

# Turning to Promise

a sermon based on Genesis 45:3-11,13  
(with reference to Luke 6:27-38)

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This passage from Luke — (paraphrase of Lk 6:27-30) Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, ...turn the other cheek, if someone takes your coat give them the shirt off your back too, give to everyone who begs from you, and don't ask for anyone to give back what they've taken — does that sound hard for anyone else, here? As Christians are we really supposed to be passive saps? If God loved us so much that he sent his Son to die on a cross for us, then why would he want us to let people walk all over us and abuse us? Right? It doesn't make sense.

And it really doesn't even in the context of what Jesus is saying to the disciples at this point. He's not telling them that they should passively endure abuse. If we pay close attention he directs his disciples to **act** when these things happen.

Turning the other cheek doesn't mean allowing someone to beat you up. Jesus was talking about an insulting slap (an assault on one's honor) — turning your other cheek to the slapper would compel him to slap with the back of the hand (if he were so inclined) and thereby dishonor himself.

When he speaks of someone taking your coat, he's not talking about a bandit. He's talking about someone who holds it in collateral for a loan and refuses to let you have it back to keep warm at night. People back then didn't have closets full of clothes. Giving him your shirt, so that you were totally naked and exposed to the elements would point out HIS disregard for you.

Jesus does NOT expect us to just take abuse. But he does ask us to respond to abuse or attacks on our honor differently. Not passively — but differently.

Our human reaction to abuse — whether it be physical, mental, or emotional is to fight back — to fight back not in resistance but in retaliation — to even the score. An eye for an eye, right? Doesn't the Bible even command that back in Exodus 21? Not exactly. And Jesus knew that. In Matthew's account of the saying we just heard from Luke, right before Jesus says to "Love your enemies..." he says, "You have heard it said, 'an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth'. But I say to you..." (Mt 5:38-39b)

Jesus understood that when that instruction was given it wasn't a command to seek revenge, but to limit revenge. Revenge has a way of getting out of hand. Because if we're honest, it usually doesn't stop with "evening" the score but getting on top. And that undermines every principle that God has for us — demeaning or abusing another to elevate ourselves even when we've been wronged.

Let's go back to that story about Joseph that we heard a few minutes ago. Joseph's brothers were terrified when they realized who he was. This guy answered only to Pharaoh, the most powerful king around. They had not only contemplated killing him — fully prepared to do so — until Rueben convinced them to just let him die in a pit. Do you all know this background?

Joseph was the eleventh of Jacob's twelve sons, but also the first son of his favorite wife, Rachel. Therefore he was Jacob's favorite. Joseph ate it up. He told on them whenever he could. He showed off the fine multi-colored robe that his father had given him. When he dreamed that he would be a leader over his brothers (That's not the way it's supposed to happen for younger brothers.), he made a point of telling them in front of their father. He humiliated them. More than that, his favored status reminded them that their father really didn't love their mothers. (That wasn't all Jacob's doing either. His father-in-law tricked him into polygamy.) When they threw Joseph in that pit — when they sold him to the Midianite traders as a slave — they weren't making the first move — they were getting revenge. Joseph "had it coming."

So now when they stand in front of Joseph (who has already set them up to look like thieves) what else do you think they would expect? Revenge. Right? Even if he doesn't beat, imprison, or kill them, he's asked them to bring the youngest brother, Benjamin, Joseph's only full-brother and the only remaining son their father, Jacob, has by the love of his life Rachel. If he were merely to keep Benjamin, their father would despise them. That's pretty bad. Isn't it? The worst punishment I ever got as a kid wasn't a whupping, it was that time my dad said, "Mark, I'm disappointed in you." I know that he meant he was disappointed in my behavior, but that hurt.

So here Joseph's brothers stand knowing that the best they can expect is to lose their father's love. Even if Joseph does nothing else – even if they only have to tell Jacob what they'd done to him and how they'd allowed him to grieve for no purpose other than their own revenge. Their lives would be destroyed.

But instead, Joseph says this, "God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. So it was not you who sent me here, but God." (Gen 45:7-8a) Now this doesn't necessarily mean that God caused them to beat him and send him into slavery, only that God's will to bless them through Joseph wouldn't be thwarted by their plans. If Joseph would have had a little more wisdom in his youth so that he wouldn't have aroused his brothers against him, God would have followed through on the promise that he'd revealed in Joseph's dreams.

But Joseph got wiser. We never hear about another one of his dreams. He kept them to himself. But we do know that God blessed him with the ability to interpret dreams for others. Because he'd begun to learn to live righteously: not humiliating his master when his wife accused Joseph of making advances when it was she, treating the prison guards with respect, being honest with others even with news they wouldn't want to hear, he ended up rising in Pharaoh's honor so that he would be in that position to save God's people according to God's plan. Instead of dwelling on the abuse that he'd received at the hands of his brother – instead of spending all of his energy plotting his revenge (even now when it would be at its best, "a dish served cold") – instead he turned to God's promise. Because he did, Israel – Jacob and his descendants – were blessed. Because he turned to promise rather than revenge, the line continued all the way up through Jesus – Jesus who would be saved by another Joseph taking him down into Egypt for a period of safety.

What does that mean for us? God has made a promise for us that we will have life in Jesus. Not just life after our mortal bodies die – but life in the here and now. He doesn't expect us to passively take abuse. He doesn't expect us to passively allow others to be abused or degraded. He expects us to take a stand and to stand up for ourselves. But that expectation comes with a promise. The promise is that when we stand up for righteousness, that when we live righteously, that when we reject the devil's bait to seek revenge, that when point out when someone sins against us and claim Jesus' strength to move forward – not allowing it to continue, but also not allowing their sin to suck up our energy – the promise he makes is that we will rise not only in his favor, but those around us. See that's one of the main lies Satan tells us, that if we don't retaliate then we won't be vindicated. When instead we hear St. Paul's admonition in Romans 12:18-19 when he quotes Deuteronomy 32:35 saying:

"If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord."

when we do that, we turn to the promise that we don't have to get revenge because God is our avenger. It frees us. It frees us from anger and angst. It even frees us to be able to love our neighbor – and our enemy – trusting that the same God who avenged our sins on and through himself and his Son Jesus on that cross, that we might hope that our accusers, our abusers, our enemies, might be transformed by the promise of life we claim in him – because of how we live – not for that sweet cold dish of revenge, but the warm comfort of his promise. AMEN.