

## **Revenge is Not in the Christian Lexicon**

Matthew 5:38-42

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Welcome to some of the most misunderstood and most controversial words of Jesus.

An uncaredful reading of this passage makes it sound as if a disciple of Jesus should let evil rule the day, that we have no right to protect ourselves from people who physically attack us, that we should not stand up for ourselves and fight for justice, and that we should just let people with power run all over us, taking away our dignity, and our possessions.

At first reading it seems that Jesus is out of touch with reality. Does he really expect us to love our enemies and pray for people who persecute us? Do we really think this is the way to live?

Apparently, most of us do not because so few people live by these words.

Let's be honest. We say we love Jesus, but we don't always love what Jesus has to say. How many of you are in love with these words? How many of you think these things are easy to do?

These words aren't at the top of our lists when people ask, "Why are you a Christian?" We don't say, "Cause I enjoy loving my enemies. I like turning the other cheek after I've been hit. When I'm being humiliated, insulted, verbally attacked, lied about, undermined, I love the opportunities this gives me to pray for people."

You don't think that way? Me neither.

I don't promise to make these words of Jesus any easier to live by this morning. I am going to tell you up front that Jesus' way is difficult.

However, I do hope to make them more understandable. I do hope to help you hear them a bit differently. I want us to be challenged to live the way Jesus tells us to live. If we do, we can help change the world. I think that is what Jesus was out to do.

It is fair to say that we either have to decide whether Jesus was right or just crazy.

If he was right, then we should follow him and try to do what he says. If he was crazy, then we should just go home.

Jesus said, "You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.'"

These words came from the Law of Moses. This law, called the law of Lex Talionis, or the Law of Retaliation, was a law that made good sense in its day.

In the day when it was made, there was no court system. The law was a way that people governed themselves. Justice could be done without police, courts, and prisons.

If I attacked a member of your family and broke your son's foot, by law you could break one of my son's feet or mine, but you could not break both his feet or both of mine. Revenge was limited.

If I killed your ox, you could kill mine but you could not kill me or lots of my animals.

Any crime that was committed, something of equal pain and suffering could be done in return, but no more.

The law was designed to keep violence from escalating and spilling out from individuals to families, from families to other groups, from groups to regions, from regions to countries.

You were not required to retaliate, but if you did, there were limits. This kept revenge to a minimum. This was the way justice was metered out.

In the Law of Moses, you had a right to take revenge, but within limits.

Jesus changed radically how we should respond to those who have wounded us.

When Jesus says, "Do not resist an evil person," he is saying, "You do not have the right to take revenge against someone who has wounded you."

Jesus is not saying that if someone breaks into our home and attacks our family, that we should just sit down and watch that person have his way with our family.

We should teach our children how to defend themselves from bullies or those who wish to physically harm them.

Jesus is not saying that we should not hold people accountable for wrongdoing.

Some people have taken these words to mean that we should be totally passive in every situation when someone is seeking to harm us, those around us, or our world.

Remember the time Jesus made a whip of out of cords and ran the money changers and the animals out of the temple courts, angered by the injustice he saw there? Does that sound passive?

Remember, Jesus lived by an ethic of love. That ethic is contrary to a love of revenge. Jesus' new radical response to those who offend us is to respond to them with love and not revenge.

**What Jesus proposes we do requires far more strength and self-control than the striking back at those who first strike us.**

When Jesus tells us not to resist an evil person, he gives an example of a person being backhanded in the face. Jesus says that when this happens we are to turn the other cheek to that person.

This is not about domestic violence, when a man attacks a woman or a woman attacks a man. Jesus is not saying that we should be O.K. with attacks like this and simply become a punching bag for an abusive spouse.

Jesus is not saying that we should not teach our children to allow others to attack them without defending themselves.

The physical strike Jesus describes is a backhand to the face. Contrary to a punch to the gut and a fist to the face, a backhand was an insulting strike, usually given by someone of power to someone of an inferior status.

Jesus is not crazy. Jesus is not telling us to become a punching bag for abuse. He is telling us that when we have been given the ultimate insult, we should not get into the mud pit with the insulting person. Don't attack with insults of our own. As his disciples, give up the right to revenge.

We are to be people that respond in a totally different way. Instead of revenge, we want to totally disarm people with love.

When we are attacked in such a way, people expect us to do one of two things. They expect us to submit, to cower and to become their subjects, or they expect us to get into the mud with them and trade insults and seek our revenge.

What they do not expect is the strength to stand and show them that they may have insulted us, but we have not wavered in our resolve to act lovingly toward them.

Imagine if we acted this way in our marriages, with our co-workers, with the jerk we ran into in a business deal.

