a parry.” Socially it means, “a quick clever reply to an insult or criticism.” There are four steps to this protocol or social code of challenge and riposte—or “push-and-shove.”

- Claim of worth or value
- Challenge to that claim or refusal to acknowledge the claim
- Riposte or defense of the claim
- Public verdict of success awarded to either claimant or challenger¹

1. Neyrey, *Honor and Shame in the Gospel of Matthew*, 20.

When I first learned about this honor/shame dynamic, it placed a whole new light on the many encounters between Jesus and the Pharisees. Most if not all of the interactions recorded in the Gospels between Jesus and the Pharisees were conducted in public. These interactions, when seen through the cultural lens of honor and shame, follow the rules of the “honor game,” also known as *challenge and riposte*.

Examples

In Matthew 12, you’ll see ... Jesus’ claim of worth or value ... the challenge by the Pharisees to Jesus’ honor ... the riposte by Jesus in defense of his claim ... and the public verdict. You will also observe that the riposte by Jesus consisted of both direct and indirect communication, in addition to a miracle.

⁸ “For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.”

⁹ He went on from there and entered their synagogue.

¹⁰ And a man was there with a withered hand. And they asked him, “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?”—so that they might accuse him.

¹¹ He said to them, “Which one of you who has a sheep, if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will not take hold of it and lift it out?”

¹² “Of how much more value is a man than a sheep! So it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath.”

¹³ Then he said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” And the man stretched it out, and it was restored, healthy like the other.

¹⁴ But the Pharisees went out and conspired against him, how to destroy him.

¹⁵ Jesus, aware of this, withdrew from there. And many followed him, and he healed them all

¹⁶ and ordered them not to make him known ...

²³ And all the people were amazed, and said, “Can this be the Son of David?” (Mat 12:8–16, 23).

1. Claim of worth or value: Matthew 12:8 is a claim by Jesus concerning his worth and value. Verses 1–7 of this chapter describe the confrontation between Jesus and the Pharisees concerning the disciples plucking and eating grain on the Sabbath. Verse 8 is the verdict—“For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.”

2. Challenge to that claim or refusal to acknowledge the claim: Verse 10 displays the challenge by the Pharisees to Jesus’ claim. “And they asked him, ‘Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?’—so that they might accuse him.”

3. Riposte or defense of the claim: Jesus’ riposte, or defense, is in three powerful parts.

First, Jesus uses indirect communication. “He said to them, ‘Which one of you who has a sheep, if it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will not take hold of it

and lift it out? Of how much more value is a man than a sheep!” (vv. 11–12).² Jesus describes a sheep in desperate need being rescued by its shepherd—a word-picture that goes beyond reason to connect heart-to-heart. Jesus answers their challenge indirectly.

Second, Jesus adds a declarative direct response. Jesus says straightforwardly, “So it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath” (v. 12). The statement is dripping with irony. As I imagine the crowd watching, I can almost hear them laughing with Jesus at the Pharisees.

Third, Jesus adds to his words an action—he performs a miracle: “Then he said to the man, ‘Stretch out your hand.’ And the man stretched it out, and it was restored, healthy like the other” (v. 13).

This three-part riposte to the Pharisees’ challenge was so powerful that “the Pharisees went out and conspired against him, how to destroy him” (v. 14). Why were they so enraged? Because their honor and standing in the public sphere took a huge hit, while at the same time, the honor and renown of Jesus was skyrocketing. This led to:

4. Public verdict of success awarded to either claimant or challenger. “And many followed him, and he healed them all and ordered them not to make him known. ... And all the people were amazed, and said, ‘Can this be the Son of David?’ (vv. 15, 23). The public verdict of increased honor for Jesus is represented by the words, “And many followed him” and “all the people were amazed.”³

On the facing page is another example of *challenge and riposte*; it is contained in Luke 13:10–17.

