

## COUNTER INTUITIVE

Matthew 5:38-48

Mark Twain once said this about the Bible: “I have no problem with those parts of the Bible I don’t understand. It’s those parts of the Bible I do understand that gives me fits.” This is one of those passages. It is part of the Sermon on the Mount which encompasses Matthew chapters 5, 6, and 7. It is within these chapters that some of the most familiar words of scripture are found including the beatitudes and the Lord’s Prayer. In this section Jesus gives a specific list of things that might be done to us by our enemies: those who assault us or sue us or force us to serve them against our will. In each case he gave specific remedies. Here now is the Gospel lesson.

*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. 43 You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ 44 But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45 so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.*

*46 For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? 47 And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? 48 Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*

There is a great difference between taking the Bible literally and taking the Bible seriously. A couple of weeks ago at the collation for my father-in-law there was a collection of pictures of him as a child, as an adult, as a husband, as a father, in Hawaii, at home, fallen asleep on the couch. Each was a different picture at a different time and in different circumstances and in different clothing. Each told you something about the man, but the pictures were not him. They reflected something important about him, but there is an untold story behind each picture.

It is the same with the Bible. The Bible gives us pictures of God, descriptions of the wonderful deeds of God, the judgment of God, the love of God, the mystery of God, but the Bible is not God. We take the Bible seriously because it is a unique and unrepeatable revelation of God. But as a picture taken of a person at one time is not the same as a picture taken at another time, so it is with God. What we seek is the essence and that is why the words and works of Jesus are so important as he is the revelation of God incarnate, God in the flesh.

Jesus made it plain that the values of the world are not the values of God. We operate within an alternate set of values that are counter intuitive, that push against the evils of this age. Jesus said we are to be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. And that alternative wisdom can be what delivers us from evil. Dan Miller in his book *No More Dreaded Mondays* tells a story about a farmer many years ago in a village in India who had the misfortune of owing a large sum of money to the village moneylender. The old and ugly moneylender fancied the farmer's beautiful daughter, so he proposed a bargain. He would forgive the farmer's debt if he could marry the farmer's daughter.

Both the farmer and his daughter were horrified by the proposal, but the cunning moneylender suggested that they let providence decide the matter. He told them that he would put a black pebble and a white pebble into an empty money bag. The girl would have to reach in and pick one pebble from the bag. If she picked the black pebble, she would become his wife and her father's debt would be forgiven. If she picked the white pebble, she need not marry him and her father's debt would still be forgiven. If she refused to pick a pebble, her father would be thrown into jail until the debt was paid.

They were standing on a pebble-strewn path in the farmer's field. As they talked, the moneylender bent over to pick up two pebbles. The sharp-eyed girl noticed that he had picked up two black pebbles and put them into the bag. He then asked the girl to pick a pebble. She could refuse to take a pebble but her father would then be thrown in jail. She could pick a black pebble out of the bag and sacrifice herself in order to save her father from debt and imprisonment. Or she could pull out both black pebbles in the bag, expose the moneylender as a cheat, and likely incite his immediate revenge.

Instead she put her hand into the bag and drew out a pebble. Without looking at it, she fumbled and let it fall onto the pebble-strewn path, where it immediately became lost among all the other pebbles. "Oh, how clumsy of me," she said. "But never mind. If you look into the bag for the one that is left, you will be able to tell which pebble I picked." Since the moneylender dared not admit his dishonesty, the girl was free and the money forgiven.

In the face of the evil of the world what are we to do? Jesus does not advocate being a victim. This girl did not surrender to abuse. There is another way through life, a counter intuitive way that has something to do with justice and mercy, love and forgiveness. *Lex talionis* or the law of talon is part of a legal system that

specifies certain penalties for certain crimes. It goes back to the Code of Hammurabi, named after a Babylonian king who codified a collection of laws in the 18th century B.C.

The Old Testament incorporates some of this. Deuteronomy 19:21 says, “Show no pity: life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot.” Over time, however, the practice was modified in Israel to allow the injured party to obtain a monetary award in lieu of inflicting injury on the guilty person so an injured party is awarded compensation equal to the damage of losing an eye, a tooth, a hand or a foot.

There are alternatives to following the law in Deuteronomy or the way of Jesus. We understand the desire for revenge. Dr. Peter Gomes in a sermon at Memorial Chapel at Harvard said, “The vast expanse of country club lawn makes one long for a heroic dandelion; the cook whose soufflés never fall, the spouse whose checkbook is always balanced, the conversationalist who is always right – these people do not encourage us to pursue perfection in our own chaos-filled lives; rather they cause us secretly to wish public disaster to fall on them.”

There is a website entitled “thepayback.com” and another called [getrevengeonyourex.com](http://getrevengeonyourex.com). On your behalf they will send nasty e-mails, anonymous letters, dead fish, noxious flowers and in general make someone miserable. Revenge may seem like a good idea, but it can cause greater damage on the one seeking it.

A farmer was having trouble with a coyote breaking into his chicken coop and stealing his chickens. He rigged up a cage to catch the animal, after which he planned to shoot it. Sure enough, that night the coyote again sneaked into the chicken coop, and was caught in the trap. That morning when the farmer saw the coyote his anger got the best of him.

