

*Summer on the Mount, Part 7*  
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We live in a competitive society. Competition is all around us and it seems to be a part of every single facet of life. We ‘compete’ with others on social media to see who can get the most views and likes. Who can go on the best vacations or eat at the most delicious restaurants. Companies and brands compete against each other to bring you the best products or at least make you think they have the best products. We have numerous award competitions for pretty much everything - music, movies, dogs, gardens - you name it and there is probably a competition for it. Do we even need to talk about sports or politics? Competition is all around us. And competition is not necessarily a bad thing. It can be used to get the best products out there. It can be used to help children challenge themselves and handle adversity. Healthy competition can be a good thing. But too often we participate in unhealthy competition. Where rather than just having fun or seeing it for what it is - we view it as the end all be all. ‘I must win or else.’ It is us against them and we cannot let ‘them’ win. Our view of competition often leads to conflict between two people or two groups of people.

I admit that I can get that way myself. I can become so engrossed in a competition that it is hard to see the competition as people. I know I’m not the only one. But as I hope we have seen as we studied Jesus’ words to his followers, he calls us to see the dignity and value of all human beings. There is a deep care for people that can be found in God’s laws and that deep care gets so easily lost when we view it only as what we can and cannot do. Today we are going to be really challenged in how we view others and how we treat them. The last two case studies that Jesus presents may be the hardest two to live because they go against everything we have been taught and seen in the world around us.

Hear these words from Jesus in Matthew 5:38-48: *“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.*

*You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Don’t even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”*

These words from Jesus seem like we are to be pushovers - like we can’t even defend ourselves. If someone pushes me, shouldn’t I be able to push them back? Shouldn’t I be able to defend myself against an evil doer? Why then does he say, ‘Do not resist an evil person.’ That doesn’t seem right. Won’t harm flourish and continue if those who commit wrongs against us

aren't held accountable for their actions? But Jesus is not saying that we are to do nothing when people wrong us. He's saying how we respond should be different.

First let's look at the original laws from God that are called the laws of retaliation. Exodus 21:23-25, "*But if there is any further injury, then you shall appoint as penalty 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, "*If someone injures his neighbor, just as he has done, so shall it be done to him: fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth; just as he has injured a person, so shall it be inflicted on him.*" Deuteronomy 19:21, "*So you shall not show pity; life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, and foot for foot.*" Why did God give these laws to his people? What is the greater wisdom? They are a limit on how God's people respond to being harmed. If someone has hurt you, you can only respond in kind because God knows that we as humans have the tendency to go to the extreme. I want to hurt them more than they hurt me. If someone takes out our eye, we do not get to take out both of theirs - we are limited in our actions.

To most this law seems reasonable and fair, but does it really promote peace? We've heard over the years how we just need to let people duke out their problems and then they can move on? But is that really the best course of action? Is that truly how the Christ follower is supposed to be a peacemaker? Jesus thinks differently. Jesus lived differently and showed us his example of not responding in kind. Jesus is not telling us to be pushovers and not respond at all. He's telling us to respond in generous, bold, and powerful ways. He provides three examples of how we are called to respond that opposes the tit-for-tat mentality: turn the other cheek, give them your cloak, and go the extra mile.

We don't necessarily understand these examples, but the listeners to Jesus that day on the hillside would have understood. In each of these examples the one who is harming is harming in a way that is meant to degrade the other individual. To slap a right cheek, to sue and take your shirt, and to force you to go a mile shows that they really don't care about the person they are humiliating. That is part of the whole point of what they are doing. But Jesus is calling his followers to not retaliate, but to stand and show that they are worth more than others are saying about them. And they behave in creative ways to make the other person notice. Rather than being humiliated about being slapped (backhanded) on the right cheek, they give to them the left cheek and force them to view them as an equal with an open handed slap as custom dictated in that time. Rather than just give the person their inner shirt and going away to plot revenge, they say take my outer coat (which I will use as a blanket when it is cold) so that others will truly see the injustice that is happening. When someone forces them to go one mile as Roman soldiers were allowed to do, they go the extra mile as if they were helping a friend. Showing generosity to those who have hurt them. The Jesus follower asserts their dignity and humanity in choosing to behave not with revenge in mind, but with generous kindness.

