

Leviticus 24:17-22 (NIV)

(The Lord said to Moses:) ¹⁷ “Anyone who takes the life of a human being is to be put to death. ¹⁸ Anyone who takes the life of someone’s animal must make restitution—life for life. ¹⁹ Anyone who injures their neighbor is to be injured in the same manner: ²⁰ fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth. The one who has inflicted the injury must suffer the same injury. ²¹ Whoever kills an animal must make restitution, but whoever kills a human being is to be put to death. ²² You are to have the same law for the foreigner and the native-born. I am the Lord your God.”

Matthew 5:38-45a (NIV)

(Jesus said,) ³⁸ “You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for* eye, and tooth for* tooth.’ ³⁹ But I tell you, do not resist^ an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. ⁴⁰ And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. ⁴¹ If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles. ⁴² Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.

⁴³ “You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ ⁴⁴ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵ that you may be children of your Father in heaven.

*Greek *anti*

^Greek *antistenai* (resist in kind)

Godly Resistance

So, this will be the third and final sermon in what turned out to be a series on anger and the different causes of anger and how to respond to them - or resist them - in a godly way. In the first sermon we talked about what to do with anger at not getting our way for selfish reasons or for unselfish reasons, as well as what to do with anger when we are sinned against. Then, last week we talked about what to do when our anger is provoked at a person or group of people being victimized or exploited by those with more power than them. But today we’re going to lastly look at how to respond when we are the ones being victimized or exploited. How does Jesus call us to respond when someone abuses or exploits us physically, verbally, emotionally, financially, sexually, or otherwise?

Now, in some ways this is a similar situation to what we talked about in sermon one: when we’re hurt by *someone we’re in relationship with who is safe for us to be vulnerable with about our hurt*. We said the godly response in those situations is to forgive and to share our hurt with the one who’s hurt us, and then employ appropriate boundaries with respect to reconciliation, which depends on them owning their wrong and trust being re-earned.

But, what about when we’re harmed or sinned against by someone with whom it’s *not safe* to be entirely vulnerable with about our hurt? Like if it’s some random person on the street or someone with power over us, not somebody we’re tight with. Or what about when we are in **the midst** of being victimized, when it’s not after the fact?

Well, that’s what we’re going to look at today. Such scenarios are what Jesus addresses in our passage from Matthew this morning. But boy-oh-boy is the meaning of what Jesus teaches here notoriously misunderstood in ways that can actually lead to tremendous harm.

To read or watch the first two sermons on Anger & Godly Resistance (from 8/11 & 8/18) visit www.saintmatthiasoakdale.com/anger

From Sermon One (8/11/24)

- Causes of Anger
 - Anger because we aren’t getting our way
 - when our way is loving/unselfish (see sermon for the godly response)
 - when our way is unloving/selfish (see sermon for the godly response)
 - Anger when we are sinned against
 - Godly Response: Forgive > Share hurt with offender where safe to do so > employ appropriate boundaries with respect to reconciliation

From Sermon Two (8/18/24)

- Another cause of Anger
 - When people are exploited or victimized by those with more power than them - anger at injustice (see sermon for the godly response)

And this is particularly the case for verse 39, where Jesus says, “But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also.” As Christian author & psychologist Allison Cook notes, many take this verse to mean that if someone harms you, Jesus wants you to *simply take it*. Or, even worse, continue to ask for more.¹ This reading - along with the way Christians often misunderstand what forgiveness requires, as we talked about in sermon one² - have led many a Christian to believe Jesus wants them to *remain* in an abusive relationship or decline to hold their abusers accountable with the law.³ But today we will see that this is not what Jesus is suggesting at all. Instead, understanding the cultural context of Jesus’ teaching here reveals the good news that when we are subjected to abuse or exploitation, Jesus absolutely calls us to resist it, just not through retaliation. Rather, the Lord wants to help us discern how we can disrupt the harm in a way that asserts our dignity & worth to the offender, exposes their wrong, and calls them into the way of love (although, that outcome is not up to us).

So let me explain how understanding the cultural context of this passage reveals that this *is* the good news of Jesus’ teaching here, even if it doesn’t necessarily seem like it. And, to do this, I’m going to be drawing heavily from a BibleProject resource that Cp Eva shared with me a few months back.⁴ While they’re not the first to illuminate the meaning of this passage in the way I’ll explain, their resource does offer it in a succinct, digestible way - so I recommend it to you.