As you read through the gospels, you can see these steps unfold time and again. Keep in mind that step four—*public verdict of success awarded to either claimant or challenger*—is not always explicitly stated. Since Jesus won every honor competition between himself and the religious leaders, it was not always necessary for the gospel writers to state the obvious.

Jerome Neyrey puts it this way:

This peer game of push-and-shove can be played in any of the typical forums of social life: marketplace, gymnasium, synagogue, banquet with one’s male companions, and the like. From our reading of the Gospels, it seems to have occurred whenever Jesus stepped into the public space. The very pervasiveness of this challenge-riposte game indicates that Jesus was both claiming prestige and worth (as God’s agent) and achieving a splendid reputation as prophet, teacher, and healer. The fact that he was so regularly challenged ... indicates that he was a very honorable person who was worthy of allegiance and loyalty. It is to his credit that he was both envied (Matt. 27:18) and challenged.⁴

2. Jesus is pointing out the hypocrisy of the Pharisees, causing them a loss of honor or “face.”

3. In honor/shame cultures the social “game” of challenge-riposte can readily escalate to violence, and we shall see that Jesus teaches us to abandon this game of oneupmanship. Jesus engaged in *challenge and riposte* not so much as an example to believers, but because *he had to*. Because of Jesus’ holiness as the Son of God and his very life purpose, it was by necessity that he challenged the status quo. Jesus engaged with his culture in such a way as to identify himself as the Messiah to provoke his own death in fulfillment of all that was written.

4. Neyrey, *Honor and Shame in the Gospel of Matthew*, 20.

| Challenge & riposte: Four steps | Jesus heals a woman with a disabling spirit | Comment |
|---|---|--|
| 1. Claim of worth or value | Now he was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath. And behold, there was a woman who had had a disabling spirit for eighteen years. She was bent over and could not fully straighten herself. When Jesus saw her, he called her over and said to her, "Woman, you are freed from your disability." And he laid his hands on her, and immediately she was made straight, and she glorified God. (Luke 13:10–12). | Note the public nature of the situation—in the synagogue with everyone watching. Jesus' claim of worth is that he is able to heal the woman and set her free—and to do so in violation of the Jewish Sabbath codes. |
| 2. Challenge to that claim or refusal to acknowledge the claim | But the ruler of the synagogue, indignant because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath, said to the people, "There are six days in which work ought to be done. Come on those days and be healed, and not on the Sabbath day" (Luke 13:13–14). | Jesus undermined the honor of the synagogue ruler by challenging the Sabbath codes. In response, the "indignant" synagogue ruler challenged Jesus' right to heal on the Sabbath. |
| 3. Riposte or defense of the claim | Then the Lord answered him, "You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger and lead it away to water it? And ought not this woman, a daughter of Abraham whom Satan bound for eighteen years, be loosed from this bond on the Sabbath day?" (Luke 13:15–16). | Jesus reveals that compassion and mercy is at the heart of God's law. The phrase, " <i>Does not each of you,</i> " suggests that Jesus is not just speaking to the leader of the synagogue but also the whole crowd. |
| 4. Public verdict of success awarded to either claimant or challenger | As he said these things, all his adversaries were put to shame, and all the people rejoiced at all the glorious things that were done by him (Luke 13:17). | The crowd is delighted; the public verdict is that Jesus wins the honor competition. Moreover, "his adversaries were put to shame"—which ultimately fueled violence against Jesus. |

Figure 2.10: Challenge and riposte in Luke 13:10–17

The cosmic challenge and riposte

The above examples of *challenge and riposte* are representative of all the interactions between Jesus and the Jewish religious leaders. Time after time, Jesus won each honor competition with these men. In doing so, two things resulted. First, he exposed their evil origins and motivations (John 8:44–47); second, by exposing them, he incurred their violence against him—a conspiracy that led to his death.

Notice the paradox: Jesus won every public “game” of *challenge and riposte* in conversation with the Pharisees. But winning these honor competitions created so much jealousy among the Pharisees that it led to his shameful death by crucifixion, an apparent final humiliation of Jesus. Christ’s purposeful submission to all that the Father willed through the cross required that “when he was reviled, he did not revile in return” (1 Pet 2:23).

