

VENGEANCE

AND OUR PERVASIVE PUSH-OVER PARANOIA

MATTHEW 5.38-42



Today we continue to work our way through six of the most challenging things Jesus will ever say to us. And I am convinced that what Jesus says here will either discourage us... making us give up on deep and life-transforming discipleship in favor of periodic and perfunctory pew appearances on high holy days...OR what Jesus says will open the door for us into the very heart of the Kingdom of God where life truly is different and what seems like utter foolishness to the rest of the world becomes power and wisdom and peace beyond all understanding for us.

These texts are either an impossible ascent that we will abandon as unclimbable or the surprising entry to real transformation. And it remains an open question which they will be for us.

Today challenge #4 comes in verses 38-42 of Matthew 5:

³⁸ "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' ³⁹ But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; ⁴⁰ and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; ⁴¹ and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. ⁴² Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.

On Tuesday I will pack up our mini-van and leave with the kids on an epic road trip that will take us to national parks, state capitals, several of the largest cities in the western United States, and unfortunately plenty of gas stations. We plan to drive down through Idaho and Utah into Arizona and then head west to come up the coast.

Planning this has reminded me of trips I took with my parents when I was a boy, and one in particular came to mind as I read our text today. It was a week we spent in a condo on the ocean in Cannon Beach and it was most memorable unfortunately because the day after we arrived a vicious flu bug dropped us all... to a person... for most of the week. It rained nearly the whole time we were there... adding gloom to our grim vacation... as we took turns throwing up and crawling back out to beds, couches, the sleeping bags on the floor.

As the week drug on, I was the first to recover and regain my appetite, and this was where the conflict began. Sugared cereals rarely entered our home, but my mom had bought a box of Fruit Loops for this trip, and the first thing I did after my stomach settled was begin to eat Fruit Loops... bowl after bowl.

And my sister Kimberly... still unable to eat... cried foul from the couch. "It is not fair" she cried. "Kevin will get more than me! Make him stop eating!"

Sound familiar? If not the sick-for-a-week-Fruit-Loop-fiasco in Cannon Beach, at least my sister's cry:

"It's not fair!"



Who, by the way, teaches kids this particular sentence? I haven't heard a single parent ever do it, but not long after 'ball' and 'dada' comes our grammatically correct demand for justice: "It's not fair!" we cry... instinctively if somewhat selectively. I've noticed we generally keep our mouth shut unless someone else appears to be getting more... Fruit Loops.

And as we grow up, this instinct for our rightful share develops into something more when our status and rights are trampled and ignored. In these instances our demand for fairness becomes full outrage. Outrage at insults and imposition. Fury at injustice and evil done to us. "How dare they!" we say. "Who do they think they are!"

I've already confessed today to Fruit Loop greed; I need to admit something else also: a certain shallowness in my cinematic preferences. I am an English major, but even so, my movie tastes rarely run in the direction of art house films or documentaries. Personally, I'm drawn to the escapist productions... shoot-um-up action adventures or romantic comedies... and in the former category it is hard not to notice that revenge and vengeance just might be the #1 formula.



Often the good guy is only reluctantly pulled in to oppose evil after it gets personal and the forces of darkness attack his wife or his child or, heaven forbid, his pet hamster. And by and large, by the end of the film we are cheering when the box office hero gives the designated bad guy what is coming to him. Shock and awe, man. Shock and awe.

Only how does this line up with our standing invitation to life in the kingdom?

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Maybe you've heard that the original Jewish law that Jesus quotes here at the beginning was actually a huge shift toward compassion and protection at a time when the norm was retaliation without restraint. This law, called the **Lex Talionis**, was actually the beginning of mercy by limiting vengeance in tribal settings where blood feuds and vendettas destroyed not just individuals, but whole families and entire communities.

And lest you think we come so far, rarely, even in ancient times was Lex Talionis applied literally: an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. Instead it became simply the foundation for a system of compensation for damages done much the same way that civil courts assess damages today. All this is well and good...

But then Jesus climbs up on the mountain and dismisses hundreds of years of careful legal precedent: "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer."

Okay, Jesus... I've been trying to follow you these last few weeks and quite frankly it has been a stretch. Now you have to be joking, right? This isn't just extreme, this is insane! You yourself Jesus have identified the person in question as evil, right? And we are not to resist even them?

Who do you think we are? Wimps? Cowards? Idiots?

Incidentally, based in part on this very passage the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche concluded Jesus' ethics were 'effeminate' and rejected them along with his plans to be a priest in favor of his theory of the *Übermensch*—the Superman—and a morality of 'blood and iron.' I suspect you are aware of what Hitler Inc. did with that.



Dietrich Bonhoeffer

When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.

And speaking of World War II, what about the thousands of Christians who died fighting the demonic Nazi war machine? Were they wrong? Their number included Dietrich Bonhoeffer whose book **The Cost of Discipleship** doesn't seem to shy away from tough texts. In fact, in that very book, Bonhoeffer writes: "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die."

Where does all of this leave us? Right here: again Jesus is calling us to something so far beyond what we can do on our own that it is impossible. That is clear... but even as we admit this we need to be equally clear about just what this specific impossibility is.

Our English translation, the NRSV, skips over some real tension in this passage that may actually help clarify Jesus' challenge. Possibly a better translation of the word 'resist' in the heart of Jesus' command would be this: 'try to get even with.' And it is an open debate whether the one we are not to resist or get even with is an evil person, the devil himself, or both. You see, every other time the Greek phrase here is used, it is understood to be the Evil One in caps rather than just twisted people.