This passage is taken from Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, in a section where He is revealing a deeper understanding & intent of God’s Old Testament laws that we’ll *need Jesus* to help us live out. And the teaching Jesus wants to deepen here is an “Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth,” which appears in three different places: Exodus, Leviticus (which we read today), and Deuteronomy. Now, while eye-for-an-eye has often been understood as a *license to retaliate*, it was really meant to put a ceiling - a limit - on the extent someone could exact retribution. So, when someone got their tooth knocked out this law kept them from escalating the situation by breaking the perpetrator’s legs or something; they could only demand the wrongdoer lose *their* tooth, too. So this prevented vengeance from escalating the situation to worse and worse harm back-and-forth.

The teaching of eye-for-an-eye was meant to curb retaliation. But when Jesus comes, He reveals an even better way to respond when we are victimized... that doesn’t involve retaliation at all. He teaches, “³⁸ “You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ ³⁹ But I tell you, do not resist an evil person.” But, man, do Jesus’ words here make it sound like He’s asking us to be a doormat! But let me explain why most Bible translations get it wrong.

The Greek word here is *antistenai*; it is a compound word - *stenai* means stand and *anti* means against: so, *antistenai* does most commonly mean stand against, oppose, resist. Hence: “Do not resist an evildoer.” But *anti* doesn’t have to be translated as *against*. In fact, as you can see in the previous verse: there, in an eye *for* an eye and a tooth *for* tooth, *anti* is twice translated as ‘for’ meaning something that matches. You take my eye, I take your eye to match. My retaliation matches your wrong.

¹ Alison Cook, “Should I Turn the Other Cheek?” December 2, 2020 <https://cmr.biola.edu/blog/2020/dec/02/should-i-turn-other-cheek/>
See also: Sheila Wray Gregoire “Does ‘Turn the Other Cheek’ Actually Empower People?” Apr 29, 2024
<https://baremarriage.com/2024/04/does-turn-the-other-cheek-actually-empower-people/>

² Which we talked about in sermon one of this series (8/11/24)

³ Cook notes that the lie people will often tell themselves is: “Just take the pain. . . be the bigger person. . . your love can change them. Unfortunately, that’s just not the way it works. In fact, the other person will usually keep taking advantage of you or your loved one. It’s foolish to pretend otherwise.”

⁴ https://bibleproject.com/podcast/what-jesus-means-turn-other-cheek/?utm_source=web_social_share&medium=shared_podcast
Also <https://bibleproject.com/articles/what-jesus-meant-turn-other-cheek-matthew-539/>

So, what more and more scholars have recognized in recent years is that Jesus isn't saying "don't resist," He's saying "don't resist in a way that matches." "You have heard it said to respond to wrong in a way that matches, but I say to you: don't resist in a way that matches. Don't resist in kind; I wanna show you how to resist in a better way!" And the reason we can be sure that is what Jesus really meant is because that is what St Paul took Him to mean. As we heard today in Romans - and I underlined for you - Paul writes, "Do not repay anyone evil for* evil."⁵ And in 1 Thessalonians Paul writes, "1 Thessalonians 5:15: "Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always strive to do what is good for each other and for everyone else." And that's what Jesus wants to teach us as this Matthew passage continues: not to be passive toward evildoers, but to resist in a way that is for everyone's good and doesn't just escalate the wrong. The good news is that when we are subjected to abuse or exploitation, Jesus absolutely calls us to resist it, just not through retaliation. Rather, the Lord wants to help us discern how we can disrupt the harm in a way that asserts our dignity & worth to the offender, exposes their wrong, and calls them into the way of love, rather than returning harm for harm.

So, then Jesus provides some concrete examples - to give some imagination for what this non-retaliatory resistance can look like - using some scenarios that, again, are *really* easy for us to misunderstand without some knowledge of the first century cultural context.

Turn the Other Cheek

So, the first example He gives is His famous teaching on 'turning the other cheek'. He says, "If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also." And what I need to make clear is that this is not the same thing as a punch. Jesus is not saying, if someone punches you in one side of the face, to say "Thank you sir. May I have another?" No, we really have to understand the norms in First Century Israel around slapping in particular, to currently understand what Jesus is teaching. You see, because the right hand was considered the dominant hand in ancient cultures, when Jesus specifically mentions being slapped on the right cheek it implies a back-hand slap. Now, you're thinking: "Why is that important?" Well, in the honor-shame culture of first century Israel, slapping someone with the back of the hand was considered the most severe affront to a person's dignity that you could even sue somebody for doing it. So, the physical violence of a backhand slap was not all that big of a deal; more important was that the backhand symbolized a way to assert dominance over a person and communicate they are lesser than you.

