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“BUT I SAY: VENGEANCE”
Matthew 5:38-42

☑ You are a twelve-year old boy in the seventh grade. You’ve always gotten along OK with Mike, but then he starts poking you, kicking you, pulling your hair.

Ignoring him does not help. Telling him to quit it makes it worse. Tattling to the teacher is the last thing you want to do.

Your parents advise you to hit him back. It might get Mike to stop. It might stop other kids from bullying you.

{Mt 5:39} Still, you resist the idea. Fighting is against school rules. You’ve always been taught that hitting is wrong. Above all, you cannot help but hear the Son of God calling you to **“turn... the other cheek.”**

That was me in 1978. I *agonized* over the decision.

Finally, I gave in. My first fistfight didn’t go very far: we were evenly matched, and some teachers quickly broke it up and marched us down to the Vice Principal’s office.

Fighting *did* work. Mike quit harassing me.

Fighting *didn’t* work. Resisting him did not stop anyone else from bullying me. In fact, for several years afterward I was targeted for much worse verbal and physical mistreatment by some other students.

Fighting didn’t clear up my confusion, either. I had more questions. Questions like:

? What is involved in turning the other cheek?

? How should my relationship with Jesus change my conduct toward people whose intentions are bad?

■ Please turn to Matthew 5:38: **“You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’”**

The Lord is excerpting three texts.

● Exodus 21:23-25: **“If there is serious injury, you are to take life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise.”**

● Leviticus 24:19-20: **“Anyone who injures a neighbor is to be injured in the same manner: fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth. The one who has inflicted the injury must suffer the same injury.”**

● Deuteronomy 19:21: **“Show no pity: life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot.”**

📖 This is the *Lex Talionis*, the Law of Retaliation. At first hearing it sounds completely cut-and-dried; yet there is more going on here than meets the eye.

★ {NIV Study Note; Barclay} First, the *Lex Talionis* is designed to limit punishment so that it **“fits the crime,”** thereby preventing **“cruel and barbaric”** excesses. **“Far from being a savage and bloodthirsty law”** it is **“the beginning of mercy.”**

★ {NLT Study Note; Barclay} Second, the *Lex Talionis* is **“a guide for judges”** not vigilantes. It decrees how *judges* are to **“assess [official] punishment and penalty.”** It is **“not an endorsement of personal vengeance.”**

★ {Barclay} Third, the *Lex Talionis* is officially observed as a principle more than a procedure. What if a man knocks out a rotten tooth, but all of his teeth are perfectly healthy? Literal maiming poses an intolerable risk of injustice. From very early on, for most of Israel's history, her judges have substituted monetary penalties for bodily ones, excluding capital offenses.

“You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’” A candidate could get elected to office with this plank in their platform!

■ And yet Messiah repudiates *Lex Talionis*. Verse 39a: **“But I tell you, do not resist an evil person.”**

🔍 What is he saying?

📖 English language translations almost universally render the Greek verb ανθιστημι [anthístēmi] as **“resist.”** This is both an accurate and misleading translation.

These words do have the same *denotation*. Their primary dictionary definitions are identical.

However, they have different connotations. Their nuances and undertones are not the same. Thus, **“resist”** is a misleading translation.

📖 Ανθιστημι has undertones of *give as good as you get, even the score, fight fire with fire*. It evokes images of hurting your enemy the way they hurt you.

“Do not ανθιστημι!” For once, The Cotton Patch Version does better than standard translations: **“never respond with evil.”** And lest we justify our retaliation as a good thing, The Message puts it like this: **“Don’t hit back at all.”**

“I tell you, do not ανθιστημι an evil person,”
“Do not retaliate against” those who do evil to you.

■ Verse 39b is more radical: **“If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also.”** Let's walk through this scenario step-by-step.

Two of us are facing off, mirror images of irritation and resentment. The right side of my face is aligned with his left and the left side of my face is aligned with his right.

I slap him. Like most people I am right-handed. So if I swing my arm naturally, which side of his face do I strike? I strike his left side. And with which part of my hand do I strike him? I strike with my palm.