And to illustrate what this means, Jesus gives us four vivid examples: one of a slap, one of a cloak, one of a mile, and one of a loan, and every one affronts our sense of fairness, basic intelligence, and our instinct to stand up rather than be pushed over or shoved aside.

Take the slap. And as we do let me repeat again what John said two weeks ago about divorce: Jesus is not asking us here to remain in any situation of domestic violence. This call to turn the other cheek is about our response to direct and intentional insults. That was the cultural meaning of this strike. It was the worst possible insult in Jewish culture, and every one of Jesus' original listeners would have understood that Jesus command here was not to retaliate to even to most humiliating slur or attack leveled against them.

Simone Weil

Don't just do something, stand there!

Simone Weil in commenting on this passage, is quoted as saying: "Don't just do something, stand there!" Not fight (our outrage instinct) or flight (our fear response)... we are called to face evil and insult with something unexpected... courage that doesn't lash back or turn tail.

And as with the slap, so with the cloak, the mile, and the loan: our call in each circumstance is to do something utterly unexpected and stunning. In historical context someone could sue you for your coat, but your cloak was legally untouchable since it doubled as a blanket at night, especially for the poor.

But in the kingdom, things are different. In the kingdom, Jesus seems to be saying that unthinkable generosity has far more power than righteous legality.



And how about the mile: Roman law allowed Roman soldiers to impress any subjected people into limited service, and of all the examples Jesus gives, this one would have been hardest for his listeners to swallow—going above and beyond to serve the hated Roman occupiers. Yet even here Jesus says the kingdom bursts the banks of the river that every expected relationship has followed for years. If anyone forces you to go one mile, go two.

And then give to anyone who begs or seeks to borrow. This last example might seem a bit mundane after the slap, the cloak, and the mile, but then I bet you've been hit up for help far more times than insulted, stripped of possessions, or impressed into forced service.

And I don't know about you, but I want to groan when Jesus says "Give to everyone who asks." Bankruptcy looms large, but before we all go and simply declare it, hear one intriguing observation from Dale Bruner. He notes—reading the text carefully—that Jesus asks us to give every time we are asked, but doesn't say that that our gift or loan should necessarily be what is asked for.

What we may be called to give is time and care rather than two bucks for a burger or beer. And ironically this may be much more challenging whether the request comes from a panhandler in the parking lot or a friend in much deeper need, but here too, as with everything Jesus commands of us in the face of evil and insult, legal assault or possible manipulation, our response is what will be the biggest surprise, full of grace, truth, and holy creativity.

**Justice never
saved a soul.**

Here is why: justice never saved a soul, and isn't this the very thing at the heart of the kingdom we cannot enter on our own? Salvation? Not just in a strict Four-Spiritual-Laws-If-You-Died-Tonight-Where-Would-You-Go kind of way. But salvation as the complete transformation of life... our lives, and possibly, just possibly, the lives of those so twisted and tortured by the demonic that they are seeking to destroy us.

Can you see in this stunning challenge just a glimpse of the depth of Christ's kingdom love that isn't willing that any should perish? **An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth might be the beginning of mercy, but it falls so far short of kingdom...** the kingdom which unfolds through God's grace and the power of the Holy Spirit quite possibly only as we consider the impossible in the face of evil and insult, humiliation and scam.

Turning the other cheek. Throwing in our cloak. Going beyond the forced mile. And giving beyond reason.

Seen this way, Jesus is not inviting us into a fraternity of wimps and push-overs, but into the company of the most courageous and creative people on this planet... people who throughout history have set aside pride and justifiable vengeance to joyfully use even degradation as the doorway to the kingdom... and not just for themselves but also for those in chains to evil who seem wholly possessed and are so often dismissed as already damned.

Know anybody like that? If you do it is because they've attacked you, they've humiliated you, they've swindled you.

³⁸ "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' ³⁹ But I say to you, Do not resist or **seek to get even with the evil one**... if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also... if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well... if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.

Paul writes in Romans 12: "If your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink." And he goes on to say this: "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

What might this look like? Really?

I told you three weeks ago... as we talked about anger and reconciliation... about the Rwandan woman who adopted the young man who murdered her only son.

It might look like that.

I bet you've also heard the story of Elizabeth Elliot in South America going to live with the tribe who years before had murdered her husband.

It might look like that.

Or Corrie ten Boom embracing the German guard who had watched over her humiliation in a World War II prison camp.

It might look like that.

How about seeking to care for the arrogant physician whose cocky mistake has caused degeneration of the discs in your back?

How about finding a way to bless the business partner who just took you to the cleaners?

How about intentionally reaching out to the person you know is, at this moment, calculatingly and consistently spreading lies about you?

Are you in a fight for family money? Are you dealing with an ex-spouse who seems bent on not just destroying you but your kids? Is there someone at work deliberately sabotaging your chances for promotion?

Where is evil personal for you? And what might you do—if in courage and creativity—you walked with Jesus past the old law of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth into the kingdom?

I guarantee that we won't be able to take this walk alone. But then Jesus doesn't ask us to. Do you remember the very last thing Jesus says to us here in this gospel where today he asks of us the impossible?

He says this: "I will never leave you or forsake you." Never. Slap. Cloak. Mile. Loan.

Justice never saved a soul. And it would appear that entry into the kingdom in the face of evil will take something more. Something surprising. Something unexpected. Something foolish and full to brim with love and grace. Something good.

Don't just do something, stand there... in the face of evil and insult, humiliation and scam. Stand there with all the courage and creativity you can muster. Stand there with all the help that we as fellow followers of Christ can provide. Stand there and do the impossible. Stand there and care.

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June 15, 2008 / Kevin Finch