To human observers at the time of the crucifixion, the cross seemed to be the destruction of Christ, when in fact, the murder of God’s Son was ordained by God (Acts 2:23)—and only led to a cosmic *riposte*, a conquest of much larger proportions. The death and resurrection of Christ comprised a victory over the ultimate enemy—*sin-and-death-and-the-kingdom-of-darkness*—the great adversary of the kingdom of God and all humanity.

Christians follow the example of Jesus

In the cross we see Christ's reaction to the violence against him: Submit to the will of God (Luke 22:42) in order to gain a much greater victory. He absorbed the shaming attacks of his human enemies rather than taking revenge. Retaliation was not in God's plan for Jesus. Likewise, the practice of retaliation is outside of God's will for Christians.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus taught his disciples to abandon the culturally accepted practice of retaliation and defending one's honor through violence—or through playing the “game” of *challenge and riposte*.

You have heard that it was said, “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you. You have heard that it was said, “You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.” But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you (Mat 5:38–44).

Jerome Neyrey interprets this to mean that followers of Jesus are to simply “vacate the playing field”⁵ of the honor/shame game of *challenge and riposte*.

During the episode of Christ's arrest, interrogation, flogging and crucifixion, Jesus did not respond with a *riposte*—despite the fact that he was insulted, shamed, and reviled. In the Garden of Gethsemane, Peter attempted to physically defend Jesus, cutting off the ear of Malchus, servant of the high priest (John 18:10). Jesus swiftly squashed this response: “Put your sword back into its place. For all who take the sword will perish by the sword. Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels?” (Mat 26:52–53).

Jesus did not have to defend himself. He knew that, ultimately, his honor was eternally secure and would be vindicated when he rose from the dead (Mark 10:34, cf. Phil 2:9–11).

Peter got the message

The same Peter who had tried to defend Jesus learned his lesson. Many years later he wrote to Gentile believers that Jesus is an example for all Christians:

When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly (1 Pet 2:23).

Finally, all of you, have unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart, and a humble mind. Do not repay evil for evil or reviling for reviling,

5. This is the phrase Neyrey uses. He contends that Jesus is calling his followers, particularly males, to “vacate the playing field,” so that rather than gaining honor in the traditional way through public game-playing, they are gaining honor by living in the kingdom of God in joyful obedience to their King. See Neyrey, *Honor and Shame in the Gospel of Matthew*, 214.

but on the contrary, bless, for to this you were called, that you may obtain a blessing (1 Pet 3:8–9).

When Christians are challenged by unbelievers concerning their life in Christ, the only acceptable *riposte* for a Christian is one that is infused by the gentle wisdom of Jesus:

But in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect (1 Pet 3:15).

David deSilva describes the passage in 1 Peter this way: “The Christian is challenged to answer the hostile challenge with generosity, the violent challenge with the courageous refusal to use violence, the challenge in the form of a curse with a blessing from God’s inexhaustible resources of goodness and kindness.”⁶

Is there any kind of rivalry that is acceptable for those who claim to be followers of Christ? Yes. It is a rivalry of affectionate honor: “Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor” (Rom 12:10).⁷

Before moving on to the next principle of honor/shame societies, let’s briefly go back to the dark side of honor and shame. You will see how the dynamics of certain honor/shame features work together in a dangerous synergy which leads to a greater likelihood of violence.

Honor, shame, conflict

These three features of honor/shame societies—*love of honor*, the *image of limited good*, and *challenge and riposte*—may be considered variables in the equation of violence.

Broadly speaking, when these dynamics are present in individuals, families and peoples, the result is a greater propensity for violence.

