

NATIONAL COMMUNITY CHURCH

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An Eye For An Eye: The Third Way

Jenni Clayville

Introduction:

Welcome to the National Community Church podcast. We're thrilled to be able to share this weekend message. If you liked it, subscribe, find us on iTunes or go to theaterchurch.com.

Jenni Clayville:

Father God, we just, we're so grateful for you, we pray that you would open our ears, that you would open our hearts to receive you, that you would open our minds and clear it so that we could hear your truth and boldly leave here different than we came in. Speak to us. In Jesus' name, a-men.

For as involved and enlightened as we would like to think we are here in the Western world, the world that we all call home today is chock full of violence. We see it in our world wars around us. We see it in the injustice in our city. And if you're like me, you see it at home when one of my sons steals extra time from the other in Fortnite. Okay, so that's maybe not as much violence but it does feel just as dramatic. So with that, let's dive into the text and see what Jesus of Nazareth actually tells us.

We're going to Matthew five starting in 38. *"You've heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.'* ³⁹ *But I say to you do not to resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn the other to him also.* ⁴⁰ *And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well.* ⁴¹ *And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles.* ⁴² *Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who wants to borrow from you."*

So, when we read this with modern cultural eyes, it's easy to translate this as a kill them with kindness or, you know, let them win or even roll over and play dead. But this is important when we read the Bible to take into consideration the law of the people in the time of the writing as well as the culture.

Let's break this passage down verse by verse. *"So you have heard it said, an eye for an eye and a tooth for tooth."* As a modern day American we hear this as get even the natural thing to do when someone hits us is what? Come on, you hit him back. Well, not me, I'm nonviolence. But we hit him back and let's be honest, when you hit him back, are you trying to make it even? Or you trying to like one uping it? Yeah, so we're one uping it. So for sure, so we all want the last word, right? I think we all have a little bit of the John Wick syndrome in us. Believe me as a mom, a boy mom of two it starts out as giggles and then it starts to escalate and the laughter is escalating, escalating, and then what happens? Boom, tears, right? And then you hear from one side room, "He hit me." And then the other side is like,

"A he hit me first." Clearly the one that said he hit me first is not crying because he retaliated to that level, right? It's human nature, praise God. But here's the deal it wasn't that different in the ancient times. Retaliation has always been heightened. The human condition is not toward justice in the court system, but much more than revenge, and even violence. You hit me in the arm; I hit you in the face. You steal my Amazon box, I'm gonna fill it with glitter and it explodes in your car or your house. Right? It's all about retaliation.

So there's a great example of the story of Samson. He presents a riddle to the Philistines. The Philistines can't figure it out. So they go round his back to his wife and try and basically turn her against him. He doesn't like that. And so Samson's dad gives her his wife to his best man. We're not going to sit on this but that's weird let's talk about that another time. I'm not really sure what that's all about. So gives her away, Samson's upset about this rightfully so. So he does a normal thing which is you know, he traps 300 foxes ties them together sets their tails on fire and sends them through wheat field burning every village area. Philistines aren't happy about that clearly, so they go and burn his wife and father-in-law. So naturally, Samson takes the jawbone of a donkey and takes out 1000 men. Retaliation escalation sounds like Thanksgiving dinner, right? It escalates.

So to combat these escalations a law was written not once is it mentioned not two, but three times. In the Old Testament, it's mentioned in Exodus 21, in Leviticus 24 and Deuteronomy 19. So we're just going to pick Leviticus for now Leviticus 24:19 to 20 says *"¹⁹ If anyone injures his neighbor, as he has done it shall be done to him, ²⁰ fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth; whatever injury he has given a person shall be given to him. "*

In legal jargon, this is called lex talionis, it is the law of retaliation. The purpose in the intent was to halt elevation in the response to protect the system of retribution from getting out of hand, to stop the cycle of vengeance, to make sure the punishment fit the crime. Today to the state this is still part of our legal system. Make sense? Right.