While the coyote was just doing what was natural for him, the farmer was so outraged that the coyote was stealing his chickens, he vowed to get vengeance. Instead of shooting it, he tied a stick of dynamite to the coyotes’ tail to blow it to pieces. He did so, lit the fuse, let the coyote go, and watched it run right back into the chicken coop. There is a certain poetic justice in this, but there is also a lesson about the destructiveness of revenge. It can cause us more harm than good. Jesus gives us an alternative to retaliation.

As strange as it may seem here is what Jesus advises: “If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also.” Being slapped hard is a startling experience and

can spark a surge of adrenaline and incite a desire for retaliation. However, Jesus said we should not follow our natural instinct to get revenge but to be unbowed instead of returning blow for blow. While this might seem weak it is instead a way of seizing the initiative by standing strong instead of repeating the violence.

“And if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well.” Actually Jewish law prohibited taking a person’s cloak. In Exodus 22:26-27 it says that “If you take your neighbor’s garment as collateral, you shall restore it to him before the sun goes down, for that is his only covering, it is his garment for his skin. What would he sleep in?” That is the compassionate rule in Judaism but they were living under Roman law that was not marked by compassion which is why this advice.

“If anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile.” Roman law permitted its soldiers to require people to carry a burden for a mile. Instead of poisoning our self with anger over being forced to help an enemy Jesus said to take the initiative at that moment by doing more than is required. Going the second mile can be very powerful.

The story is told of the time shortly after the concluding battles of the American Revolution, but before the peace had been negotiated that George Washington went to his troops in Newburgh, New York. They had been growing very restless because they had not been paid. Washington had begged the Continental Congress to do what they said they would do and pay the soldiers, but the Continental Congress refused.

Some of the officers began to organize a rebellion. They talked about marching on Philadelphia, which at that time was the seat of the reigning national government, overthrowing that government and letting the army rule the nation. With the fate of America in the balance, George Washington made a surprise appearance before these officers. After praising them for their service and thanking them for their sacrifice, he pulled from his pocket a copy of a speech that he wished to read.

But then he fumbled with a paper and finally reached for a set of reading glasses – glasses those men had never seen him wear before. Washington made this simple statement: “I have already grown grey in the service of my country, and now I am going blind.” Historian Richard Norton Smith wrote: “Instantly rebellion melted into tears. It was a galvanizing moment and the rebellion ended.” That is the power of going the second mile.

If we figuratively turn the other cheek, give away the whole wardrobe, and walk the second mile it sends a different message, a message like this: “You may choose violence and greed and domination to get what you want, but your way finally ends poorly. I will end the violence and greed and domination because I have chosen another way.”

Dr. Jim Crawford, former pastor of Old South Church in Boston said of these words of Jesus, “It exercises the power to reset the agenda, to recast the vocabulary, to redefine the means to the end, to reclaim the initiative, to reassert the dignity of adversaries, to search for alternative higher ground. That is what lies behind this stunning illustration of ethical behavior offered by our Lord. Our Lord opens a world where violence dissolves and is no more.”

The principle that underlies these apparently passive responses is the love of Christ. Jewish scripture does not say we are to love our neighbor and hate our enemy. In Jewish scripture is the commandment that we are to love our neighbors and to avoid vengeance or grudge-bearing (Leviticus 19:18). It also prohibits oppression of aliens living in their midst saying, “When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God.” (Leviticus 19:33-34).

These are words that Jesus affirmed. He calls us to love to our enemies so that we may be children of our heavenly Father, acting as true sons and daughters of the God who loves even his enemies. There is no special virtue in loving those who love us. Even evil people can love those who love them. If we love only those who love us, we are no better than those who do evil and we can expect no favor from God.

It might appear that there is no justice. God makes the sun rise on those who do what is evil and those who do what is right. The rain does not respect property lines, but falls indiscriminately on the land, regardless of who owns the land. This is why it can be so challenging to accept the way of the cross.

We cannot expect any special favors. Under the windshield wiper of his illegally parked car, a driver stuck this note: “I’ve circled this block for 20 minutes. I’m late for an appointment. If I don’t park here, I’ll lose my job. Remember Jesus said, ‘Forgive us our trespasses.’” When he returned to his car, he found a parking ticket and this note: “I’ve circled this block for 20 years. If I don’t give you a ticket, I’ll lose my job. Remember Jesus also said, ‘Lead me not into temptation.’”

This section of the Sermon on the Mount concludes with Jesus saying, “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” Whatever does that mean and what do we do with it? We are told that no one is perfect while also being told that practice makes perfect. So what do we do with these words of Jesus? “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

Dr. Peter Gomes told of the time in the Second Vatican Council that Pope John XXIII was having trouble telling one American Cardinal from another at the conclave, and frequently mixed up Richard Cardinal Cushing of Boston with Francis Cardinal Spellman of New York. Finally, after doing this to the two prelates yet another time, he found himself greatly embarrassed and made profuse apologies to the Americans. To set the pope at his ease, Cardinal Cushing said, “That is all right, Holy Father; no one’s infallible.”

Indeed no one is. Even if we do as Jesus said in turning the other cheek and going the extra mile it does not prove we are perfect people. God alone is perfect but we do have the capacity to reflect something of the perfection of God as a picture is able to reflect something of a person. But doing these things heads us toward the perfect God. It might help to know that the word translated “perfect” comes from a Latin word meaning to complete. Looking at us people may see a more complete picture of the love of God.

So in Philippians chapter 2 Paul wrote: “Make my joy complete: Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

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Dr. John A. Terry, Pastor

The Federated Church of Hyannis