This is the same attitude Jesus said people should have if they are taken to court and sued for the shirt off their backs.

In Jesus' day, you could literally sue someone for the shirt off his back, but you could not legally sue for his cloak and keep it, because the cloak was also used by the poor as his sleeping mat.

But in a stunning statement, Jesus tells his followers that if they were sued for their shirt, to give the person who sued them their cloak as well. Why? Was Jesus crazy?

Some might have thought so. But imagine if the person won the suit came for his shirt. After he was given the shirt, he turned to walk away, only to hear the man say, "Wait, my friend, you forgot your cloak."

Confused, the man who won the suit asked, "But why would you give me your cloak?"

Then the opportunity would be there for the man to share a word of love and hope with him. He might say, "If you are so desperate to sue me for my shirt, you must also need a cloak. The Lord I worship tells me to love you enough to give it to you."

Think of the impression that witness would leave on that person as he was left standing there with the man's shirt and cloak as the man walked away nearly naked. He would be dumbfounded by his generosity.

Then Jesus uses this illustration. He says if "anyone forces you to go one mile, go two."

When you travel down the highway today and you see mile markers, remember that the Romans were the first to mark the roads with mile markers. It was not unusual for a Roman soldier to force a citizen to carry his load.

Imagine the surprise of a soldier to meet a person who gets to a mile marker and instead of setting down the load and spitting on the ground and cursing the soldier, he says something about being a follower of Jesus and tells him that he will carry his load for another mile.

We have all passed by people on the street begging for money. You have passed by people holding signs that say, "Need work. Please help." You've turned the T.V. channel as people have appealed for money for food, hospitals, and medicine. Some of you have even passed on the opportunity to give to the ministries of the church.

Jesus says, "Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you." (v. 42)

Again, is Jesus crazy or should we loan money to every person that comes asking for it? If we did, soon word would spread and the line would become deep and before long most of us would have no more money to lend and we would be in line asking for money ourselves.

Again, it helps to know something about the context of Jesus' day. In his day, people were still living by an Old Testament law that said that every seven years debts were cancelled. This was an act of mercy and a way to help the poor get back on their feet. We have our own debt forgiveness plan. We call it bankruptcy and debt consolidation plans.

Well, if you were shrewd and devious, you might borrow some money in year 6.5 knowing in year seven it would be forgiven. So the closer year seven came, the more difficult it became to borrow money. This created an added hardship on people who needed money to survive.

Jesus expects us to be good stewards and discerning with our resources. He also wants us to be loving and kind and not just think about ourselves.

Now we get to his most shocking statement yet. “You 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 sons of your Father in heaven.” (43-44)

Jesus has just given us four examples of people we often see as our enemies. People that are evil. People who wound us. People that sue us. People that have power over us. People that are constantly wanting us to support them with no intentions of repayment.

Now he tells us that in all of these cases he wants us to respond to these people with an ethic of love.

Instead of taking revenge, instead of running like a coward, he wants us to stand up to those who insult us and let them know that while we might be offended, we will not stop caring for them. When people think they have gotten the best of us by taking something from us, surprise them and give them something more as a way of saying, “I have something you can’t take from me, which is my freedom to choose how I respond to you.”

People may force us to do some things in life, but they cannot force us to hate them. That is our choice. Jesus wants us to surprise people with our generosity and give a witness to Jesus.

We sometimes see those in need as adversarial. Jesus wants us to be more empathetic and more loving to those in need.

Our ultimate goal is to imitate the Father. Jesus reminds us that our Father in heaven is filled with mercy and grace.

When he sends the rain, does the rain just come to the just or does the rain come to both the just and the unjust?

So it’s safe to assume that there are going to be some people who are beneficiaries of your love and your money and your time that do not deserve it.

Jesus wants us to spend less time trying to play judge to decide who deserves our love, and more time just loving.

It’s like throwing candy on a parade route. It is thrown out for any and all. Children that have been good get candy and even the bullies get candy.

If you love those who love you, Jesus said, what reward will you get?

Don’t even the gang members do that?

If we only greet brothers, what are we doing more than the members of the Ku Klux Klan?

Don’t even the Nazis greet other Nazis in the name of brotherhood?

So, if we want to be like our Father in heaven, Jesus says we have to do more.

The more he is referring to is that we have to love our enemies.

Not only does that mean no revenge, it means that we actively have to extend blessings to them in some form.

Remember – this love is not a feeling.

This love is action.

It is a demonstration of love we have for God and because we love God, we are acting lovingly toward others, even though they may have wounded us.

In doing so, we are saying, “Despite your actions, you cannot dictate or take away how I will respond to you, because “Greater is He that is in you, than he that is in the world.” (1 John 4:4).

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