

Question: What does the Bible say regarding Christian believers dealing with those who boss or bully them or others?

The Bible clearly teaches that revengeful retaliation is inappropriate and wrong. To return evil for evil may be effective sometimes, but it tends to result in an endless cycle of hostility. On the other hand, to passively accept and submit to bullying often leads to stress, bitterness and depression, as well as a break down of mental and physical health. Jesus acknowledged that he was sending his disciples out into a harsh and cruel world where they would be “like sheep among wolves.” Thus, he told them, “Be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves” (Matthew 10:16). Shrewdness involves the exercise of intelligent and reasonable wisdom. I believe it is possible to see this illustrated in the teachings of Jesus.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, “Do not resist an evil person” (Matthew 5:39). To understand this statement we need to know that the word he used for “resist” means to not oppose or stand against with hostility as one army stands against another. He went on to illustrate how this can be done. He said, “If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.” A right-handed person would have to use the back of his hand to strike someone’s right cheek. This was not a blow of force, but a form of insult and humiliation by a person in power toward one considered powerless such as a slave, woman or child. By exposing the other or left cheek, one is calling for an open blow of the fist. To strike a person in this way would acknowledge the target as an equal. For a person who was in the position of power, this would have been unthinkable.

Jesus also said, “If someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well” (Matt. 5:40). This pictures a poor man in a court of law being sued for payment of a loan. For the poor man to give up not just one, but both of his garments, would leave him standing naked. This would have been shameful for the one who was the cause of his nakedness. This, too, was unthinkable.

In a third illustration, Jesus said, “Whoever shall force you to go one mile, go with him two” (Matt. 4:41). By law the Roman soldier could force a person in an occupied country to carry his backpack for up to a

mile. According to theologian Walter Wink, the soldier would have been punished if he asked for his load to be carried farther. The offer to take his load another mile would cause him to hesitate to ask for the first mile, lest he be punished for going farther.

In each of these cases, the action taken is neither revengeful retaliation nor passive submission to unjust mistreatment. The action proposed would have brought the target of unjust attacks into a position where the power is balanced. By this shrewd action an end to unjust mistreatment is possible.

While the specifics of these illustrations may not address our specific problems with bullies, I believe the principle can be helpful. A friend shared an experience that provides a modern illustration of this kind of shrewdness. As a young boy, he dealt with a bully who took away his coca cola drink during school recess. The next day in clear sight of the bully he bought his coke from the drink machine and then proceeded to spit into it. The bully left him alone after that.

Typically, bullies become very predictable in their attacks. The field of psychology teaches that there is preemptive power in predicting behavior before it happens. When you see it coming, you might tell the bully, “You’re going to get angry and attack me. You’re going to tell me what to do and how to do. And you are going to intimidate and humiliate me. But I can take it. Go ahead and do your thing.” I can almost guarantee you that done in the right way, this will balance the power and stop the bully in his/her tracks. To go ahead and do what you predicted would mean admitting that you were right. This the bully does not want to do.

In applying this principle, we need to constantly check our attitudes so as not to be guilty of trying to take revenge. I believe there is also power in obeying Jesus command to love our enemies. Perhaps some of our readers can suggest other creative ways to balance the power without revenge or passively accepting mistreatment. I would be glad to share any ideas with our readers as I have opportunity.

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