Let's read on. *"But I say to you do not resist the one who is evil."* When aggression is acted out toward us, we usually react in two ways. We fight or we flight, fight or flight. I actually do both. If I see you coming at me and you're red hot, this hasn't happened in a while but if you come at me like red hot my initial response is to back up and go ooh, let's not have any conflict. But if you jump out of a bush dressed in a clown suit, I will punch you in your painted face. It is and I can't even help it is a natural reaction because clowns are evil, it's in the Bible. It's not I just want to make sure that you guys know it's not in the Bible. Okay. I was like, ooh, theologically incorrect right now. Anyway, I digress. So, do not resist translates from the Greek to me antistēnai. Say me antistēnai. It's a lot. It's a lot. Yeah, this means to withdraw, fight back to get even. So in the Old Testament, it's primarily used towards military encounters, referring specifically to when the two armies collide and there's steel on steel until one side breaks and flees. It is the tension of the battle.

Scholars believe that this is Jesus trying to push us towards creative obedience finding imaginative ways not to fight violence with violence. Instead of asking, how do we resist the evil one? The question is, how do we resist evil retaliation. Jesus is in essence, giving us a third way of militant nonviolence.

A friend of Pastor Dave Schmidgall works in National Archives, and sent a somewhat lost video of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. to him a while back, and this weekend, launches Black History Month and so the timing couldn't be ignored. I wanted to show you a quick clip of what we got to watch.

Video:

I can see the struggle not as a struggle to free 20 million Negroes in the United States, but a struggle to free 118 million citizens of this country. And I don't think anybody in this country can be truly free until the Negro is free. And I certainly don't think the white man is free as long as you have segregation and discrimination because the festering sore of segregation debilitates a white man as well as a Negro. And this is why I say that our aim and the struggle is not to defeat or to humiliate the white man but to win is friendship and understanding and the end is reconciliation and the creation of the beloved community. We are not seeking to annihilate the opponent but to convert him, and this is why we follow nonviolence. I think the end the violence is to get rid of to annihilate the opponent. But in the non-violent movement, the end is to convert the opponent and to bring about a society where all men will live together as brothers and every man will respect the dignity and worth of human personality.

He said the end is reconciliation and the creation of the beloved community. We are not seeking to annihilate the opponent but to convert him. And this is why we fall on nonviolence. The end is to bring about a society where all men will live together as brothers and every man will respect the dignity and worth of human personality.

Dr. King also said this at another time, "Nonviolence is absolute commitment to the way of love. Love is not emotional bash; it is not empty sentimentalism. It is the active outpouring of one's whole being into the being of another."

An act of outpouring is intentional investment into someone else. Let's drill down a bit more. So on 39 says, "*But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.*" This is my right cheek. I know I'm telling you this because you're looking at me and you think it's this one. Okay? Yeah, yeah, yeah. This is my right cheek to slap my right cheek; you have to use your left hand, right. But in society, the left hand was reserved for unclean tasks, for toilet duty, the poopies as you call it in my house. And because of that, using the left hand was a big no, no, just don't do anything with it even gesturing with your left hand, carried a penalty of exclusion and a ten day penance. Big deal, okay. So the only way to slap the right cheek is to backhand with your right hand, right. However, the backhand slap was reserved for reprimanding inferiors which tells us that Jesus' audience was slaves, women, children and the impoverished. When Jesus turns the other cheek is actually suggesting something very provocative.

Daesha where is Daesha? Come on up real quick. Okay, so I'm going to use Daesha as an example. Um, just so you guys all remember. Thank you, this is a she's a worship leader. She's pregnant. Look how cute she is. She didn't like just eat a big burrito; I'm just letting y'all know.

So, if you just slap me a backhand, okay. Okay, here we go. That hurts so bad guys. Okay, so turn the other cheek means I turn this way. So if you're gonna slap me again. That's weird. Like, you don't really get a full slap, right or if you backhand me again. That's my nose. It doesn't really do anything. Right. And the left hand is a no-no. So the only other way to hit again would be what? Yes.

Daesha: I'm going to punch my boss.

Jenni: She's gonna punch her boss. This is what's gonna happen. Do you want to punch me?

Daesha: Not really.

Jenni: Okay, good. Thank you, Daesha Thank you. Thank you. This, this will henceforth be known as a day that our pregnant worship leader punched a pastor.

So you see, here's the thing you never actually slapped a peer. Okay? The intent of a slap was to humiliate the underling. And since slaves, women and children had no rights, there was no penalty whatsoever for this act. However, to point out the injustice even more, if you were to punch an equal, a peer, that would be a fine of four silver coins. If you slapped a peer, that's 400 silver coins, or you could get an ear chopped off depending on your social status. So when Jesus counsels these already humiliated people to turn the other cheek, he's not suggesting a passive stance. He's saying he's not saying just let them hit you again. He's giving them the opportunity to rob their oppressors of humility and the power of having the power over them again. He's controlling the abuse of power, he's confronting it.