But, check this out: if someone backhands you and you then offer your other cheek - your left cheek - to them, you're inviting them to (instead) slap you with their palm, with an open hand. And, again, you think, "So what?" Well, even an open-handed slap (with the palm) was still not a right or nice thing to do, but in the culture of First Century Israel an open hand is how you would slap someone you considered an equal. As N.T. Wright explains: "Offering the other cheek implies: hit me again if you like, but now as an equal, not an inferior."⁶ So, as Cook explains, "Seen in this light, turning the other cheek is a brave countermove. It's not being a doormat. In fact, it is quite the opposite. Turning the other cheek is a way of standing your ground, communicating 'You will not belittle me. You cannot take my dignity.' It's countering (the) bullying from a position of strength."

And the reasons Jesus' suggestion here is so much better than retaliating in kind (backhanding them right back) is because rather than escalating the situation, turning the other cheek asserts how the

⁵ Rom 12:17 Same word, *anti*, by the way.

⁶ Full Quote: "To be struck on the right cheek, in that world, almost certainly meant being hit with the back of the right hand. That's not just violence, but an insult; it implies that you're an inferior, perhaps a slave, a child, or (in that world, and sometimes even today), a woman. What's the answer? Hitting back only keeps the evil in circulation. Offering the other cheek implies: hit me again if you like, but now as an equal, not an inferior."

evildoer is wrong about you - that you are not less than them in the eyes of God - and makes them choose: either they're going to treating you as an equal - by now open-hand slapping you - or they're gonna stop the violence altogether!! So, it is a creative response that exposes their wrong and calls them to think better of you than they do.

Now, as we consider how this might apply to people victimizing or exploiting us today, keep in mind that our responses don't have to be as clever as this, they just have to follow the model this teaching sets out: which is exposing or naming the wrong and calling the offender into treating you right.

- So let's say, for example, that your boss is verbally berating you. He or she probably wouldn't do this if they didn't think you'd either sit there & take it OR respond in kind by berating them. But responding in the better way of Jesus could look like disrupting & naming the wrong - saying, "it's unacceptable for you to talk to me this way" - and calling them to treat you with the respect you deserve - "Is that really how you want to talk to your employee?" That's what turning the cheek looks like, it's countering the bullying from a place of strength.
- Or, let's say you feel like your friend is manipulating you. Disrupt & name the wrong: saying, "I feel like you're manipulating me." Then call them in, "That's not something friends do to one another." So they have to evaluate: are you their friend? And if so, is this how someone treats a friend? [And if they repent, then there is still that process of forgiveness and trust being rebuilt for reconciliation.]
- But turn-the-other-cheek *does not* mean that anyone should ever tolerate domestic abuse, whether it be verbal, physical, whatever. To the contrary, the better and best way to respond *is* by notifying the authorities, because this disrupts & names the evil - it wakes the offender up that something is seriously wrong here if you're calling the cops - and the prospect of legal consequences calls them out of sin into the way of love.

The good news is that when we are subjected to abuse or exploitation, Jesus absolutely calls us to resist it, just not through retaliation. Rather, the Lord wants to help us discern how we can disrupt the harm in a way that asserts our dignity & worth to the offender, exposes their wrong, and calls them into the way of love (although, that outcome is not up to us).

So, let me go a little more quickly through the other two...

Shirt off your Back?

Jesus then continues, in verse 40, "And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well." Again, the cultural context is critical for understanding what Jesus is teaching. In those days, standard dress was two garments: a long shirt or tunic that was up against your skin and then a coat over it, to keep warm at night. And everyone except the very rich only had one shirt and one coat. Now, sometimes people would surrender their coat when they were indebted to someone, as a pledge they would pay them back. But, as you can see from the Exodus 22 passage, in this scenario Jewish law required that the coat be returned each day before sundown so the debtor wouldn't freeze.⁷ However, the offender in the scenario Jesus describes has exploited a loophole, because this law said nothing about taking someone's shirt, which he wouldn't ever have to give back until the debt was paid. But this cruelty would also be hidden from others, because the victim would still have on their overcoat; no one would know they had no shirt underneath.

