

“Solid—Beyond Getting Even”

Today we're continuing the series that Mark started last week. It's called "Solid" and we're looking at a super-concentrated part of Jesus' teaching. It's a place in the Gospel of Matthew where Jesus lays out his thoughts on all kinds of different things. We're not going to be looking at everything he touched on in there, but we're going to look at some of the key stuff. He spoke these things from the side of a small mountain or hill so these concentrated teachings are sometimes called the sermon on the mount.

Last week Mark started this series by beginning at the end. It's like this: Jesus teaches some super-concentrated stuff and then says, **“Everyone who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock” (Matthew 7:24, NRSV)**. He says, “In a world where things change so quickly, so unexpectedly, this is the stuff that's so solid you can build your life on it.” But it isn't just about hearing. It's about doing. You can hear hours and hours of great info about how to be in the best health. You know, diet, exercise, rest. But if you don't do something, look out!

So today we're going to listen to some information, we'll learn some stuff, but that's not enough! We have to do something with it. And honestly, I'm pretty confident that you will not like what you hear today. Which will make the doing part extra difficult.

The question today is, **What does love look like?** And Jesus answers the question by talking about a slap, a shirt, a walk and a loan. Here's what he said, **“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” (Matthew 5:38-42, TNIV)**. What does love look like? Jesus is saying, that's what it looks like.

So, think for a minute about the person who has hurt you the most. Think about somebody who has irritated you. Somebody who has wounded you and that wound goes way deep. Somebody that's broken your heart. The person that you're most irritated at, that is most unlovable to you.

Maybe they're from your work. Maybe it's somebody in your family. Maybe it's somebody that you've known for a long time really well. Maybe it's somebody here at this church, or somebody from your past.

As you picture that person it begs the question: How do you deal with hurt? How do you deal with people you don't want to love because they hurt you? And Jesus is going to teach us. And as he teaches he does a lot of contrasting. He looks at conventional wisdom in that day with the possibility of a new kind of life, a kingdom kind of life.

For example he says, “You have heard it said: Eye for eye and tooth for tooth.” That's conventional wisdom that's right out of the Old Testament: Exodus Chapter 21. **“But if there is serious injury, you are to take life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise” (Exodus 21:23-25, TNIV)**. A lot of people hear those words and their response is: “That sounds so barbaric! Why would that make it into the Bible? Why would God want us to do that?” What we've got to remember is that that law was established to bring mercy.

It was not teaching go for revenge whenever you can. It was actually limiting retribution. It was saying if somebody knocks out your tooth, you are not allowed to go out and kill him. Eye for eye was actually teaching about proportional justice. And it was a big step forward in the ancient world. But it was still this problem. The problem is the human heart, because my heart's wrong. And when my heart's wrong, the way that I'll interpret this law is: “If you hurt me, I will hurt you back as much as I'm able to.” And hurt received always feels worse than hurt given. So no matter how fair it seems, eye for eye thinking always escalates the pain.

That's the way that it works in our world. You hurt me; I'll hurt you. The hurt received always feels worse than the hurt given. Eye for eye, tooth for tooth. It escalates into total destruction. And Jesus is saying: “Now, in me, with my help, there is another option for human life.”

But let's be careful here because Jesus is not giving laws that say you have to be like a doormat. And it is very important that we understand this. Jesus is actually referring to very concrete situations in his day that everybody listening to him would immediately recognize. He was saying, “Now, as you make God your

father, as you actually learn to live depending on God for security, and love, and approval, and safety and well being, it makes possible a new way to relate to human beings that could heal up you and your relationships in the world."

And then he paints a picture of what that might look like. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. Again, be careful here. Jesus is not giving a rule or a law for what to do any time you get into a fight. He's not saying if somebody hits you just let them keep on hitting you until they wear themselves out. He's describing a situation that people would have immediately understood.

Notice Jesus specifically says the right cheek. For someone to hit you on the right cheek was a particular kind of insult. It was to receive a backhand slap. And in Jesus' culture, to publicly receive a backhand slap was one of the most humiliating things that could happen to you. The main intent of this kind of slap was to degrade a person publicly.

Jesus says, "OK now, let's say you become my follower. You're living in the reality of the world, and someone insults you publicly, deeply—slap or otherwise. Your first reaction might be to retaliate. That's what the world would expect of you. But here's a radical idea. Your honor and dignity are in the hands of your Heavenly Father, so ultimately they're simply not at risk; ultimately you are not at risk. Even if someone insults you."