In turning the other cheek you're now just showing everyone the injustice for what it is. In this moment you are offering a third way. You're giving your oppressor the opportunity to see that what they're doing is hopefully wrong and that they would choose another way, whether it's admitting your humanity or repentance or actually saying they're sorry. You're letting justice goodness and Shalom reign in the midst of chaos and injustice.

Jesus actually lives this out later in his life in John 18 when he is slapped by an officer the night before his crucifixion, so he knew what he was saying. Jesus isn't encouraging passivity instead; this is an act of non violent defiance.

Let's read on in 40 it says, *"And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. ur cloak as well."*

Most of us have a closet full of clothing, it can last us a week to two weeks so we don't have to do laundry. This is not the case in the ancient world. Most men wore two pieces of clothing, a tunic and a cloak. So here's some history. At that time, the Roman Empire taxed the wealthy heavily this was to fund their wars. And so the wealthy looked for non liquid investments to secure their wealth. Land is the obvious answer but unlike today, that when we have an open market of buying and selling, that wasn't the case then. Land was handed down from generation to generation and ancestrally owned, so land was rarely for sale. However, land owners could be driven deeper and deeper into debt until they were forced to sell their land.

Their two pieces of clothing were the last thing they owned. So the tunic is the undergarment, its equivalent to our unmentionables. And the cloak, I mean, we think is a shirt. It's not a shirt, it's under stuff. The cloak served as an outer garment and at nights doubled as a blanket on cold nights. Taking someone's cloak basically meant that this person had no money to his name. And the only thing he had left was literally the clothes on his back. And now you're going to sue them for even that basically leaving them in their underwear. So when Jesus is telling us to hand over the tunic, as well, which by the way, when I read it, I'm very entertained by Jesus. I think he's just being funny, like, oh, you know. Jesus is aware that he's saying you're leaving in your birthday suit, right? So happy birthday, everyone. Nakedness in Judaism was a taboo. The shame however, wasn't actually falling on the naked party; the shame fell on the person viewing or the person causing it. So by handing over your tunic, you're exposing the unfair treatment, again, the injustice. Jesus gave us control back so we don't have to play the game that they're playing. And by responding in the third way of non violence, you're showing justice reigns.

Let's read on 41, *"And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles."*

So back then mile markers were put in the road. And along the road, it was to support a law called Lex Angeria and this was the Roman impressment law. The verb force here is translated angareusei, say angareusei. I'm just throwing all the Greek at you. Don't worry its the only two words I know. Angareusei is only seen twice in the New Testament. The second time is found in the stories of Simon of Cyrene when he is forced to carry the cross for Jesus when Jesus can no longer carry his own cross. So the law of Lex Angeria allowed a Roman soldier to order any civilian to carry anything, including his pack that would weigh up to 85 pounds. I don't even like carrying my groceries from my car to my house and so just a thought of this is like super exhausting. Actually, I'm going to borrow Chance this is my firstborn. Come on up, honey. This is my son Chance. He's so handsome. Look at him. He is around 85 pounds, okay. So imagine a soldier says, "Hey, carry my carry my Chance". And they didn't have backpacks, so just assume like, I'm carrying up... It's too awkward, I'm just gonna do this way. It's awkward enough. Look how long he is like he's the same height as me. I knew how awkward this would look. It's okay. So you're walking the mile. It's late. Are you okay? Okay. It's late, you're tired. Right? You need to go home, make some dinner. You have chores that you haven't done yet. You have to get

ready for the next day. You're so annoyed, but you have no choice because this is the law. Right? I can't do this for a mile. Thank you for your assistance, sir.

Thank you. Thank you, Chance.

But the whole idea as you can see, and it wouldn't have been that easy. It's not like they had backpacks, you're carrying it as awkward as you can. You're carrying super heavy load for a mile. So why would Jesus say, go the second mile. Many of us use the term going the extra mile as this idea of excellence or kindness. This is not what Jesus is saying. See what's happening here is exploitation. And even all laws have their limits. A Roman soldier can have you carry his stuff up to a mile, but not more. So in fact, actually if they did if they made you carry anything more than a mile it's actually illegal and it would result in severe penalties under military law. So imagine, you get up to the mile marker and the soldier's like ready to get stuff back. And you're like, I'm just gonna keep going. And you take a step. So everybody knows the law. Everybody is watching what's happening. And this soldier who was earlier like, hey, carry my stuff, you little piece of whatever, and you're like, oh, okay, and now he's like, "Oh, can you give me my pack back because I'm going to get in trouble". So now you've shifted the posture.