As stated in Section 1, Chapter 5, there are two

Honor/shame arithmetic

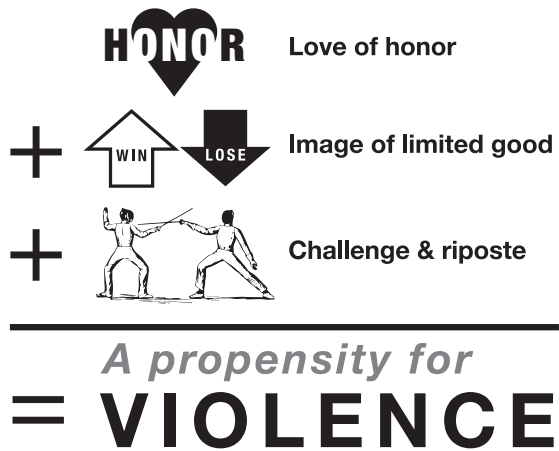


Figure 2.11: Honor/shame arithmetic which adds up to violence

6. See David deSilva’s chapter, “Turning Shame into Honor: The Pastoral Strategy of 1 Peter” in *The Shame Factor: How Shame Shapes Society*, eds. Jewett, Alloway, and Lacey, 175.

7. The *no-retaliation-ethic* taught by Jesus is also re-articulated by Paul in Romans 12:14–21. Moreover, Paul instructed the church at Philippi, “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves” (Phil 2:3). ESV 2002 uses “rivalry” in place of “selfish ambition.” Rivalry is another word for honor competition, the “social game” of *challenge and riposte*.

attack modes in the “Compass of Shame” by which violence manifests itself in honor/shame societies:

- **“Attack self”**—violence directed internally—against oneself (depression, self-afflicted wounds, suicide). This is more common in societies where *social harmony* trumps violence against others.
- **“Attack other”**—violence directed externally—against others (honor-based violence such as honor killings, kidnapping, etc.). This is more common in societies where violence (such as honor killings) is an acceptable form of protest.

A kingdom summary—dark side and bright side


| Challenge and riposte—kingdom of this world vs. kingdom-reign of God | | |
|---|---|---|
| | Kingdom of this world | Kingdom-reign of God |
|  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Many forms of honor competition lead to conflict, revenge, violence, destruction, death • Cyclical win-lose competition magnifies the problem—between individuals, families, peoples, nations; making it seemingly endless • Some rivalry may be socially acceptable (athletic, educational, business), but still not glorify God | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As the only true king, Jesus rightfully reigns; he won every honor competition in the human arena (with religious and political leaders)—and cosmic arena (with the kingdom of darkness) • The cross, death, resurrection and ascension of Christ form a cosmic riposte against all evil • All rivalry between Christians is forbidden except outdoing one another in serving, showing honor • When Christians locate their honor in King Jesus, they have no honor deficit; this frees them from the need for honor competition and its destructive force |

Figure 2.12: Challenge and riposte—kingdom of this world vs. kingdom-reign of God

Action points

- *Fast-forward:* To explore ways that *challenge and riposte* can shape a contextualized presentation of the gospel of Christ, turn to Section 3, Chapter 4.
- *Reflect:* When was the last time you were offended and tempted to defend yourself and engage in rivalry—but because of your deeply felt awareness of your own honor in Christ, you withheld from striking back by words or actions?
- *Bible study:* Read through one of the Gospels in your daily devotional time and make note of every conversation that occurs in public between Jesus and the Jewish leaders. Observe the degree to which the dynamics of challenge and riposte are present in each occurrence.
- *Teaching:* When teaching on the Gospels, don’t miss the humor of Jesus when he responds to the challenges of the Jewish religious leaders. Emphasize

the intelligence, irony and humor that Jesus uses in his various ripostes. For example, Luke 15:7 is loaded with irony, even humor.

- *Mission*: Rivalry can flourish among mission colleagues, mission teams, and on mission trips. To what extent is this part of your team? It is crucial for leaders to exhibit servanthood and humility. The only kind of honor competition befitting Christians is when they try to out-serve one another (Mark 10:43–44), or “Outdo one another in showing honor” (Rom 12:10).