

In the movie “Fiddler on the Roof”, Tevye and his Jewish neighbors receive word that the Tsar has evicted them from their village and confiscated their land. There is a great upheaval and anger in the community. I mean, if someone told this to us here in Kingman, how would we feel, and what would we do? There is talk of an uprising and revolt in Tevye’s village. One of the villagers says to Tevye, “We should defend ourselves. An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth!” “Very good,” mutters Tevye. “That way the whole world will be blind and toothless.”

Tevye’s insight is the same as Jesus’ reinterpretation of the Old Testament law. Both knew that while the law was good it was inadequate and could create a cycle of violence. The villagers quote Leviticus 24:19-20, “If anyone injures his neighbor, whatever he has done must be done to him: fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth.”

The idea behind this law is simple. Fear of justice should limit violence. If I knew that by injuring someone, that I would be injured in the same way, I would certainly pause. Now there was a limit to retribution. If someone shoved you, the most you could do is shove them back, you wouldn’t hit them with a club. If someone kicked you, you could not legally cut off their leg. If someone shot you in the arm with a pistol, you could not shoot back with a shotgun.

Here is the point of today’s antitheses. Here is why after citing this law Jesus felt the need to say “But I say?” By eliminating retaliation and hate of enemies, Jesus is putting a fence around violence and revenge.

Jesus is proposing ways to stop the cycle of violence and revenge. To stop trying to get “one up” on people who have wronged us. To stop trying to get even. To stop keeping score.

Judith Viorst is the author of a children’s book called I’ll Fix Anthony. We have Anthony’s younger brother who complains about the way his older brother treats him. The little brother says: “My brother Anthony can read books now, but he won’t read any books to me. He plays checkers with Bruce from his school. But when I want to play he says, ‘Go away or I’ll clobber you.’ I let him wear my Snoopy sweatshirt, but he never lets me borrow his sword.

Mother says deep down in his heart Anthony loves me. Anthony says deep down in his heart he thinks I stink. Mother says deep deep down in his heart, where he doesn't even know it, Anthony loves me. Anthony says deep deep down in his heart he still thinks I stink. When I'm six, I'll fix Anthony."

If you've been a younger sibling, you know how Anthony's little brother feels — but all of us at one time may have wanted to "fix" a family member, a person at work or a friend who did us wrong.

In spite of Anthony's little brother's determination. In spite of anything we might devise for getting even with someone else. Is there really such a thing as getting even? How often have our attempt at getting even only made things worse?

Jesus is saying that if you are my follower, have I got a deal for you. You get the privilege of stopping the cycle. Aren't you excited? You get to stop trying to exact a tooth for a tooth. You get to let God be the dentist.

These weren't just words from Jesus to us. He will follow this up with his own divine example. When the authorities and their guards come to arrest him in the garden, Peter will start a fight with a sword. How will Jesus' respond? "Put your sword back in its place, for all who draw the sword will die by the sword." Then he heals the man that Peter wounded. Jesus could have easily taken revenge right then and there. In Matthew 26:52-54 Jesus says "Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels?"

There's a song called Ten Thousand Angels. It says, "He could have called ten thousand angels to destroy the world and set Him free. He could have called ten thousand angels, But He died alone for you and me." The math is a little off in this song. Twelve legions would not be 10,000 but 72,000 angels.

The point is that Jesus could have easily used his divine power, but he did not. He did not strike back. He did not protect himself. Instead, He took the worst that evil had to give and triumphed over it. He surrendered his case to God and God vindicated him in the end. The evil perpetrated against him did not end in the destruction of the human race, but in its redemption.

Jesus was saying that with nothing to fear, we have no reason to seek vengeance. Psalm 135:14 says, “For the Lord will vindicate his people and have compassion on his servants.”

Jesus deeply cares about what we are going through. He understands the hurt. He knows because he’s gone through his own trials. In these moments Jesus reminds us that God is our Judge and Vindicator. God will take on our case. God can and does take any harm that comes our way and redeems it in the end.

We have a God who will right the wrongs of the world and turn harm into good. There will be ultimate justice.

So, you don’t have to resist the person trying to harm you. You can go two miles when commanded to go one. You can turn the other cheek, because it does not ultimately matter — except, of course, to the other person. You can lend and give with no expectation of return. By these acts you maintain your agency, you maintain your voice. You prove to the other that your happiness is not tied to what you are here, but what you are in the eyes of heaven. You show them that it is more important to be a follower of Jesus than a person who always gets their way. With Jesus on our side, no one gets to take advantage of us.

We can be people of peace. We seek to bring healing rather than getting even. We can offer forgiveness, even when it is undeserved. We can seek reconciliation and restoration of relationships. We can seek to build up rather than tear down. We can pull others toward us rather than push them away. We can seek to reconcile our relationships, even when the other party does not make the first move.

You see, forgiveness is not a matter of saying, “Oh, that’s alright. It doesn’t matter. I forgive you.” No, real forgiveness says, “It’s not alright, and what you did does matter. It was hurtful, it was wrong, but I forgive you anyway.” Forgiveness does not dismiss the wrong, it acknowledges it, and then extends mercy and grace.

Loving neighbor and complicity are not the same. As says this exchange between Mendel and the Rabbi in *Fiddler on the Roof*:

Rabbi, may I ask you a question?

Certainly, my son.

Is there a proper blessing for the tsar?

A blessing for the tsar? Of Course! May God bless and keep the tsar...far away from us.

With this last antithesis, Jesus is telling us to take on the character of God. Jesus says, “You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of God in heaven. God causes the sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.”

Being a person of grace, mercy and forgiveness is to take on the loving nature of God. As Jesus said, God does not just bless those who are good, he does good even to those who are not.

From our passage today, Jesus say, “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 brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

Jesus is telling us something important here. The word used here for love is agape. This type of love is an active love. Jesus is saying, don’t wait until you feel like you love someone. In his book *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis wrote, “Do not waste your time bothering whether you ‘love’ your neighbor, act as if you did. As soon as we do this, we find one of the great secrets. When you are behaving as if you loved someone, you will presently come to love him.”

Are we really being asked to be a blessing to our enemy?

In 2011, riots swept through Egypt on New Year's Day. A suicide bombing of a Christian church in Alexandria killed 23 Christians and wounded 97 others. Several other incidents took place across Egypt, further spreading injury and death. Egyptian soldiers and police were everywhere, and many rioters were beaten or killed. Then the time for prayer for Muslims came. All Muslims, including the rioters, knelt for prayer. Their faces were bowed to the ground. They were vulnerable and susceptible to attack by government soldiers. Dramatically, Christians began to surround the praying Muslims. [\[Show Pic Here\]](#) They held hands and faced outward in a large circle to protect these men, even though these were their enemies. Even though they may have been the perpetrators inflicting harm on them and their fellow Christians. The reporter covering the story posted a picture of the Christians holding hands in a circle on Twitter and stated, "Bear in mind that this picture was taken a month after the Alexandria bombing where many Christians died in vain."

These Christians did not take justice into their own hands, they left justice to God. They followed what Paul said in Romans 12. "Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord. On the contrary: 'If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink.' Do not be overcome by evil but overcome evil with good."

They did not take revenge, they left room for God to work. Their act worked towards stopping the cycle of violence. More so perhaps, than any legislation or intervention of global powers could have.

As they did, let us do the same. Let us resist the urge for retaliation. Let us find love for all in our hearts, especially our enemies. In doing so, we follow Jesus' example. We follow the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.