

## Apprenticed to Jesus: Revenge and Generosity

Matthew 5:38-42

Eugene Peterson grew up in a good Christian home in a small town in Montana. His mother taught him about Jesus and how to live his life. He had plenty of friends and lots of space to run wild. Peterson said it was basically like living in the Garden of Eden – until he went to school and encountered Garrison Johns, the school bully. About the third day of school Garrison Johns, a second grader, discovered Eugene. Eugene became his “personal project” for the year. Almost every day after school, Garrison would stalk out Eugene and beat him up on the walk back home. And somehow Garrison found out that Eugene was a Christian, so he started calling Eugene “Jesus-sissy.”

Eugene had been taught to “turn the other cheek” so he just took what Garrison was dishing out. His mother told him that Christians had been treated that way throughout history so he better get used to it.

Then came that fateful day the following March when Garrison caught up with Eugene and seven or eight of his friends walking home from school. Garrison began taunting and jabbing Eugene, working his way up to a full-out pounding. Here are Eugene’s own words of what happened next:

Something snapped within me. Totally uncalculated. Totally out of character. For just a moment the Bible verses disappeared from my consciousness and I grabbed Garrison. To my surprise, and his, I realized that I was stronger than he. I wrestled him to the ground, sat on his chest and pinned his arms to the ground with my knees. I couldn’t believe it – he was helpless under me. At my mercy. It was too good to be true. I hit him in the face with my fists. It felt good and I hit him again – blood spurted from his nose, a lovely crimson on the snow. By this time all the other children were cheering, egging me on. “Black his eyes! Bust his teeth!” A torrent of vengeful invective poured from them, although nothing compared with what I would, later in life, read in the Psalms. I said to Garrison, “Say Uncle.” He wouldn’t say it. I hit him again. More blood. More cheering. Now the audience was bringing the best out in *me*. And then my Christian training reasserted itself. I said, “Say, I believe in Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior.”

And he said it. Garrison Johns was my first Christian convert.

*(Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places, pp. 134-136)*

It is incredibly difficult to know how to apply Jesus’ command to “turn the other cheek.” In theory the idea of not taking revenge on people who mistreat us sounds good. But in real life it just doesn’t seem very practical. Peterson’s example of the neighborhood bully highlights the tension. We don’t want our kids to grow up thinking that they should solve their problems with their fists; but we also don’t want them to live with the dread of being bullied.

You may or may not have to figure out how to deal with neighborhood bullies. But you will have to decide in everyday life if you are going to retaliate when people wrong you. You will have to decide if you will treat people the way they have treated you, or if you will treat them better than they have treated you. Chances are this past week somebody wronged you: an insult, a slight, an injustice, or simply a careless comment. It may have been somebody you’d never

met before or somebody you live or work with. If you can think of a time you were wronged this past week, keep it in mind as we consider Matthew 5:38-42.

***Jesus' teaching on revenge and generosity toward "evil people."*** (Matthew 5:38-42) In verse 38 Jesus makes reference Exodus 21, a chapter which spelled out what justice looks like when one person injured another person or damaged his/her property.

38 "You have heard that it was said, 'AN EYE FOR AN EYE, AND A TOOTH FOR A TOOTH.'

This quotation expressed "the principle of exact retribution": the retribution for an injury should fit the severity of the injury itself. Here is the fuller quotation from Exodus 21:

23 "But if there is any further injury, then you shall appoint as a penalty life for life, 24 eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, 25 burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise.

If you attacked somebody and they lost an eye, the penalty would be one of your eyes. If you cut off somebody else's hand, you would lose a hand. The principle of exact retribution stated that the punishment was supposed to fit the crime. Once the punishment was carried out, the matter was supposed to be over. History is full of examples of revenge-taking spiraling out of control and turning into full-out warfare (either between tribes or between nations). Eventually the original offense is forgotten and revenge takes on a life of its own. This principle was supposed to curb excessive revenge-taking.

The bottom line was that under the Law you had certain rights. If you were wronged, the Law spelled out what justice looked like. An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. You had a way to get even. You had a way to settle the score. Apparently by Jesus' day the principle of exact retribution was no longer a principle applied only in the courts; it was taken to mean that you could personally take revenge (something that was forbidden in the Law – see Lev. 19:18).

Jesus teaches a type of righteousness that was deeper and more substantive when He said:

39 "But I say to you, do not resist an evil person; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also. 40 "If anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, let him have your coat also. 41 "Whoever forces you to go one mile, go with him two. 42 "Give to him who asks of you, and do not turn away from him who wants to borrow from you.

The overarching command is given in the first part of verse 39: "... do not resist the evil person ...". To "resist" the evil person means to stand up to them and oppose them. Instead of "getting even" by practicing the principle of exact retribution, Jesus says to not fight back. Instead of settling the score, Jesus is advocating ***non-retaliation***. In order to remove any doubt about what He's saying, Jesus gives four scenarios/examples which make His point.