☑ {Barclay; *Baba Kama* 8:6} Yet Jesus speaks of being struck **“on the right cheek.”** The only way I can slap the other guy on his right is with the back of my hand. In **“Rabbinic law [a blow] with the back of the hand [is] twice as insulting.”** First century rabbis teach that **“If a man”** slaps another **“he must pay him [200 zuz],”** a denomination of coin. **“If [he slaps him] with the back of his hand he must pay him 400 zuz.”**

☑ {Barclay; France} “[Turning] **the other cheek**” means that we are not to retaliate even when an enemy lashes out with the **“greatest possible contempt.”**

★ Before going further, we must make a decisive distinction: non-retaliation is not a synonym for passive compliance, much less active collaboration. It is the foundation of nonviolent resistance.

☑ If nonviolent resistance sounds like an oxymoron, consider the legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. He helped dismantle racist segregation and voting restrictions without condoning or inflicting violence. When he was targeted for brutal attack, he did not retaliate.

☑ {McKnight} This is not only about what not to do. **“Do not [ανθιστημι]’ is as much a positive action of love as ... a negative posture”** against retaliation.

■ {Ex 22:26-27; Dt 24:12-13} Matthew 5:40: **“If anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well.”** For most people, their **“coat”** (their outer robe) is an essential daytime garment and their only blanket at night. So while the law allows a judge to confiscate a shirt it expressly forbids them from taking a **“coat.”** Jesus says, voluntarily **“hand over”** both.

■ Matthew 5:41: **“If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles.”** Israel is a conquered people. Their land is occupied by a foreign power. Any Jew can be compelled on a moment’s notice to aid and abet any Roman soldier by providing lodging, feeding them a meal, or carrying their gear for up to one mile. Jesus says, voluntarily go twice that far.

■ {Lk 6:30} Matthew 5:42: **“Give to the one who asks... and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.”** The law prohibits stinginess. Jesus says fulfill God’s law of generosity. Elsewhere he expands it by adding, **“If anyone takes what [is yours] do not demand it back.”**

Like most people, ancient Jews hate their enemies. They thirst for vengeance (though they would probably call

it “justice”). They are looking for a Messiah who will fulfill their fantasies of revenge.

☑ {Mt 5:44; NLT Study Note} The Son of God presents a radically different response: Do not retaliate! **“Love your enemies”!** **“It is more important to give justice and mercy than to receive it.”**

? Question: Don’t non-retaliation and self-sacrifice pave the way for the victory of evil?

Evil would have been victorious had Jesus allowed Peter to defend him with the sword!

Evil would have been victorious had Jesus had summoned the legions of angels to obliterate his enemies!

Evil would have been victorious had Jesus not allowed evil men to crucify him!

? Question: Jesus was special. Does he expect this of *us*?

In a word, Yes.

Luke 9:23: **“Whoever wants to be my disciples must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.”** It is almost certain we will not undergo physical crucifixion; but why would we infer from this that we are exempt from all unjust suffering?

First Peter 2:21, 23: **“To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you and example, that you should follow in his steps.... When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.”**

? Question: How can we live up to this high and holy calling?

✎ We do it by trusting God.

{Ps 62:7; Is 50:10} What did we say in our Call to

Worship? **“My salvation and my honor depend on God; he is my mighty rock, my refuge.”** What did we hear in our Old Testament reading? **“Let those who walk in the dark... trust in the name of the LORD and rely on their God.”**

✎ We do it by surrendering control to Sovereign God.

{Dt 32:35} The LORD Almighty declares: **“It is mine**

to avenge; I will repay.”

✎ We do it by loving our enemies as God loves his enemies.

{Ro 12:17-21} The apostle Paul exhorts us: **“Do not**

repay anyone evil for evil.... Do not take revenge ... but leave room for God’s wrath....On the contrary, ‘If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink...’ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”

✎ Above all, we do it by partaking of Jesus.

Christ did not give as good as he got, did not even the score, did not fight fire with fire. He never mirrored evil by taking revenge or serving selfish ambition.

He overcame evil with nonviolent resistance and self-sacrifice. It follows that the more we are filled by his life, the deeper we go in fellowship with him, the more we will think, speak, act and relate as he does.

“You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ 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. And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.”

Matthew 5:38-42 is the word of the Lord.