

Question: What does the Bible say regarding Christian believers dealing with those who boss or bully them or others? I know about turning the “other cheek,” but sometimes I run out of cheeks to turn! I’m no bruiser, but I don’t want to be perceived as a wimp either.

The Bible clearly teaches that vengeful retaliation is inappropriate and wrong. To return evil for evil may seem to be effective sometimes; however, 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 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 (Matthew 5-7).

When Jesus told his followers, “do not resist an evil person,” (Matthew 5:39) he used a word that means not to oppose or stand against that person 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” (Matt. 5:39). 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. 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. Such an action would have been shameful for the one who was the cause of his nakedness. This request also would have been was unthinkable.

In a third illustration, Jesus said, “Whoever shall force you to go one mile, go with him two” (Matt. 5:41). 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 had asked for his load to be carried further. 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 further.

In each of these cases, the action taken is neither vengeful 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 above citations and discussion may not address your specific problem with a bully, I believe the principle should 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 drink during school recess. The next day in clear sight of the bully he spat into his own drink. The bully left him alone after that.

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 the command of Jesus to love our enemies (Matt. 5:43ff).. Discuss this with other mature Christians. Perhaps they can suggest other creative ways to balance the power without revenge or passively accepting mistreatment. I would also urge caution in how one may guide a child in using this principle. [Send questions or comments to University Church of Christ, 801 N. 12th, Murray, KY 42071 or phone 270-753-1881. This article is reproduced on the web: www.nchrist.org] 2012/09/14