As we go through these examples, I'd like to ask you to just "go with it" and try to hear the spirit of what Jesus is saying. All sorts of questions and qualifications will come to mind as we consider these scenarios. I think Jesus is being deliberately provocative when He gives these

scenarios. He wants us to come face to face with the question, “Am I willing to give up my rights and my sense of fairness in order to be like Jesus?” Which is more important revenge or following Jesus?

First, Jesus says in verse 39:

39 "... but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also.

Historians who understand first century Palestine tell us that a slap was normally administered with a person's right hand. Being slapped on your right cheek probably meant being backhanded – an extreme insult. Jesus says that those who follow Him should be prepared to suffer a slap on the other cheek instead of retaliating by slapping the other person in return.

Second, Jesus says in verse 40:

40 "If anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, let him have your coat also.

In Jesus' day a man typically wore a “shirt” or long tunic next to his body with a heavier coat on the outside. Jesus says that if someone sues you for your inner shirt/tunic, you should let him have your coat also. This was an extreme expression of generosity because Jewish law stipulated that the outer garment was a possession that couldn't be forcibly taken from you (see Exodus 22:26-27; it had to be returned by sundown). Presumably the person has no legal grounds for suing you in the first place because Jesus is illustrating what it means to “not resist the evil person.” Instead of resisting, you abandon your rights and bless him with your coat.

The third scenario is given in verse 41:

41 "Whoever forces you to go one mile, go with him two.

In the first century Roman soldiers had the authority to force ordinary people into service. They could force you to carry supplies or clean a chariot or wash dishes. Jesus says that if someone forces you to go one mile, you double the demand and go two miles. You not only don't resist the evil person; you go above and beyond what's demanded of you.

Fourth and finally, Jesus says in verse 42:

42 "Give to him who asks of you, and do not turn away from him who wants to borrow from you.

Jesus says that His disciples should be the type of people who freely give to others who ask. Instead of calculating what the other person has done for me and then deciding if s/he is worthy (that's the “eye for an eye” approach to giving), I should just give. And when people want to borrow from me, I shouldn't run the other way; I should share what I have – whether tools or books or clothes or whatever.

At this point you may be thinking, “This makes no sense. What good could possibly come from being generous to evil people? What if they don't appreciate what you're doing? What if you end up getting taken advantage of?”

Jesus doesn't tell us **why** His disciples should replace revenge with generosity. But I think we have a clue as to His thinking in the passage we'll consider next week. Jesus will say that loving our enemies proves that we're "sons of our Father in heaven"; we love our enemies because God loves His enemies. Our behavior is supposed to mirror God's behavior. And so I think that's the most obvious reason why we should replace revenge with generosity is because that's what God has done toward us.

Jesus literally embodied the things He taught in this passage. Jesus gave to everybody who asked Him; even when He was exhausted, He traveled from town to town giving wisdom and healing and deliverance. The soldiers took Jesus' outer garment and cut it into four parts, and cast lots for His tunic (John 19:23-24). When He was beaten and spat upon, He didn't fight back. When He was forced to carry His own cross to the place of execution, He did it. He went the extra mile and died for our sin.

As all this was unfolding, Jesus' disciples had to have been asking themselves, "What is the purpose of all this? How can this possibly be accomplishing anything? Aren't evil people getting away with slander and robbery and murder?" Peter – at the time – especially thought Jesus' mistreatment was a waste. That's why he rebuked Jesus when Jesus seemed to be saying that He would go to Jerusalem to be crucified. That's why he cut off the servant's ear with his sword when they came to arrest Jesus. He couldn't fathom that not resisting evil people could ever accomplish the will of God. Only in retrospect did it make sense.

Significantly, Peter is the NT author who spells out the significance of Jesus' non-retaliation the most clearly. In 1 Peter 2:21ff. we read this:

21 For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps, 22 who committed no sin, nor was any deceit found in His mouth; 23 and while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting *Himself* to Him who judges righteously. . .

In 1 Peter 3:9 Peter also wrote:

9 not returning evil for evil, or insult for insult, but giving a blessing instead. . .

That's really what Jesus taught and that's how Jesus lived. Therefore, that's how Jesus' disciples should also live. Remember that discipleship means being apprenticed to Jesus in order to learn how to live **as He lived**. "A disciple becomes like his/her master." So how can we say, "I sure am glad Jesus didn't fight back, but if you wrong me, I'll make you pay. I don't get mad; I get even." We need to grapple with the possibility that there will be times when we – like Jesus – are called to set aside our rights and our sense of fairness. (See also Romans 12:17-21.)

We're going to talk about application in a few minutes, but first let's consider **two points of clarification**. Real-life situations are notoriously complex and require great discernment and the leading of the Holy Spirit.

