

“On Retaliation and Becoming People of Peace”

The Way of Jesus

Downtown & Lexington

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Let's read our passage together from Matthew 5:38-42:

Matthew 5:38-42

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 the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you.

These are some of the most known verses in the whole of the Sermon on the Mount. In fact, I was talking with a guy in my LifeGroup about this sermon and he said, “Have I told you about the time I was in 6th grade and got into a fight.” No, haven't heard that one, and also that's not exactly what Jesus is talking about in this passage.

We are familiar with the phrases: Turn the other cheek, Give the shirt off of your back, and Go the extra mile. But what do these statements actually mean and how do we begin to apply them into our lives?

If we just jump straight to applying Jesus' words here into our 21st-century American lives, we will misunderstand him. First, we've gotta do some work to understand how his original audience would have understood him and that's gonna help us know what it means for us.

So let me do some cultural background for you.

We must understand more about the Palestinian culture of the time. Anthropologists suggest that Shame/Honor was the core social value of Jesus' day. It was the currency, so to speak. While Americans will give up honor to gain money, Palestinians would give up money to gain honor. Americans typically experience shame when they don't live up to their own expectations, while Palestinians experience shame when they don't live up to the rules and expectations of their family and community. The great American story usually centers around freedom and breaking free from family or social restraint, but for Palestinians, this story would be viewed as a tragedy bringing shame and dishonor to both the individual and their family.

So let's define honor and shame

Honor - The worth, value, and prestige of a person. Similar concept to your reputation. It is your value, given to you by those around you. What do people think about you? Honor exists only in the eyes of a

public who expects certain things and evaluates individuals accordingly. This honor was not merely for the individual but the family or group he represented.

Shame - the loss of worth, value, and prestige. To be disgraced, or dishonored. An unfavorable public perception. Shame was a tool used to control group behavior and protect norms. People conformed to rules and social pressures because of the threat of shame. Like honor, shame was also shared with the family or group. One could bring honor or shame upon their family.

Honor is both ascribed and achieved. Ascribed honor is given at birth based on your families standing in the town, your gender (males are more honorable), and your birth order (firstborn males given the most honor in a family vs the last born female given the least honor).

Achieved honor refers to the reputation and fame an individual earns by his own merit: giving money away to make life better, military victory, high performance in athletics or the arts. If you gain recognition from achievement then you also gain honor. We honor teams that win championships with a parade.

So how does this honor culture impact day to day life? The subtle understanding was that honor was a zero-sum game, there was only so much honor to go around. If one person increases, then the other must decrease. Therefore, there was a constant push and pull for who gets this limited resource. Nearly every social interaction dealt with honor. It gives context to the heightened amount of envy and jealousy that Jesus evokes all of his life. He was sought from birth to be put to death because he was a constant threat to take honor from others.

Practically this creates a pattern of public interaction called honor games made up of what academics call challenges and ripostes - It's a fencing term, a counterattack. Not sure if you watched the debate/debacle the other night, but there were definitely moments that illustrate these types of honor games.

1. Someone makes a claim to honor - I am smart
2. Another refutes the claim - You shouldn't use the word smart with me
3. Thus honor must be defended - Then it obviously spiraled out of control
4. Finally, the public makes a verdict passing honor to the winner - we get to vote.

So this is the context Jesus is speaking into. Honor is highly valued, but it is a limited resource therefore people are competing for honor and trying to avoid shame.

Ok, all this is set up for our passage. It's needed background to understand how the original audience would hear Jesus's words. Without an understanding of honor and shame culture, we would miss some of what Jesus is teaching. Now when looking at our passage we can see that just like the past 4 weeks, Jesus is continuing in the same teaching pattern. He first states a traditional command, then he expounds upon its meaning, and finally, he applies it into the lives of his disciples.

Matthew 5:38 reads: "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' - lex talionis. law of retaliation, law of according to kind.

