

## “Turn the Other Cheek”

Matthew 5:38-42

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Today we start a sermon series that will address questions you have about the Bible or about particular passages in the Bible. As you can see in the bulletin, this morning’s sermon will address Jesus’ instruction to “turn the other cheek.” Katelyn Crumpacker, who is a rising sophomore at Salem High School, asked us to address this specific instruction of our Lord. She writes: “I struggle sometimes with this verse because I don’t want to be someone who lets people walk over me.” She adds: “I also struggle with not getting even with people.” First, thank you, Katelyn, for your willingness to share your struggles with this verse. Second, you are not alone! We *all* struggle with not getting even with people. And, like you, *none* of us wants to be a human doormat! So, you are in good company.

In addressing our struggles with this verse, it’s helpful to know a little background about it. It’s part of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5 through Matthew 7. The Sermon on the Mount has some of the best-known sayings and teachings of Jesus, such as the Beatitudes, the so-called “Golden Rule,” and the Lord’s Prayer. If you had to summarize it in a “tweet” on Twitter, you might type: “What it means to be a follower of Jesus” or “How to live as loyal subjects in God’s Kingdom” or “What Christian discipleship looks like.”

It’s called the Sermon on the Mount because Jesus gives the sermon on a mountain. The unnamed mountain recalls Mt. Sinai, the mountain where Moses received the Ten Commandments and other laws in the Old Testament. So, just as *God*—on a mountain—gave the law to Moses, who then became the great teacher of Israel, *Jesus*—on a mountain—gave this instruction to his disciples, who in turn taught it to the church.

Jesus' divine authority here is also apparent in how he "preaches" this sermon. He declares: "You have heard it said...But *I* say to you." (He repeats that same phrasing elsewhere in this sermon.) Jesus isn't negating what they've "heard"—i.e., what the law commands in the Old Testament (the law God gave to Moses). But he is *modifying* these commands by *extending* or *intensifying* them. This would've raised Jewish eyebrows, of course, because Jesus was basically revising or revamping *God's* law. We can think of Jesus' revisions of God's law like this: In college basketball, the line on the court for a three-point shot was 20 feet, 9 inches from the goal. Beginning next season, it will be 22 feet, 1¾ inches from the goal. So, they've *amended* the rule by *extending* the line. It will now be *more demanding* for college basketball players to score three points at that *revised* distance. Likewise, whenever Jesus says "But *I* say to you," he's *revising* God's law by making it even *more demanding*. That is life in God's Kingdom: It is *more demanding*.

Today's text is a great example of a more demanding command. God's law teaches "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." That law is in Exodus 21:24 (as well as in Leviticus 24:20 and in Deuteronomy 19:21). That law was commonly called *lex talionis* or the law of retaliation. *Lex talionis* was not unique to Israel; it was widespread in the ancient world. In fact, *lex talionis* dates to at least the eighteenth century BC.

"An eye for an eye..." means that the punishment should fit the crime. If someone knocks out one of your teeth in an argument, you could retaliate by knocking out *only one* of his teeth. Not *two* of them or *all* of them. If a neighbor killed one of your cows because it wandered onto her property, you could kill *only one* of her cows in return. Not *two* of them...or one of her children! The purpose of *lex talionis*, then, is to *limit* retaliation: It prevents payback from being disproportionate.

With that background in mind, let's look at Jesus' "But *I* say to you" (in verse 39). Jesus here extends or intensifies *lex talionis* by saying: "Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the

right cheek, turn the other also.”

Before we say what Jesus means by this, let’s say what he *doesn’t* mean. “Turn the other cheek” doesn’t mean that you should just let people walk over you. For example, if a bully hits you at school, Jesus isn’t saying that you should tell him: “You hit me once. Here, hit me again.” We’re not to be human doormats like that. Another example: If you’re in an abusive relationship, Jesus is not saying: “Be a human punching bag; don’t leave your relationship.” Also, Jesus is not saying that you should *never* defend yourself when someone physically or verbally attacks you. That’s probably not what he had in mind either.

So, then, what *is* Jesus saying? Just what *does* he mean? He means: Don’t pay back evil with evil. Don’t let your knee-jerk response to get even get the best of you.

The apostle Paul emphasized this to his fellow followers of Jesus (including us!). In Romans, he wrote: “Do not repay evil with evil, but do what is good in the eyes of all...never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord’...Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.” And in 1 Thessalonians, he urges: “See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all.” “Turn the other cheek” is echoed elsewhere in the Bible, too (e.g., in Proverbs and 1 Peter). And, of course, Jesus himself *lived* this, especially at the very end of his life.