⁷ Exodus 22:26-27

²⁶ If you take your neighbor's cloak as a pledge, return it by sunset, ²⁷ because that cloak is the only covering your neighbor has. What else can they sleep in? When they cry out to me, I will hear, for I am compassionate.

Well.... this gives an entirely different meaning to Jesus' suggestion that they hand over their coat as well. Because if the victim has no underneath shirt, and they then hand over their overcoat, where does that leave them? Well, it leaves them **naked**!! Just imagine.

Now, we may think, "I don't wanna respond that way either, by standing naked in the middle of court." And it's true: for someone to make themselves naked in public or before the judge here is certainly a sacrifice, right? They're exposing themselves to public shame. But think about what this creative action does to the hidden injustice: in a shocking way, it would expose the injustice to the whole community, appealing to the offender's sense of shame before their fellowman, which calls them out of the injustice.

And an example of this in today's context the willingness for victims to speak up the #MeToo movement, where individuals were sexually victimized by powerful people - like Harvey Weinstein, Matt Lauer, Charlie Rose, Roger Ailes, Bill Cosby, and good Lord the list is wrong. And in many cases, what facilitated the abuse and kept it hidden was the power these abusers had over their victims' careers.

Surely none of these victims *wanted* to publicly admit the abuse they had endured, but the reason why the #MeToo movement was so successful is because these victims were willing to expose themselves to the shame they may feel at having been abused - they made that sacrifice - to shock peoples' conscience and disrupt the abuse, which certainly led to accountability and consequence in the public square, in some case legal consequences, and most importantly prevent others from being victimized by the abuser in the future.

And, by the way, Jesus did this on the cross. I know it is never depicted this way for decency reasons, but did you know Jesus hung on that cross completely naked? And it was a message to all of humanity putting him there, appealing to human's shame: saying, "This is the reality of our sin does to God."

Going the Extra Mile

Okay, last one. A final example Jesus offers of what godly resistance might've looked like in His cultural context is in verse 41, where He says, "If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles." So what's this about? Well, remember that at this time Israel was - unwillingly - under Roman occupation. So, this meant that stationed throughout Israel were Roman soldiers, there to keep the peace and to tamp down any uprisings.

But it's been estimated that the equipment and weaponry these soldiers carried around weighed between 70 and 100 pounds. So, using their power of the sword, these soldiers would often coerce a civilian to carry the load for them as they traveled around. Well, the Roman authorities knew this would be prone to abuse, so they limited the length a soldier could require a civilian to go with them to one mile.

Well, Israelites certainly didn't appreciate it when a soldier coerced them into carrying the very weapons being used to oppress them; talk about demeaning. But there was also no hope of changing the system. Right? I mean, in our society there are laws against such coercion. But these soldiers were permitted to do this, so it would do no good to fight them on it. SO this last example is about when there really is nothing that can be done - there are systemic reasons - the injustice can't be stopped. However, Jesus wants us to see that, even then, there is still an opportunity to affect change on a personal level: when the mile was up, one could love their enemy by offering to help them out for another mile of their own free will. And what this sacrificial act of generosity does to the soldier is say that "you may not care about me, but I care about you." And it calls the soldier in to see the person they're exploiting as a fellow human being, and maybe begin to treat them and those like them *with* more justice and kindness moving forward.

And for us today, this speaks to the value of cultivating love for our enemies by working hard not to dehumanize and resent them, even pray for them. Once we've cultivated love for our enemies⁸ - we can choose not to take offense, look for creative ways to love them and for them to recognize our humanity, leave it to God to judge them, and pray they might glimpse in us the way of His kingdom that they're invited to, too. Thus, Jesus goes on to say in verse 43 of our Matthew passage: "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'⁴⁴ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,⁴⁵ that you may be children of your Father in heaven." That you may show them my love for *even* them.

When we are the ones being exploited or victimized, Jesus is showing us that there is always a better way to resist than retaliation. But we absolutely need His help to have the imagination for how to do this - what it looks like - in the particular situations that will confront each one of us. Later on in Matthew, He tells His disciples, "I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves."⁹ And this is the sort of wisdom and grace that Jesus wants to impart to us as we continue to follow Him.

In the Name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

⁸ Particularly in situations where we have no power to stop them from exploiting us, like the slaves Paul writes to (Eph 6:1, etc).

⁹ Mt 10:16