**First**, we should assume that ***Jesus' teaching doesn't contradict other clear teachings of Scripture***. In other words, we don't apply Jesus' teaching in ways that negate complementary

teachings. For example, Romans 13 teaches that governing authorities exist to reward those who do good and punish those who do evil and that rulers “do not bear the sword for nothing.” Governing authorities are given the responsibility to do what we as individual Christians are forbidden to do – make people pay for the evil they’ve done. There will be times when we as followers of Christ utilize the courts and governing authorities to pursue justice. There will be times when we are compelled by mercy and grace NOT to demand our legal rights; but it seems to me that the structures of justice exist for our benefit as much as everyone else’s. That’s the clear teaching of Scripture.

Other examples. . . Jesus’ teaching on not taking revenge doesn’t negate the responsibility to speak the truth in love (Eph. 4:15) or to stimulate each other to love and good deeds (Heb. 10:24-25) or to admonish/correct those who are living foolishly. It takes real discernment and wisdom to know how Jesus’ teaching on non-retaliation fits with complementary Scriptures.

John Stott has written, “Thus the only limit to the Christian’s generosity will be a limit which love itself may impose. . . [Jesus] teaches not the irresponsibility which encourages evil but the forbearance which renounces revenge.” (*Sermon on the Mount*, pp. 107-108) The only reason you wouldn’t “turn the other cheek” would be if love demanded something else.

***Second, Jesus isn’t teaching that we shouldn’t intervene when we witness others doing evil.***

Jesus is talking about His disciples personally being willing to suffer wrongs without taking revenge. There are plenty of Scriptures that speak about standing up for the helpless and powerless. There are lots of situations in which it is good and right to resist people who are doing evil to others.

When our kids were really little we lived next door to a family that included a very aggressive little boy. He was rowdy and angry and a little bit dangerous. One day I looked out the window and saw him intentionally hit one of my daughters in the head with a kickball. I didn’t go out there are say, “Honey, we’re Christians, so let’s turn the other cheek and let little Mitchell take another shot at you.” As I remember I exercised great self control (you would’ve been proud of me). I first had a few comments for Mitchell. Then I knocked on the door and talked with his mom for a few minutes about how we could keep her son from throwing balls at my daughter’s head in the future. Stepping in and protecting people is a good thing. There are usually ways to do this without personally taking revenge.

***So how does Jesus’ teaching apply in everyday life?*** The tendency is to focus on all the difficult scenarios. And there’s certainly a place for that. But we shouldn’t let the “hard cases” keep us from obvious applications of Jesus’ teaching in everyday life. I’m thinking about scenarios when the only casualty of replacing revenge/retaliation with generosity is our ***pride***; the only thing injured is our pride and our personal sense of being wronged.

Basically my challenge is to test-drive Jesus’ teaching in your everyday life. Rowan Williams says that “The hardest place to live is right where you are.” Try to live out Jesus’ teaching right where you are. For example, you may work with somebody who is disagreeable, who often says things that insult or offend you. What about the possibility of turning the other cheek and going the extra mile with that person. If you’re in the habit of retaliating, your newfound generosity may be a striking thing. The other person may or may not change, but at least you’ve put yourself in a position to show them a better way.

This, of course, is a matter of the heart. It would be possible to bite your tongue and not say all the nasty things about people that you're thinking; but you would become a bitter, cynical person. Jesus can teach us heart-righteousness in which we are actually the type of people who honestly don't want to take revenge and make people pay for the things they say and do. Jesus wants to make us the type of people who actually care about the people who wrong us.

The only way I will become that type of person is by internalizing how Jesus has been that type of person toward me. When I dwell upon the fact that Jesus doesn't demand an eye for an eye when I offend Him and insult Him, I am humbled to the core. His love for me softens my heart and compels me to love others the same way. When I take revenge on people I effectively disqualify myself from having a deep spiritual impact in their lives. At the beginning of the message I told you about Eugene Peterson taking revenge on Garrison Johns. Sixty-five years after that incident Eugene and his wife moved back to that community in Montana. He looked in the phone book to discover that Garrison still lived in the area. All those years later Eugene had anxiety over meeting Garrison because of what he'd done.

When I think about my own experience of non-retaliation, I don't think I have ever regretted letting go of revenge or retaliation. There have been times, though, when I've regretted trying to get even. When I was in college one of my best friends from high school went out on a date with a girl that I was kinda-sorta dating. It made me so angry that the next time I saw him I walked up to him, put my finger in his face, and said some rather nasty things. I wasn't walking with Christ then, and I remember it felt good at the time. But that was the last time I ever saw him. He died in a car accident about a year later. The last words I spoke to him were full of anger and revenge. I went to his funeral full of regrets. Last week Brian said that "radical truthfulness" is a better way to live your life; I'd like to add that non-retaliation is also a better way to live your life. No matter what someone has done to you, there will come a day when you will look back and wish that you'd replaced revenge with generosity.