

+One day a truck driver stopped at a restaurant for dinner and ordered a steak. Before he could eat it, in walked a motorcycle gang, with dirty leather jackets and long, unkempt hair. They took the man's steak, cut it into six pieces, and ate it. The driver said nothing. He simply paid the bill and walked out. One of the gang members said, "That man couldn't talk. He didn't say a word." Another one said, "He couldn't fight, either; he didn't lift a hand." A waiter added, "I would say that he couldn't drive either. On his way out of the parking lot, he ran over six motorcycles crushing all of them." Something in us loves that story, because we like retaliation.

But today's Gospel might say otherwise. It has been said that few passages of Scripture summarize Christian ethics more succinctly than today's passage. It could also be said that few passages are more misunderstood.

There are some recognizable phrases in this passage, such as "Turn the other cheek...Love your enemies." People who have never set foot inside a church are familiar with these sayings. But the question is: What do they mean and how do they apply to our lives today—over 2000 years after they were spoken?

Though Jesus is referring to laws and customs that were specific to his culture, his words do apply to us, because the desire for revenge is as much an issue for us today as it was for those living in the first century. When someone does you wrong, when someone takes advantage of you, you want to get even like the fellow in our opening illustration.

As we begin looking at part of this passage, I would like to focus today by just taking a closer look at the statements Jesus made that are sometimes misinterpreted. Hopefully, we can then put these words in their proper perspective and relative to our lives today.

First of all, Jesus said, "You have heard that it was said, an eye for eye...tooth for tooth. But I say to you, offer no resistance to one who is evil." Does this mean that we should become completely passive and let others walk all over us? That we should do nothing to protect our lives or the lives of our children? Or that we should never stand up for our rights?

Of course not. When Jesus drove the money-changers out of the temple he wasn't being passive. When Paul demanded his rights as a Roman citizen after being without a trial in Acts 16, he wasn't being passive. Nor was Jesus being passive when crucified - one word from him could have destroyed them all.

In this context, the word resist means retaliate. He's talking about revenge, not self-preservation. Jesus isn't telling us to be weak and passive; he's telling us not to be vindictive, which actually was the original meaning of the passage he quotes from in Exodus.

It was really meant as a limitation on vindications, because the original intent of the passage is that if someone should damage your servant's eye, you are not allowed to damage both eyes of his servant. Only an eye for an eye. If someone should knock your servant's tooth out, you were not allowed to in turn knock out all of his teeth. Just a tooth for a tooth.

In other words, this teaching was meant to cap conflict and prevent escalation. Gradually, however, people began to twist it into an endorsement of revenge. We all know what happens when people get into the business of revenge. A person does another wrong. The other party retaliates. The individual responds with a fresh injury, then the perpetrator strikes back. Then comes a counter punch. The other hits back and it goes on until a feud is born like the Hatfields and McCoys, a feud that continues long after the original hurt is forgotten.

So Jesus takes it up another notch to be perfectly clear.

+ i.e. Guy starts yelling that you are taking his parking place, as he got there first. Fine, no testosterone issues here – just move on to the next parking space. (Though one might be tempted to key his car....)

2. Another statement that can be misapplied is: “Give to the one who asks you and do not turn your back on one who wants to borrow.” Does this mean that a Christian banker should never refuse a loan application?

Does this mean you have to loan money to someone again and again, even if you know they won't make an effort to pay it back? Or that every time you're approached by a panhandler on the street that you have to give them your money? No, because this commandment doesn't relieve us of our obligation to manage our resources responsibly. It's our responsibility to practice generosity, but it's also our responsibility to practice discernment.

+If we gave away all the money (your money) at Cathedral...or empty our wallets at every request, how does that really help anyone in the long run? Help the homeless, give to a shelter; if one is need of finances, provide them steps they can take to obtain them.

3. Lastly, Jesus tells us (v. 48): “Be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

This sounds impossible, but it's not. Jesus would never command us to do something that we aren't capable of doing (like me dunking a basketball). He didn't command us to be all knowing, to be all present—these things are beyond our grasp.

But he told us to be perfect, as our heavenly Father is perfect.

The Greek word for perfect can also mean to reach an intended end or completion. In other places in the bible, it is translated as mature. In other words, a person is “perfect/complete/mature” if he or she fulfills the purpose for which they were created.

What was the original purpose for which we were made? How are we most complete? God is love and in that image we are made. We love because God first loved us (1 John 4:19. Being perfect, in the context that Jesus mentions it here, isn't attained through sinless perfection, because that isn't possible. The kind of perfection Jesus is referring to here is being perfect in

love—loving your enemies. (But we don't have to like them!)

We are never more like our Father than when we love those who don't love us ... when we refuse to retaliate, even if the other person is wrong ... when we respond to mistreatment with kindness ... when we extend our generosity to those in need ... that's how we show His love.

That's how we become perfect, like our heavenly Father is perfect.