And since your honor and dignity are not at risk now we can get creative. You don't have to retaliate, you can look for other options. Now you can look for a strong, creative way to refuse to participate in mutual hostility. Let me say that again, because this is what Jesus is saying. You now, as an agent of the kingdom, can look for a strong creative way to refuse to participate in mutual ongoing hostility because that way is not working in our world.

So make it personal again. How do people hurt you, how do people insult you, how do people demean you and how are you going to respond? You have choices.

There are all kinds of ways it might be illustrated, that's just one, that's the slap. And then Jesus says, "Take another situation, if somebody wants to sue you and take away your shirt, give him your cloak as well." People in Jesus day would have understood this clearly. Because a man had two garments. You had your shirt, which was an inner garment, and a cloak which was more like a big blanket you wore wrapped around you. That outer cloak would be your blanket at night. It's what kept you warm. If you were poor and needed a quick loan you could use your clothes as collateral until you paid back the loan. But Jewish law said that even if you didn't pay the loan back by nightfall, your cloak, your blanket, had to be returned to you, so you could at least be warm. That was your right. You always had the right to your cloak.

So Jesus here is talking about your rights and my rights. I have my rights and I want them, I demand them! But Jesus is saying, "There is a different way. A way where you do not stand on your rights. Where if someone comes after your inner garments, you say, 'not only can you have that, but you can have my cloak too. Even though I have rights to it, you can have it. This is not about my rights it's about what love looks like.'"

We think our day and age is the only one where people get all up in arms about their right to do this, or have that. Nope! It was going on in ancient times too. People would whine and complain about their rights. Jesus is saying, "Let it go. Be more concerned with serving than being served. Be more concerned about your civic duties than your rights. Be more concerned about your responsibilities than your privileges." This is the way that leads to life.

The aim is you can be creative and strong in the work of reconciliation because now you live in the kingdom and blessed are you. You're not weak, powerless. You're not the victim of either the desire for revenge or the fear that makes you run away any more. Another kind of life is now possible and God will be right there with you and help you lead it.

Now Jesus says, "Let me give you another example. If anyone forces you to go with them one mile, here is an idea. You go two." Again, everybody knows exactly the situation Jesus is talking about. Israel is occupied territory. Rome is their hated oppressor. Rome is allowed, by law, to force an citizen of an occupied country, a Jew here in Israel, to force them to carry a burden a mile whether they want to or not; no matter

what else they have going on in their life. And as you can image, this law was hated. Zealots in Israel wanted to kill these soldiers.

So Jesus says, "OK now, brothers and sisters. We will live in a new kind of community." What do you do in that situation? A Roman soldier makes you carry his burden a mile. He's young, barely a man. He's from another part of the world. He's probably poor himself. He's hated here, and all he gets from our land, from our people, is abuse, hostility. He gets shunned. He gets resented. He gets the cold shoulder. He gets called names behind his back. That is all he gets all day long.

We do that all the time. When we don't love people all we do is dehumanize them. All we see is the hurt that they inflict on us. I don't see that as somebody's son, somebody's friend, somebody's dad, a person with a problem. All I want to see is this is how you hurt me.

So Jesus says, "Now here's an idea. This Roman soldier makes you carry something a mile. And you finish the mile, and you look him in the eye, and you say to him, 'You know you look kind of tired. And I bet your life here is pretty hard. Can I give you a little more help? Can I go with you another mile?'" Can you imagine how that would blow that soldier's mind? Nobody did that for soldiers. That would be when like you get the bill from the IRS and send in the money and say "You know I have got some left over money, I would love to send that in if that could help you out there." We don't do that kind of stuff!

Again, Jesus is not giving a law. He's not saying you always have to go an extra mile even if the soldier says, "No, I was planning on stopping here," you gotta say "Jesus said I have to take another mile so we gotta go another mile." He's not doing that. He's saying, "Now in the presence of the kingdom you can be creative and strong in the work of reconciliation. You can love somebody that nobody else is loving. You can do that. YOU can do that."

And then Jesus kind of summarizes all of this. **"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 the unrighteous" (Matthew 5:43-45, TNIV).**

So check this out: Everyday God gives good gifts. Everyday God just loves. Now, this is **not** the way I work. Love my friend, love my neighbor, no problem. If somebody hurts me.....not so much.

God's not that way. This is where it's so hard for us to understand God because we project all of our stuff on him. God just loves people. He loves people that love him. He loves people that don't love him. He loves people that spit in his eye. He just loves people. And he doesn't do it because he has to. He doesn't say to himself, "Well I am God, so I guess I am stuck with having to love people. Boy, I sure wish I didn't have to." He does it because it is the only way to be that has life to it.

