

Overcoming Evil with Good

Matthew 5:38-48

Pastor Jim Rademaker

While checking his bags at the curbside of the airport, a man became angry with the employee who handled his luggage. For several minutes he belittled the young man. Surprisingly, he didn't seem troubled by this man's verbal abuse. After the angry man entered the airport, a woman approached the luggage handler and asked, "How do you put up with such injustice?" The young man said, "It's easy. That guy's going to New York, but I'm sending his bags to Brazil."

Revenge. It seems so sweet, doesn't it! When we are wronged in some way, our natural inclination is what? To fight back. To get even. *An eye for an eye. A tooth for a tooth.* Isn't that how it works?

In this section of Matthew, the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus has been speaking about what? The commandments and what they really mean. *You have heard it said ... But I say to you.* And we learn that the commandments are not first and foremost about what you have to do or not do. They're actually about what? They're about what's going on on the inside. They're about your heart. Anger, hatred, envy, pride, lust. Problems that, even if you gouged out your eyes and cut off your hands, would remain.

"*You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.'* Where had they heard that before? Jesus was quoting from the Old Testament (Ex 21:24, Levit 24:20, Deut 19:21). These phrases are now associated with vengeance. Is that what the Old Testament was teaching? Ways to get back at people? Not at all. Rather, it had to do with justice. Today, we would say what? The punishment must what? The punishment must *fit the crime*. There's to be just punishment. A life sentence for stealing a loaf of bread isn't justice.

In each of these Old Testament passages about an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, it's about civil justice, not personal vengeance. It's a passage for the government of Israel and its judges, how people should be dealt with, especially concerning the courts and punishment and sentencing. God knew the human heart and its tendency for evil and injustice; lacking in love. And so, He sets up a justice system that limits the tendency to over-punish. Punishment mustn't be overly harsh, but fit the crime. Be just. And so, the original intent of the law was to *limit* vengeance, not encourage it.

You may have heard about the Hatfields and the McCoys, one of the more famous feuds in U.S. history. In 1878, a dispute over ownership of a pig ended with the McCoys killing one of the Hatfields. From here, the conflict escalated into an all-out war, with both sides regularly perpetrating killings, beatings, and kidnappings against the other. A life for a pig isn't just punishment. That's what? Vengeance. God knew what would happen if He left it up to individuals to settle things on their own.

A biblical example would be Simeon and Levi (two sons of Jacob). A crime was committed against their sister Dinah. So what did they do? Instead of seeking justice for their sister against the perpetrator, they sought vengeance. They attacked the city the man was from and killed every male in it. (Gen 34)

An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth means that only the man who committed the crime is to be punished, and his punishment must be no more than the damage he inflicted. So, God's law, summarized as love, goes against the natural, tribal, vengeful nature of human beings, not to love, but inflict vengeance.

This idea of just punishment is reflected in our own constitution, in the Bill of Rights, the 8th Amendment. "*Excessive bail shall not be required, nor excessive fines imposed, nor cruel and unusual punishments inflicted.*"

Why not? It's the loving thing to do. Vengeance, getting even, and then some, is not the righteousness that exceeds the scribes and the Pharisees. It doesn't reflect the true righteousness of the heart and character of God. The commandments are not first and foremost about what you have to do or not do. They're about what's going on on the inside.

"*You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.'* *But I tell you* [how to respond when mistreated], *Do not resist an evil person.* Jesus isn't saying that we shouldn't defend ourselves or others. We're to love our neighbor as we love whom? Ourselves. What we're not supposed to do is fight evil with evil; return evil with evil, but with good.

How to respond when mistreated? **Romans 12:14** *Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. ... 17 Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. ... 19 Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." 20 To the contrary, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head."* [to put him to shame for his bad conduct.] 21 *Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*

Jesus gives three examples of what this looks like. *If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also.* A blow on the right cheek was one of the most grievous insults possible in the ancient world. The equivalent today might be someone spitting in your face. What would be the right way to respond? The loving thing? The righteous thing? Evil with evil? Or evil with good?

You are the light of the world. Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven. Overcoming evil with good.

