

The Urge to Get Even
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Matthew 5:38-48
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My brother, Tim, and I used to play racquetball three times a week. We matched up well together. Both of us were competitive enough to engage in long rallies and work up a good sweat. Now, if you haven't played racquetball, you need to know that it's played in tight quarters. It's not uncommon to get in each other's way. Because of the tight quarters, the ball sometimes goes whizzing by you a little too close for comfort. And, every once in a while, the ball whacks you in the head, or the back, or the butt, and it stings like crazy. When that happens—let's just say—Christian charity is not the first thing that comes to mind. Neither are you thinking of Jesus' advice to—umm—"turn the other cheek." No, you're much more likely to want to get even. You're tempted to crush the ball about two inches away from your brother's ear, and if it just-so-happens to whack him in the back and peel off a little skin, well, that's just the breaks of the game.

So when was the last time you had an urge to get even? We usually don't have to wait very long, do we? Somebody says something or does something that rankles us, and instantly we're tempted to respond in kind. It's as if it's built into our nature. And maybe it is. Maybe, for self-preservation, we instinctively lash out when provoked.

Back in the Old Testament, there was a principle that governed one's response to personal injury. It was called *lex talion*, the "law of retaliation." In a nutshell: "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth." This law was intended to set strict limits on the right to revenge. In other words, you couldn't avenge the loss of an eye by exacting two eyes from your enemy. By the time of the New Testament, Jewish law further restricted vengefulness by substituting monetary compensation for the loss of an eye.

And now, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus goes even further. He challenges his followers to let go of their right to retaliate all together. The *Message* translation puts it like this: "An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. Is that going to get you anywhere? Here's what I propose: 'Don't hit back at all. If someone strikes you, stand there and take it. If someone drags you into court and sues you for the shirt off your back, gift wrap your best coat and make a present of it. And if someone takes unfair advantage of you, use the occasion to practice the servant life. No more tit-for-tat stuff.'"

Yikes! What are we supposed to do with that? In a world of spirited racquetball contests, and troubled marriages, and cranky coworkers, Jesus' words lead to lots of questions: What if someone takes aim at me—shouldn't I say something? What if someone's behavior becomes abusive—shouldn't I defend myself? What if someone I care about is getting trampled upon—shouldn't I stick up for them? Jesus doesn't answer these questions. As I see it, he isn't offering us a new law—with case by case instruction—so much as he's challenging our age-old patterns of retaliation. His words seem designed to shock us. He's saying: "The old vengeful ways must give way to a gentler, more magnanimous approach."

We struggle with Jesus words, don't we? Do they apply to every situation? No, probably not. But they definitely apply to some. Sometimes we're meant to turn the other cheek. Sometimes we're meant to go the extra mile. As followers of Jesus, it's up to us to figure out when and where and why.

Perhaps Jesus' words make more sense when we've been on the receiving end of "a gentler, more magnanimous approach." That happened to me when I was growing up in South Dakota. My first job was working as a hired hand for a farmer named Dick Stene. I was 14 at the time, green as grass, but willing to learn. Early in the job, I was helping Dick load corn into a grain bin. He hooked up a tractor to an augur, which is a big cylindrical tube that moves the grain. The augur was run by the power takeoff on the tractor. Since I'd never operated a power takeoff before, I was given a quick lesson. If I let out the clutch of the tractor, the power takeoff would start and the augur would run. If I pushed in the clutch, the power takeoff would stop and the augur would shut off. Out—on. In—off. Simple enough, or so I thought.

In the middle of the job, the augur got stuck. Dick went up on the roof to work on the pulley system. I shut off the augur by pushing in the clutch. Dick worked on it for several minutes. Then he dropped his pliers. My immediate impulse—wanting to be helpful—was to fetch the pliers and toss them up to him. But to do that, I had to get off the tractor. And to do that, I had to let out the clutch. No sooner did that happen than Dick let out a horrible scream. His hand had gotten squeezed between the pulley and the belt. I raced back to the tractor and pushed in the clutch as soon as I could, but it was too

late. Three of his fingers were badly mangled. The pain was so intense that Dick barely managed to get off the roof without fainting.