When offended our human bent is not justice in the court of law, but retaliation and escalation. My rule on pranking, you got one shot, then I will repay you in such a way that you would never want to do it again. This is both a punishment and a future deterrent. That's past me of course, I no longer remove tires from cars or put sardines in air filters.

Jonathan Pennington

“The rule of lex talionis...was designed to prevent two wrongs— severe retribution that did not fit the crime and self-appointed vigilante action. It is all too easy for revenge to quickly get out of hand, for the one(s) seeking justice to be controlled by passions, and for well-intentioned responses to become violent reactions that often end up doing more damage than the original crime and spiraling into more violence and instability. This is why the lex talionis exists and why it continues to be a part of our own justice system in the West.”

Jesus is not doing away with the command and call for Justice. The law of retaliation, “an eye for an eye” is still legitimate civil legislation. All civil societies must have just laws and punishments for those who break the laws. It is an important part of love that there be a societal foundation of justice. But Jesus is making a transition. This is what you know, this is what you are used to, but now this is where I want you to go. Jesus is about to mess with their understanding and way of life.

Jesus expands on his meaning in verse 39: “But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil.”

Resist - Greek word meaning “set one’s self against”.

The one who is evil - someone who unjustly attacks

Jesus says we are not to set ourselves against someone who unjustly attacks. We don’t oppose, we don’t seek to get even, we don’t try to pay back. Often the word is used referring to the law and in that case, it means to take to court. Do not take to court.

Alright, think back to our discussion of honor and shame. Another way to view what Jesus is saying is he is telling his disciples to stop playing honor games.

In Jesus’ day, people were applying “eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth” to retaliate against minor offenses and insults ... a call for us to use the principle only as it was intended, not for everyday retaliation.

Back to the Beatitudes from the first part of Matthew 5, Jesus is telling his disciples you find honor (blessed are the...) from me so you don't need to find honor from those around you. Freedom from the game. So much freedom that you don't have to fight for your own honor. There is no need to retaliate when shamed.

Now Jesus is going to teach the application of his teaching with four Scenarios, he is going to give four Cultural Applications of Do not resist (set oneself against) the one who is evil.

These are four examples of what many call “non-retaliatory righteousness.” In each of these four scenarios, someone is being publicly shamed. They are being dishonored in front of others and Jesus is teaching his disciples a new way of responding. Freedom from having to self defend, from trying to prove oneself, from having to earn your place in society. Jesus is giving creative ways to reassert honor when they would have appeared to be helpless victims.

These are real-life examples of how the disciples should apply this teaching, Not so much for us. But based on these examples we should have insight on how to respond to our own situations. It should help us to create a rubric of how to respond when you are dishonored, wronged, or taken advantage of.

1. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.

When we read the word slap, the first thing we think about is assault or abuse. Or as a little boy who grew up in church, I was always taught that this was why boys shouldn't fight back.

The physical assault actually isn't the big issue in this scenario. But before I go further, let me clearly say this verse is not talking about someone trapped in an abusive situation. Jesus isn't telling the victim to stay and continue to get assaulted. If you are in an abusive situation please reach out to the police, tell your LifeGroup leader or contact us directly.

What is Jesus talking about is this: An unmerited slap in the face was regarded as an expression of hate or as an insult; the insult is even more important than the physical pain.

Jesus clearly mentions a slap to the right cheek. From my research, it either means one or two things. Either it is a backhanded slap or a slap with the left hand. Either way, it was highly offensive and insulting. Backhanded slaps were reserved for those considered beneath you. It would be a way to assert dominance (honor) while bringing shame to the one who was struck. You are beneath me.

If it implies the left hand, then that too would be shameful. A person's left hand was considered unclean (shameful) because it was primarily used when going to the restroom. The insult is more pronounced because it is a slap with an unclean hand. A shameful, dirty hand across the face, what was considered the most honorable part of the body.

So Jesus is not talking about what to do when someone attacks your body. He's talking about when someone attacks your honor. The big question is what do you do when you are dishonored and insulted? How do you respond when your humanity, your God-given dignity is taken from you?