Then Jesus goes one step forward. Don't hate your enemies, but choose to love them as God has shown generous love to you. Now we might say like the teachers of the law or the Pharisees, 'Lord, who is my enemy? We don't have enemies. I don't have a great nemesis unless you are talking about those pesky ants or flies in my house that I can't seem to get rid of.' We might classify people as annoying or frustrating, but we wouldn't go so far as to call them our

enemies. And thus we can get out of this command from Jesus which tells us to love them. We may not have big 'E' enemies, but we definitely have little 'e' enemies. An enemy in a broader sense is anyone who we have a hard time loving. Anyone who we classify as standing opposed to us - those are the people we have a tendency to treat like enemies. Like it is us versus them. And rather than seeing them as people who have their own stories, their own hurts, their own dreams, and needs, we view them as people we can't stand. We view them with hate in our hearts. It could be the co-worker we can't stand. It could be the neighbor who just doesn't take care of their property. It could be the coach that didn't give you enough playing time or the families that seem to get everything they want. It could be the click of families who always get first pick. It could be that Democrat or Republican who just complains about everything. It could be those selfish politicians who are only looking to cause drama or gain power. There are people or groups of people whom we have harbored hate for in our hearts and we consider them an enemy. We have a 'hate them' mentality and if we are Christians we may think that God is with us and against them as well. Anne Lamont had a friend who was a priest who once said, 'You can safely assume you've created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do.'

If we hate those who we view as against us and deep down we believe that God is for us, but not for them then we have a deeper heart issue. Because God is for people. God is for those who are created in his image. God has compassion on them. When Jesus hung on the cross what were some of his final words, 'Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing.' Jesus was faced with unimaginable hate and he responded with forgiveness and compassion. Why? Because he knew who they were. He knew their stories. He is grieved by their bondage. He understands the prison they find themselves in. In response, he pours out forgiveness. Can we choose to do the same?

Let's look at Jesus' teaching using The Message translation: *"You're familiar with the old written law, 'Love your friend,' and its unwritten companion, 'Hate your enemy.' I'm challenging that. I'm telling you to love your enemies. Let them bring out the best in you, not the worst. When someone gives you a hard time, respond with the supple moves of prayer, for then you are working out of your true selves, your God-created selves. This is what God does. He gives the best - the sun to warm and the rain to nourish - to everyone, regardless: the good and bad, the nice and nasty. If all you do is love the lovable, do you expect a bonus? Anybody can do that. If you simply say hello to those who greet you, do you expect a medal? Any run-of-the-mill sinner does that.*

*In a word, what I'm saying is, Grow up. You're kingdom subjects. Now live like it. Live out your God-created identity. Live generously and graciously toward others, the way God lives toward you."*

Brothers and sisters, do we need to grow up? Yes! We all need to start living as kingdom people. We need to submit to Jesus as our Lord - living generously and graciously toward others even when they say all kinds of things against us. Even when they behave poorly towards us. Even when they are going against God. We do not have to respond back in kind. We do not have to be petty and actively participate in tit-for-tat antics. When we are faced with disrespect, through the power of the Holy Spirit in us, we can choose to love and respect them. When we are faced with ridicule, we can stand and take it because we know the truth and we

can speak truth back in love and kindness. When other brothers and sisters start to ridicule or mistreat others because of their beliefs, political views, and how they look or dress or whatever, we can choose to love by speaking the truth and redirecting them that those who are being ridiculed are made in the image of God. We are called to radical, generous love. Love first and foremost for God and then for all people. That is the way of Jesus. If we have elevated a political party, a view point, or even our own country above our love for God or people, we need to check our hearts. If we want true peace on earth, then it needs to start with our radical love that extends across the lines we use to divide. May the Church be known for this kind of radical love rather than being known for what we stand against. Yes, we do stand against injustices and evil in this world, but we stand in a way that is still anchored in the love of God.

On July 4, 1776 the American colonies declared their independence writing, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” All of humanity has been endowed by their Creator - God Almighty - with the right to be treated with dignity, respect, and to be shown love and grace. May we his people choose everyday to live as kingdom people. May we live differently than the world around us. Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with us.