An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth? Dick might have been tempted. I'm sure he was angry with me—furious—and he had every right to be. Fortunately doctors were able to re-attach his fingers. And fortunately, I didn't lose any of my own fingers in retaliation. And I didn't lose my job. And I wasn't even docked any pay. And most important of all, I know that Dick was able to forgive me over time, because he told me he did. And that meant a lot to me. To this day, I still run into Dick every once in awhile when I'm back in South Dakota. And in the middle of our conversation, he'll say with his characteristic dry wit. "You know, Vern, I think about you often, especially on cold winter days when my fingers feel numb to the bone." So, am I forgiven? Yes. Forgotten? Not for one second. Nobody ever said following Jesus was going to be easy.

The Sermon on the Mount continues. Jesus demands get harder. Again from *The Message*: "You're familiar with the old written law, 'Love your friend,' and its unwritten companion, 'Hate your enemy.' I'm challenging that. I'm telling you to love your enemies. Let them bring out the best in you, not the worst. When someone gives you a hard time, respond with prayer. If all you do is love the lovable, do you expect a bonus? Anybody can do that."

This leads to more questions. Is this even possible, Jesus? We live in a world of playground bullies who beat up innocent kids, a world with polarized political parties who often engage in dirty politics, a world of 9/11 and terrorists who are bent on destroying us. And you're asking us to love our enemies and pray for them?

What do you think, are we supposed to take Jesus' words literally? When I was at Transfiguration, during the anxious days leading up to the Iraq War, we tried doing what Jesus was asking. We prayed in worship for Saddam Hussein. We weren't praying for him to be victorious, mind you, just praying for him to come to his senses and do what he could to prevent bloodshed. As we did, one couple got mad and left the church. They said, "You shouldn't pray for people like that." We said, "Jesus told us to." And they said, "We don't care. It's wrong."

Jesus' words are shocking. Still, I think he intends for us to take them literally, and if not literally, at least seriously. We're supposed to try to turn the other cheek;

we're supposed to be willing to give away our possessions; we're supposed to try to go the second mile, to give to those who beg from us, to love our enemies, to pray for those who hurt us. Will we run into complications when we do? Sure we will. Will we be able to do these things all the time? No, probably not, there'll be many times when they simply won't work. But that doesn't mean we we're not supposed to try.

In the last verse of today's gospel, we hear one more command from Jesus. It seems to be the hardest of all. "Be perfect," he says, "as your heavenly Father is perfect." We hear this and we think we need to be sinless. But that's not necessarily the meaning of "perfect." The word in Greek is *teleios*. It has a sense of "goal" or "end" or "purpose." In other words, Jesus is telling us, "Become what God intends for you to be." The Message puts it like this: "You're kingdom subjects. Now live like it. Live out your God-created identity."

This is helpful. We can do the difficult things Jesus asks us to do only to the extent that we live *into* our God-given identity. We are God's blessed and beloved children. We have a God who gives the sun and the rain to everyone. It doesn't matter if we're good or bad, God is an equal-opportunity giver. And here's the point: as God's children, who are made in God's image, we are to live generously and graciously toward others, the way God lives toward us.

Can you do this? Maybe some days better than others? In a few minutes we'll invite you to come to the communion table. Before you come, I encourage you to get out the green card in your bulletin. Better yet, take it out right now. There's a question on the card that goes like this: What is one thing—one fear, one hurt, one memory, one resentment—that keeps me from becoming the person God wants me to be? I encourage you to spend a minute giving it some thought. Then write it down and bring it with you as you come to the table. There are baskets for the cards. As you come, ask for forgiveness. Ask for help to let go of a hurt or a wrong. Ask for strength to become who you are. My hope for you is that you will feel a little less burdened having confessed your limitations to God. My pray is that you can live *into* your role as God's blessed and beloved children.

Everyday our world tells us the same thing: *an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth*. In a world of racquetball and playground bullies and 9/11, we're going to have flashes of

anger. That's okay. It's part of being human. And more than that, we're going to have flashes of righteous indignation. That's okay too. It's part of the struggle for fairness and justice. We're not in the business of looking the other way when terrible things happen.

Then again, there will be times when Jesus calls us to a radically different response. "Resist the urge to get even," he will say, "Where will it get you anyway? How about this instead: You are kingdom people, blessed and beloved by God, called to be salt and light in the world. Go, be who you are!" Amen.