And Jesus says, "Now, I will be with you, and I will help you because you can't do this yourself." But you can start doing that. There's not a whole lot of rules that will guide it. Every situation will take some creativity and so you have to pray. That's why he says, "Love your enemy and pray..." Because that's generally the next step: "God, I don't even know what to do!" And you will be strong and creative.

Jesus said one day, "If somebody slaps you, turn the other cheek." And then the final day of his life, we are told that his enemies surrounded him and they spit in his face and they beat him with their fists. And others slapped him and said, "Prophecy to us, Messiah. Who hits you? Prophecy to us!" They hated him so. And he could have called 10,000 angels to smite them. He just stood there; turned the other cheek. Ah, don't you know? Won't you come?

He said if somebody takes you to court, takes the shirt off your back, don't insist on your rights, tell him, "Here's my coat." One day his enemies took him to court, put him through the mockery of a trial, condemned him to death. And then as an ultimate expression of humiliation, because to be robbed of clothing, to be naked was such an expression of humiliation, they took his clothes. When the soldiers crucified Jesus, they took his clothes, divided them into four shares with the undergarment remaining. "Let's not tear it," they said to one another. "Let's decide by lot who will get it." And they gambled for the last of his clothes. They take him to court. They take His shirt. Jesus says, "Here, take my coat as well. That'll help you."

He said, "If Roman soldiers come someday and they make you go with them a mile, then at the end of that mile you say, 'Can I go with you another one?'" One day the soldiers came for him. They forced him to

carry a cross until he couldn't carry it anymore. And then we're told in Matthew 27, after they were going out, they met a man from Cyrene named Simon. And they forced him to carry the cross. It's the same word. It's exactly the same law.

One day the soldiers came for Jesus, and he went a mile with them. But at the end of the mile, he said, "I'll go another. I'll go another mile. If that's what it takes, I'll go another mile."

That's the one we follow. That's the only hope for this sorrow-twisted world. Ultimately, this world will not be redeemed by a different economic system, or a different political arrangement, although those issues are real, real, real important. Ultimately, you think about gangs, and violence, and wars, and ethnic cleansing, broken homes, hearts shattered. What's ever going to heal that? It's the way of the cross. It's the way that says, "The evil, the hurt, the cycle of hostility. . . it stops in me. . . with the Father's help now. At the cross it will all get turned around. And now it comes down to you and me in our lives. And the situations will be different.

You probably won't get slapped by somebody this week. Probably nobody will take you to court and sue you for your coat. Probably no soldier will force you to go a mile. But you'll have all kinds of opportunity and I will, too. And just to make sure that we're thinking this way, I'd like to give us a phrase that we're all going to take with us into the week. And the phrase is "**Here's my chance.**"

Here's my chance. And the idea is that each moment when there's something difficult--relational problems, somebody's hurt me, somebody comes to my mind; then I remember this is an opportunity to be with Jesus, to live in the reality of his Kingdom, to be a Kingdom agent, to actually manifest redemptive love, to be strong and powerful and creative in the service of the good. Here's my chance to be with Jesus, to learn from Jesus how to live like Jesus. Say it with me: Here's my chance.

You'll be in some situation where somebody makes you mad. They will insult you, offend you, humiliate you, cut you off in traffic, or in mid sentence and you will want to go Old Testament on them, eye-for-eye on them. But this week you will have an alternative. "Here's my chance. I don't have to live in retaliation mode." In Jesus another way has come. And it's a better way. And I can let go. I don't have to be a part of the mutually assured hostility that's been destroying our world for a long time. It can stop. I can let go. Here's my chance.

Somebody's going to hurt you. Somebody's going to give you a little zinger. And your natural instinct will be to give them a little zinger back. Maybe do it subtly. Maybe do it in a way that couldn't be attributed to you.

Instead, this week we're all going to say, "Here's my chance." Get down and pray for that person. "I'm not even sure the right thing to do or say right now. But I'm open. I'm available. I will try. I will have the courage to try as you will help me."

To your mind this week sometime is going to come a person who's hurt you worst of all. Somebody who betrayed you, cheated you in a business deal so badly. A friend who violated friendship. Somebody who broke a confidence, and they did it on purpose and left you in enormous trouble. Somebody who deliberately lied to you, deceived you. Somebody who broke your heart. You'll be tempted to go eye-for-eye. But you have an alternative. "Here's my chance."

Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth just leaves us all blind and toothless! I don't want to be part of it! I want to join another team! Because now the Kingdom is available to me and to you. That's what I want, God. Here's my chance. Here's my chance. Here's my chance. "Everyone who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall because it had been founded on the rock" (Matthew 7:24, NRSV). That's solid! And for today that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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