Why turn the other cheek? There are two typical responses to an attack on your honor. The first would be to strike back. To retaliate in an effort to regain honor. The other response would be to cower in shame.

Jesus' instructions are different. By offering the other cheek you are doing the unexpected. Some call it non-violent resistance that is neither retaliation nor is it cowardice. To show with courage and creativity that you are not just a powerless victim of their insults, but you willingly stand ready for another attack.

By turning the other cheek disciples are able to proclaim that they quit the honor game. They proclaim that no man can shame them or take their honor because their honor comes from someone greater. Stunning defiance.

2) And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well.

What is Jesus talking about? In this scenario, a man is being unjustly sued for his tunic/shirt probably before a gathering of elders at the gate. It's another honor challenge. Shaming someone by taking their shirt. There were two major articles of clothing worn at this time. The tunic or shirt that was worn directly against the body and then the loose-fitting cloak or coat that went over it. The cloak was also used as a blanket for the poor and according to **Deuteronomy 24**, it was forbidden to leave a poor person naked or without his cloak.

Why give him your cloak as well? The typical response when someone wants to unjustly take your possessions is to fight for honor and protect your stuff. Or in shame, hand over your shirt. Jesus says if someone demands of you your shirt, then give him both your shirt and your coat.

By giving your cloak as well the disciples are again able to do the unexpected. To win by losing. To show with courage and creativity that they are not just a powerless victim of exploitation, but they willingly give more than was asked of them.

By giving their cloak as well, they proclaim, I don't play the honor game. They proclaim that no man can shame them or take their honor because their honor comes from someone greater.

3. And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles.

What is Jesus talking about? The people of Israel were under Roman occupation. They must submit to Roman law, Roman rule, and Roman exploitation. They were a defeated people living in submission to their enemies. Powerless. One of the ways Romans took advantage of the Jewish people was for Roman soldiers to require them to carry their baggage/their possessions for up to a mile. It was an exertion of power and degrading to be forced to carry the possession of those who oppressed and occupied your country.

Why go the extra mile? The typical response when someone wants to exploit you is to fight for power with resistance and rebellion as the Zealot of that time were doing. Or to shamefully and powerlessly comply.

Jesus instructs what people often call the third way. Non-violent resistance. It is not retaliation nor is it cowardice. It is to take the bags and start walking, but keep walking. To show with courage and creativity that you are not just a victim of their oppression, but you willingly give your time and strength away.

By going the extra mile they proclaim, I don't play the honor game. They proclaim that no man can shame them or take their honor because their honor comes from someone greater.

4. Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you.

What is Jesus talking about? In this scenario, the beggar and the borrower are placed in the same category as the insulter, the exploiter, and the oppressor. "Do not resist the evil one." I believe this means that Jesus is referring to a specific type of beggar and borrower. Not just someone who is poor, but someone who has lost honor. To the dishonored, the shameful who have been ostracised and cut off from both his community and his family. Not just the poor, but those who have been exiled.

Jerome Neyrey

"Those disinherited or banned as suffering a frightful social stigma in the village as disobedient and rebellious sons. They clearly lose honor and so become shameful, at least in the eyes of their neighbors ... they would not be the objects of compassion or sympathy. They got what they deserved because they did not suffer "misfortune." They experience shame from family and kin for their rebellion against family tradition."

Think of the story of the prodigal son. Rejected his father, wasted his inheritance. Destitute. Left to beg and borrow.

No honorable person would associate or help the dishonorable. It is to risk shame. So there lies the conflict. A dishonorable person knows that they will bring dishonor. They have lost the right to ask for help. They must reap their just rewards. By asking for money, the beggar is openly attacking the person's honor.

Why give to the one who begs?

Simply put, they give to the one who begs because their honor comes from God. No man can take it from them. They can help those around them because they quit the honor game.

Got some more stuff I want to share about the misapplication of this verse, but I will save it for the podcast.

Before we move on to the personal application. I want to make sure you see Jesus's pattern for a peaceful response.

