

“An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.” This principle of *lex talionis*, the law of retaliation, is found in many ancient law codes, like Hammurabi’s Code, and in the Old Testament. Jesus, however, seems to abolish this ancient law, teaching that we are not to seek vengeance, but instead “turn the other cheek.” The fact is, though, Jesus is bringing this law to its logical conclusion.

The principle of retaliation was not meant to *promote* vengeance, but to *restrain* it. The idea was if someone injured your eye, you were entitled to injure their eye back, but no more. You weren’t to put out both their eyes or to kill them. Because of the hardness of human hearts, the law made this concession to *limit* retaliation and keep it as equitable as possible.

But alongside this law, God gave other commandments, encouraging mercy and forgiveness. In today’s first reading from Leviticus, we hear God’s commandment: “You shall not bear hatred for your brother or sister in your heart.” We must see those who hurt us, not as enemies, but as our brothers and sisters. “Take no revenge and cherish no grudge... You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Jesus’ teaching that we are to “turn the other cheek” is the true fulfillment of these commandments.

The way of vengeance only leads to self-destruction. As Gandhi said, “An eye for an eye will only make the whole world blind.” It has also been said that bearing a grudge is like drinking poison and hoping it will hurt our enemy. Seeking vengeance is ultimately pitiful and unsatisfying.

Dostoevsky’s novel, *Notes from Underground*, includes a story about a man obsessed with petty vengeance. One day, a military officer rudely pushes him aside in a crowd and he is humiliated. He begins plotting how to get even. Whenever he passes the officer in the street, he glares at him with anger, but he never notices. He writes an anonymous letter to the newspaper denouncing his enemy’s rudeness, but they don’t publish it. He even considers challenging the officer to a duel. After two years of fuming, he devises the perfect revenge. He will give him a shove just like the one he received. So when he sees the officer walking past him in the street, he decides to walk straight at him, not budge an inch off course, and shove past his enemy. That will show him! But at the last moment, he loses his nerve and steps out of the officer’s way. Finally, one day, he dresses in his best clothes, buys a fancy new coat, and marches out to exact his revenge. As he passes his enemy in the street, he uses all his force to ram his shoulder into the officer, who just keeps walking by, hardly seeming to have noticed. Dejected, the man wanders home, admitting to himself that all that time he had just wished that the officer would be his friend. It’s a sad, silly story, but perhaps all of our grudges are just as sad and petty.

Jesus teaches in the Beatitudes, “Blessed are the meek.” Being meek does not mean being a pushover or a doormat. It requires a deep, inner strength. Cowardice is motivated by fear; meekness is motivated by love of our enemy. The attitude of “If you hurt me, I’ll hurt you back worse” reveals not toughness, but actually a thin skin, being ultra-sensitive to even the slightest insult or injury. In contrast, being meek shows that the other person doesn’t have power over us and our emotions. We know that our value doesn’t come from the way that other person treats (or mistreats) us; our value comes from the love God has for us and no one else can take that away.

Consider the example of St. Mother Teresa’s meekness. One day, while she was begging in the streets for food to feed poor orphans, someone spat on her. She wiped away the spittle and calmly replied, “That was for me. Now what will you give the orphans?” The man was stunned by her persistence and became a regular supporter of her mission. That’s not being a pushover; that’s being the bigger person.

In honor of Presidents’ Day (a week late), here are a couple quotes from presidents that illustrate Jesus’ commandment that we must love our enemies. Lincoln once said, “I defeat my enemy when I make him my friend.” In his farewell address over a century later, President Nixon said, “Always remember, others may hate you, but they only win if you hate them back, and then you destroy yourself.” (Sadly, Nixon probably knew the truth of these words by having done what he advises against.)

The perfect model of meekness and mercy is Jesus Himself. He was strong and clear in calling out the hypocrisy of the Pharisees, but He did not hate them. And when they had Him arrested and crucified, He did not fight back. Instead, Jesus prayed from the cross, “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.” And though they seemed to have defeated Him that day, Jesus rose again in the final victory of His resurrection. It is only when we conform our lives to Jesus and seek His help, that we will be able to imitate His mercy and share in His victory.