Jesus is spicy, is what that is. It's kind of like the game of tug of war, tension is the controlling factor. As long as you keep participating, the tension also controls you but what if you just let go. The person that is pulling against you no longer has any power over you and the more we resist something, the more that power is over us. So in going another mile, you're taking back your power of choice. Jesus is giving you your dignity back. Again, we're showing the injustice for what it is. And we're not going to play the game.

So an eye for an eye and a tooth for tooth for the follower of Jesus means finding creative and non violent ways to pursue justice. We're showing injustice for what it is, but not responding in kind to let restitution be possible. Jesus here is saying you are worthy and you are valuable, and he is also giving value to the one who is oppressing you. Jesus is teaching something that is absolutely impossible, without the Holy Spirit.

But let me be clear about something. This passage is not saying violence and abuse is ok. If you have been abused or traumatized in any way, physically, spiritually, emotionally, mentally. This is not about you enduring more. It's not about you staying with your abuser, it's not blaming you for not trying hard enough or praying long enough. If you've been raped, molested, or taken advantage of your purity is not diminished in any way. There's nothing you could have done to deserve any of that. And we, as the church have missed the mark in protecting you and advocating for you. I'm sorry and we want to do a better job. We want to do better caring for each other. If you have been abused in any way, can we stand with you? It was wrong and we want to journey with you and your safety and healing. And if you or someone you know is being abused right now, tell someone today. This is a call to non violence.

And for those of us who have played an active role in hurting another human person, maybe it was intentional, maybe it was accidental or for me, maybe I played a neutral role when I should have intervened. Christ already paid for that. You are forgiven and you most likely have some work to do, you need to go and fix that with the other person. But on God's side, it's taken care of.

Matthew 10:16 says, "*Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.*"

We are to defend without attacking, not just with our bodies, but this includes our hearts. It's possible to turn the other cheek, to give up your tunic, to go the second mile with a heart of hate and bitterness. And that defeats the purpose of what Jesus is calling us to do. In the end, it's about the posture of your heart and how you respond to the third way. We can't use our brokenness as an excuse to retaliate. And we can't weaponize our feelings.

Here at National Community Church, we have SOZO prayer team, and that can help us connect with what God says about us. One of the things I love about SOZO, and I actually just did this a couple of weeks ago is that it takes you to a place of renouncing your partnership with the enemy. If deep down inside, we still want to make the people that hurt us pay or suffer, then we are still partnering with the enemy. Right? And so this is a great way to take back in the spirit what we have lost.

Walter Wink author of 'Jesus and Nonviolence: A Third Way' it's a tiny little book, but it's amazing. He says this. "...Jesus did not advocate nonviolence merely as a technique for outwitting the enemy, but as a just means of opposing the enemy in such a way as to hold open the possibility of the enemy's becoming just as well. Both sides must win. We are summoned to pray for our enemies' transformation, and to respond to ill-treatment with a love that not only is godly but also, I am convinced, can only be found in God."

As we follow Christ, we are called to something greater. We are called to be the different, to support one another, to spur one another on, to build a community that fosters empowerment for those that were oppressed and that encourages the restoration of the oppressors. Let's find ways to cover one another. So when you see someone working to turn the other cheek, our job is to support the cheek turner by approaching the offender and saying, "Do you see what's happening here? Do you understand the magnitude of what of what's happening?" And then lovingly and without judgment, inviting the repentance into the community of the restored.

I feel it's more than appropriate to end today with a quote of the great Dr. King, a man who walked a non violent third way all the way to the end of his life. "We must develop and maintain the capacity to forgive. He who is devoid of the power to forgive is devoid of the power to love. There is some good in the worst of us and some evil in the best of us. When we discover this, we are less prone to hate our enemies.

Would you pray with me?

Father, you're such a good good father, and we thank you for these opportunities to lean into your word. Continue to disorient us and make us uncomfortable, so that you can make us right. Reveal in us the things that you love about us and restore the broken parts of us that are so desperately in need of you. We thank you for the third way which is your way, Father. Change us so we walk out of here different than when we came in. In your Son's holy and precious name, amen.