Peaceful Response

1. Don't retaliate. Don't fight evil with evil. Quit the honor game.
2. Remember your God-given honor. You don't need the honor of men if you have the honor of God.
3. Respond with courage and creativity.

So how does this all apply to us? What do you do when someone tries to rob you of your honor? When someone tries to treat you as if you're less than them and make you feel like you're less than them? Our

culture isn't rooted in honor and shame, but most of us do care about our reputation. We do take offense to public insult and we don't like to be miss treated.

Our instinct will always be to fight evil with evil. We desire to retaliate. It looks different because some of us are prone to fight while others tend toward flight. Some of us are good and others of us are kind. Some of us rage out while others of us rage in. Here are some potential ways we might be prone to retaliate.

- Retaliate with an Eye for Eye - Insult for insult. Miss treatment for miss treatment. Attack back and humiliate.
- Retaliate with Gossip and Slander - speak negatively about them behind their backs. Get other people to be offended with you and join you in your disdain.
- Retaliate with Unresolved Bitterness - stuff it down and hold it against them. Rage inward.
- Retaliate with Abandonment - Cut off a relationship. Cancel culture. Dead to me. Done with you.

How do we turn the other cheek, how do we give our tunic as well, how do we go the extra mile, and how do we give to the one who begs. How do we respond with creativity and courage?

Michael Aitcheson

For when we turn the other cheek, give away our cloak, or keep walking (Matt. 5:38–42), we are undermining the offender's power over us by acting with a willing attitude. Moreover, we are not allowing the burden of vengeance or bitterness to rule us. Above all, we are displaying the power of God at work in us, for He is patient with the unjust.

Let me give you some everyday scenarios:

When insulted or offended in LifeGroup. We are in a polarizing political season and odds are not everyone in your group agrees politically. I would not be surprised if over the next few weeks someone said something insulting or offense to you about your political opinions. What are you going to do? How can you turn the other cheek? One of the implications for turning the other cheek is that you are staying connected. Still vulnerable but not leaving. Because our honor comes from God we are able to remain in a relationship when insulted, miss treated, attacked. Unfazed. I am not saying you are unhurt, but unfazed relationally. I am not going to retaliate nor am I going to leave.

When taken advantage of by your boss. Many of us have a boss and many people have some type of contentious relationship with their boss. She might require you to work overtime without pay. Expect you to do things that aren't in your job description. Take credit for your success. Increase your responsibilities and/or title without increasing your compensation. This doesn't mean you should never helpfully address these issues, but you can respond creatively without retaliation.

When interacting with a condescending family member. It could be your parents who wished you had chosen a more honorable career and they just won't let their disappointment go. It could be your aunt who implies something must be wrong since you are not married or don't have kids. Maybe it is a cousin or uncle who only gives out backhanded compliments.

Or when someone embarrasses you or when you have a passive-aggressive neighbor or maybe an all-out attack on social media.

As we conclude, let me encourage you to remember the way of the cross. What Jesus is asking of us is difficult, it can feel impossible. So let's close by remembering the way of Jesus and how he responded to insult, attack, and dishonor.

- For our sake, Jesus was mocked and abused. He was slapped, beaten, spit upon, forced to carry his own cross. He was not treated with any dignity. And he did not resist
- For our sake, he was stripped of all he had and he was left naked hanging on a cross. Crucifixion as a form of punishment was the chosen form of execution for the Romans because of its pain and shame. He did not resist, he did not oppose, he did not defend, he did not get even.
- For our sake, he was exploited and oppressed. His own disciple betrayed him, other disciples abandoned him, the Jewish leaders rejected him, and the people called for him to be crucified. He died a shameful death. And he did not resist.
- And he did not resist. He did not oppose, He did not defend, He did not get even. Nor was he a coward who ran scared. Instead, he went a 3rd way. **John 10:17-18.** For this reason, the Father loves me because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. He gave everything, all he had, all of himself. His act of love was to rescue and redeem a people for himself. A people to follow in his way.