Jesus wants us—his followers—*not* to live in the world of tit for tat and evil for evil. That’s what the world *wants* us to do, *teaches* us to do, *conditions* us to do, *expects* us to do. That’s why our knee-jerk reaction is to hit someone right back, physically or verbally. But Jesus *demands more*. He wants his followers to be *counter-cultural*, to think *differently*, to have *his* mind (“the mind of Christ” in Paul’s words) by thinking of how to overcome evil with good or at least by resisting the urge to get even.

Here's how we can think of it: At the beginning of the movie, "The Wizard of Oz," everything is in *black and white*. Dorothy, Auntie Em, everyone lives in a *monochrome* world, a world turned upside down by a terrible twister. *That* is like the world of repaying evil for evil. That is like the *monochrome* world of letting our knee-jerk reaction to get even get the best of us. That is the *black-and-white* world where "an eye for an eye makes the whole world blind" (in words attributed to Ghandi). In the movie, though, the moment Dorothy steps foot in the Land of Oz, she enters this *vibrant* world of *color*. *That* is like God's Kingdom, and *that* is our true home. That is where we—as God's loyal subjects—imagine how we could "turn the other cheek" and practice doing it, how we could resist the urge to get even, or—better yet—how we could overcome evil with good.

Listen to this story of life in the colorful Kingdom of God where we turn the other cheek. A pastor writes: "Years ago, I was serving a large church as an interim pastor. My first morning in the former senior pastor's office, an older gentleman briskly entered and barked with an edge in his voice: 'This is an awful big office for just an interim minister! How come you college boys get such nice digs?' I was taken aback but not rattled. In fact, the depth of his abrasiveness stirred my curiosity. I said, 'Wow, nice to meet you, too!' He was not amused. His brow only furrowed more. 'Hi, I'm David, the new interim minister.' 'I know who you are!' he said acerbically. He then began pulling up his pants by his belt—a curious custom of men of his generation when they are annoyed or about to say something abrasive. I decided to head him off at the pass. 'What's your name?' 'Bill,' he said. 'Bill, I have to ask you something.' 'What's that?' 'Are you hurting?' His arms fell by his side; his eyes opened wide. His mouth was slightly ajar in disbelief. 'Why would you ask me such a thing?' 'Oh, just a hunch,' I replied. 'Do you have any plans for lunch today? I'd like to break bread with you and get to know you.' His countenance immediately changed. 'You want to treat me to lunch after how I just talked to you?' 'Yes, I really do.' At lunch, Bill asked again why I asked him if he was hurting. I replied, 'I saw something in your eyes and heard

something in your voice—it was just a hunch.’ Bill then broke down and cried as he told me about his abusive father and the years of abusive beatings. He left home at sixteen and worked blue-collar jobs all his life, deserting his dream of attending college. The ‘you college boys’ line now made perfect sense. That lunch opened a window for new beginnings, and Bill and I became close friends. In fact, he hugged me and cried the day I left as interim pastor.”<sup>1</sup>

The pastor could’ve insulted Bill right back. But he didn’t. He paused and used his imagination, pondering why Bill would say what he did. He figured something wasn’t right. Bill was hurting. So the pastor turned the other cheek, overcame Bill’s insults with good by inviting Bill to lunch, by making time to get to know Bill. Freud said “All behavior is purposeful.” Jesus wants us to pause and use our imaginations, pondering why this person is saying or doing whatever they’re saying or doing, and then to turn the other cheek whenever possible.

But we *can’t* do that on our own. One reason we struggle not to get even is because we don’t pause and ask God to *help* us overcome evil with good. Because we don’t ask the Spirit in us to help us not to let our knee-jerk reaction to get even get the best of us. We need the Spirit to empower us, to enable us to do what Jesus commands: to turn the other cheek, to stop the cycle of violence, believing in the words of Martin Luther King, Jr.: “Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that.”

With the Spirit’s help, we’re able to turn the other cheek and drive out hate with love whenever possible.

Please join me in prayer: God, with the help of your Spirit in us, may we live as loyal, loving subjects in your Kingdom. When we struggle not to get even—as we will—help us to pause and think about why this person is saying or doing whatever they’re saying

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<sup>1</sup> David Lee Jones, “On Becoming Ecclesial Geologists: Family Systems Theory for Faith Leaders,” *The Presbyterian Outlook*, January 9, 2019.

and doing. Then, guided by your Spirit, enable us to resist the urge to get even and—better yet—to overcome evil with good. Yes, empower us to live not in the monochrome world of tit for tat but to live instead in your colorful Kingdom where we turn the other cheek with the Spirit's help whenever possible. Amen.