In the second example of how to respond when mistreated, someone is out to sue you and take your shirt. (at that moment, they're likely your "enemy") The tunic in Jesus' time, was something like a woman's slip, or a man's undershirt, a light, semi-undergarment worn for modesty and protection. Even the poorest of people generally had at least two tunics.

Over the tunic a person wore a cloak, a blanket-like outer garment. At night, when it got cold, it was a person's blanket. Apparently, it wasn't unusual for the extra tunic of a person to be given as collateral or bond during a court proceeding. Sometimes, in a serious offense, a person's cloak was even required by the courts to be given to the party bringing a lawsuit. However, God had laid down rules regarding this practice.

If you take your neighbor's cloak as a pledge, return it to him by sunset, because his cloak is the only covering he has for his body. What else will he sleep in? When he cries out to me, I will hear, for I am compassionate.

(Exodus 22:26-27)

The point is that in legal proceedings, a person had a right to get his cloak back before sundown. A person's right was that his cloak could not be taken away from him permanently. How might you overcome the evil of being unjustly sued? Not making your rights the most important thing on the planet. Not demanding your rights above everything else. Overcoming evil with good might mean sacrificing your rights for another. Not reacting to the wrong done to you. But instead, responding in love. *And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.*

A third example of how to respond when mistreated, of good overcoming evil. Apparently, a Roman soldier could legally make you carry something (usually all his military baggage) for him for one mile (At that moment, they're likely your "enemy"). Again, there's something like it reflected in our constitution. The 3rd Amendment. *"No soldier shall, in time of peace be quartered in any house, without the consent of the owner, nor in time of war, but in a manner to be prescribed by law."*

Suppose a Roman soldier comes to you and forces you to carry his suitcase one mile. How might you overcome this evil? Being bitter? Being resentful? Getting back at him? *And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.*

Finally, true righteousness is generous, not stingy. *Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.*

How fun it might seem to send someone's luggage to Brazil, instead of to New York! Fun, for the sinful nature. How natural it was for the Hatfields and the McCoys to go after each other. *Eye for an eye. Tooth for a tooth.* As happens with all of God's loving commands, our hearts pervert it to accommodate our own sinful desires. How many people are brought closer to the Kingdom of God by your asserting your rights? How many are brought closer to the Kingdom by your retaliation?

God has a higher purpose for our lives. He doesn't call us to retaliation. He doesn't call us to save our lives, but to lose them. When we are wronged, we have a choice. We can try and overcome evil with evil, which only gains the victory over us in the end. Or we can overcome evil with good; with love. *Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.*

Getting even. Demanding our rights. How often, it's not about justice, but injustice. Not about love, but retaliation. Vengeance. Trying to overcome evil with evil.

What's going on on the inside? "Lord, why must I get even? Why can't I let it go? Why can't I leave it with you? Why am I so easily offended, when YOU are my life?" The commandments are not first and foremost about what you have to do or not do. They're actually about your heart.

"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect [complete, mature, grown up], therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Who of us doesn't cheer inwardly for the baggage handler at the airport who sends the rude man's luggage to Brazil, instead of to New York? Of returning evil with evil? How about returning evil with good? Returning evil with a smile and warm wishes? Return evil with loving silence? With prayer? With turning the other cheek? Going the extra mile? Loving your enemy?

Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.

"We should incite those who have hurt us to repentance by doing them good Good deeds have the power to consume our enemies spirit, or to grieve them. So God converts those whom He does convert, by showing them goodness. It's only in this way that we can convert a person, namely, by showing them kindness and love.

Luther, M., Commentary on Romans. Kregel Publications, 1976.

Overcoming evil with good. What does that look like? It looks like a cross, where God gave everything for us, His enemies. *"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them."*

How to respond when mistreated? Jesus didn't set Himself against even those who put Him on the cross. Instead, what did He do? He prayed for them. And even more, He died for them. He offered His cheek to His smiters. His back to those who whipped. He carried His cross down the lonely road of sorrows. He walked the extra mile with His enemies. He gave His tunic to those who gambled for it. He took no revenge on those who falsely accused him. Instead, He prayed for them. *"Father, forgive them; they know not what they do."* He gave to those who begged of Him. He still does. He is holy as the Lord is holy. He is perfect as His Father in heaven is perfect. (William Cwirla)

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. ... Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all overcoming evil with good!