

# “An Eye for an Eye” or “Love Your Enemies”? Choose One

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**Matthew 5:38-48; Romans 12:16-21**

When I was in junior high--now called middle school--I invited my best friend to church. I didn't mean for him to take it seriously; I just wanted us to spend more time together. But as someone not raised in the church, he found the whole thing captivating and fascinating.

About the only thing I liked about church at the time was youth group, where we got to play guitars and sing cool folk songs instead of stuffy hymns. And I liked the youth trips that provided ample opportunity to hit on girls in the back of the bus. But my buddy really drank the Kool-Aid. He fell in love with the church and the Bible and Jesus. Pretty soon he was good for nothing when it came to cooking up a prank or indulging in some other devilish delight.

Given my friend's newfound religious zeal, we drifted apart. From time-to-time, I would confound him with one biblical dilemma or another, like “Where did Cain get his wife?” or “Do you seriously believe the world was created in seven days, despite what Mr. Montague taught us in science class?”

At times, I even used my friend's newfound religion against him, such as when I got a hankering for his cake in the school cafeteria. “Say Joey,” I'd say, eyeing his dessert. “I'd like

that cake you've got there. And Jesus did say, 'Give to everyone who begs from you' and I'm *begging* you here."

He'd scrunch up his eyebrows, chew on that for a minute, and then push his dessert over my way. Most of the time, I'd say, "Nah, I'm just teasing 'ya." But I do remember devouring his offering a time or two, especially if it was chocolate!

So you see, I've struggled with--and sometimes twisted or dismissed--some of Jesus' teachings a long time. Like the one about giving to everyone who begs from you or turning the other cheek. It often felt like Jesus and I lived on different planets. Or maybe he lived a very sheltered life and never met a bully on the playground for whom turning the other cheek was an invitation to beat you to a pulp.

Fortunately, in time, both my buddy and I learned to read the Bible with greater understanding. And one of the things we learned is that you can't always take the Bible literally, especially when Jesus is pulling your leg. Did Jesus really mean for us to pluck out our right eye, when in the grip of lust, or to cut off one's right hand if it causes you to sin? Obviously not. No, what Jesus is doing here, as throughout the Sermon on the Mount, is grabbing us by the lapels with a graphic image or exaggeration that forces us to sit up and take notice.

Further, as Walter Wink taught us, Jesus very pointedly mentions the *right* cheek. "But if anyone strikes you on the *right* cheek, turn the other also." To be struck on the right cheek, says Wink, signified the back-handed slap of social dismissal; this was the slap of a master used on a slave. By contrast, to turn the *left* cheek was to confront one's tormentor with the necessity of striking with the open hand and thereby acknowledging the subordinate as one's equal. Thus, far from being an act of helpless submission, turning the other cheek was a form of courageous, non-violent protest.

Similarly, to bear a Roman soldier's gear two miles when he commanded you to bear it one, was a way of saying, "You don't own me. I can do better and other than you command. I can overcome your evil with God's good."

And so, when Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount, "Do not resist an evil doer," he does not mean that literally. He spent his entire ministry resisting evil doers. No, he is saying "Do not resist evil *with evil*," or as our passage from Romans has it, "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

One of the privileges of being a pastor is seeing how ordinary people sometimes act in extraordinary ways. In fact, most of what I know about being a Christian I learned from seeing rank-and-file believers in action. Maybe that's why in time, I--like my middle school friend--became fascinated and captivated by the church.

This week, for instance, I learned a remarkable story about Jacque Pennell, a charter member of our church whose memorial service was held here on Friday. As a fun, youngish mom, Jacque was often asked to chaperone school events. One of her assignments was as the designated mom for daughter, Melanie's, cheerleading squad at Reynolds High School.

This was during the early years of integration in Winston-Salem and tensions were high. Then, to complicate matters, Reynolds was scheduled to play an all-white team in a neighboring town. And the locals at the host school were making no secret of their displeasure at having persons of color descend on their stadium. In fact, as the Reynolds' bus pulled into the parking lot, a mob banged on the sides of the bus and shouted racial insults. Naturally, the cheerleaders were terrified and many were crying.

That's when Jacque gathered her charges 'round her, like the mother hen she was, and said, "Now come on, girls, we can handle this." Then she told them they were going to hold their heads high and be nice and kind, no matter how others acted. Then she led them in prayer

before marching into that stadium arm-in-arm with a black cheerleader on each side with the rest of the squad trailing behind.

And as they entered that stadium, a biblical-style miracle happened. The awestruck crowd, thirsting for blood just moments before, was shamed into silence as they watched this courageous mom teach them their manners.

It was a powerful embodiment of the gospel truth, “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”

That’s what Jesus meant by turning the other cheek: Not rolling over and playing dead in the face of opposition and violence, but standing your ground, emboldened by love, while refusing to return hatred, blow for blow and tit for tat.

