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When getting even feels right

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One of Jesus' more controversial and misunderstood teachings dealt with forgiveness. In the Old Testament the Hebrew people were commanded to seek equal recompense for a wrong suffered. They were told to take "Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth" (Matthew 5:38; Ex. 21:24; Lev. 24:20; Deut. 19:21). At first glance such a law seems harsh, but it was introduced by God to *limit* retribution. Prior to its institution if someone lost an eye they might feel justified in killing the man who maimed them.

A Better Tool

While that law stood for centuries, Jesus tossed it aside like a worn-out tool, and replaced it with a better one. He told his followers, "But I tell you, don't resist an evil person. Whoever strikes you on your right cheek, turn to them your other cheek." (Matthew 5:39). I don't think Jesus was forbidding self-defense. Rather, he was telling us not to allow someone else's wrath to control our response. We're not to retaliate in kind but in kindness. In God's kingdom the heart and mind of the King controls us, not an enemy's wrath.

Hard to Practice

No matter how you interpret Jesus' words, they're hard to practice. I have a hard enough time showing patience when a wild-eyed driver cuts me off on the freeway. If that's tough, how much harder would it be if someone slapped my cheek?

Because his words were hard to apply, Jesus spoke of the heart behind such kindness.

Behind Kindness Is Love

He said, "Love your enemies" (Matthew 5:43). Behind kindness is love. That's a profound thought, not only for what it says, but for what it doesn't say. If love is behind kindness, what's behind retaliation? Could it be greed? Or, hatred? If so, the words of Jesus ripped the mask off retaliation and exposed a hate filled monster lurking in the soul . . . waiting for a slap to release it. But in God's kingdom, love for the offender, not hatred, rules our heart and controls our response.