In his challenging teachings and graphic, exaggerated imagery, Jesus is hoping to disrupt our usual way of handling insult and injury: “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” That’s how we are taught to get along in the “real world,” to give back at least as bad as we get. But the result is an ever-escalating cycle of violence that only compounds the injury and makes real reconciliation impossible.

And so the husband, upset with his wife, fires off the tried and true, “You’re just like your mother!” only to have her spit back an equally hurtful insult and soon, somebody is storming out of the house.

Or two friends are having an amicable disagreement on Facebook, when one of them arcs off into caricaturing a whole class of voters for supporting the wrong candidate. Pretty soon, both posters are lobbing verbal attacks, each citing Jesus and the American Way. Then others pile on in a heated exchange that convinces absolutely no one of anything. Such Facebook face offs rarely end well.

By contrast, Jesus invites us, on occasion, to take one on the chin for the Kingdom. Drawing on the best of his Hebrew tradition, he reminds us that a “soft answer turns away

wrath” (Prov. 15:1). And instead of doing the least possible in a relationship, go the second mile. As Paul counsels the members of the church in Rome, “Outdo one another in showing honor” (Romans 12:10). And maybe be willing to lose your shirt or an argument, once in a while, instead of losing a relationship.

Now please don’t hear me saying any of this is easy. Handling conflict constructively takes practice and commitment and skills development. That’s why Chuck and Renee Hinson are starting yet another marriage enrichment group at our church, so couples can turn their conflicts into learning opportunities. That’s why on Wednesday nights in Lent, one of our therapists will offer a small group seminar on “The Art of Having Difficult Conversations.” That’s why tomorrow morning at 10 o’clock, a new *Companions in Christ* group begins so our life as a Christian can be grounded in Him who alone makes it possible. Don’t even *try* living the Sermon on the Mount without him! That’s why our church sponsors a crackerjack Cub Scout pack, so boys can grow into young men of character and compassion. As each of these smartly-dressed boys will promise shortly in their Cub Scout oath, “On my honor, I will do my best . . . to help other people at all times.”

And here’s the hardest part of all. Even if you develop good conflict management skills; even if you learn how to use “I statements” that invite empathy instead of “You statements” that create defensiveness; even if you learn how to listen at least as much as you talk; even if you are passionately committed to making a difficult marriage or other relationship “work,” there is no guarantee it will. Sometimes, despite your best efforts, you still end up with an enemy.

“No worries,” says Jesus. “Just love your enemies and pray for (them).” Because even if God can’t change them, maybe, just maybe, God will change you.

Nelson Mandela, the fierce African lawyer and leader, spent nearly 3 decades in prison for his courageous protest of apartheid. When finally his movement bore fruit and he was

released from prison, many expected Mandela to emerge an angry, bitter man. But remarkably, he showed no animosity toward his enemies, just forgiving, liberating love.

Bill Clinton, who became a close friend, asked Mandela how he did it: "I watched you walk down that dirt road to freedom," Clinton told him. "Now, when you were walking down there, and you realized how long you had been in their prison, didn't you hate (white people) then? Didn't you feel some hatred?"

Mandela admitted, "Yes, I did a little bit." Then he continued: "As I felt the anger rising up, I thought to myself, 'They have already had you for 27 years. And if you keep hating them, they'll have you again.' And I said, 'I want to be free. And so I let it go. I let it go.'"

Maybe that's what Jesus is after in the Sermon on the Mount: not saddling us with more unrealistic expectations, but helping us get free. And helping us get free by not letting others decide how we will act. Instead, Jesus challenges us to live out of a different center and a different source: "For you are children of your Father in heaven who gives sunshine and rain to the good and the not-so-good, the just and the unjust, the deserving and the undeserving."

"And don't just hang out with people just like yourself," Jesus continues. "Anybody can do that! It is being willing to listen to, learn from, and even love people who challenge, aggravate, and perhaps hate you that shows you belong to me."

Years ago, a beloved mentor told me, "Don't let anybody else tell you who you are." I've found that's easy to do in principle but hard to do in practice, especially when I'm with those who annoy, aggravate, or attack me.

But sometimes, when my reactivity is on the rise, I hear Jesus whispering in the depths of my soul, "Don't let them call the shots. I'm here to help. Together, we've got this."

Then Jesus throws down his final impossible challenge: "Be perfect, as your Father in heaven is perfect," which has nothing to do with never making a mistake. Rather, "being

perfect” in this context means learning to love our families and friends and neighbors and even our enemies, when they least deserve it which is, of course, when they, and we, need loving most.

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*Lord Jesus, thank you for loving us, even when we are eminently unlovable. Now teach and empower us to do the same for others for nothing else so powerfully reveals that we belong, first and foremost, to you. Amen.*

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