

The Heart of Retaliation
Matthew 5:38-42

Please turn in your Bibles to Matthew 5:38. “*You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you.*”

Revenge comes easily to the human race. We have a natural tendency to retaliate when anyone harms us (even when that harm might be in our imaginations). And really, it’s this innate response we have when someone wrongs us that makes what Jesus has to say so shockingly radical – not only are we not to retaliate as followers and disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ, we aren’t even to resist someone who is admittedly “bad”.

This is again another very familiar passage from the Sermon on the Mount, and it might be the hardest thing Jesus says to us as it presents scenarios most of us can identify with and commands we would rather not have to actually act on. Jesus quotes what is commonly referred to as the *lex talionis* in Latin or the **law of retaliation, and it was intended as an equalizing of justice**, a law that would bring balance to wrongs done and justice desired. In the Bible we find it explicitly in the Old Testament in Exodus 21:24, Leviticus 24:20, and Deuteronomy 19:21. As an example I’ll read from Deuteronomy 19:21 which says, “*Your eye shall not pity. It shall be life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot.*”

There is something innately appealing to the equal nature of justice found in the *lex talionis*. And this shouldn’t be surprising. The idea of justice being handed out in proportion to the crime committed is something that God has written onto the human heart. The idea of equalizing justice is **present in the most ancient, written law code – the ancient Mesopotamian Code of Hammurabi** (show picture) which was written in the 16th century BC, around 1750 – which predates Moses writing of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy – The Torah or Pentateuch – by at minimum 300 years.

What’s important to understand about the *lex talionis*, an eye for an eye justice, is that it’s **a judicial law meant for application in a court setting**. The *lex talionis* as we find it in the Bible or any other civilization in which there are cognates, is always intended for use in deciding a dispute in a legal court of law. The intent of equalizing justice in a society was also to **discourage private revenge**. As we will see in a moment, the problem Jesus is going to point out is not seeking out justice, but seeking it out and taking justice into our own hands. Jesus knows and society shows we aren’t nearly as benevolent in our justice as we might think. The other thing to note about the context is when Jesus cites this law, and gives his expansion it’s **in the context of personal retaliation not judicial or courtroom retaliation**. Jesus is not discussing nor is it in His mind to comment at this point on the Christian’s role, responsibility, or relationship to the state – here it is simply to say that what the state has the authority to exact in justice, the *lex talionis*, is not to be applied to personal ethics or behavior. For the Jews of Jesus’ day, they had taken this legislation and not only applied it to personal retribution outside of the courts, but demanded it in any and every circumstance. This is what Shakespeare was speaking about when he coined the phrase wanting a pound of flesh.

This is largely what makes this passage and teaching immensely difficult to understand and live out. Like everything we will find in Matthew’s gospel, and the entirety of the New Testament for that matter, the issue isn’t simply try harder, but rather to truly look at what Jesus says, even when it looks untenable, ridiculous, unworkable, or down right crazy and ask in what practical ways can Jesus’ radical principles be set to work in our very broken world. We need to ask: How does the gospel that has saved me from the penalty of my sin make a difference in this situation? How has what God the Father has done for me through Christ the Son enable me to respond in a way that brings glory to God and the gospel to bear on this situation? What do I do, how do I live in light of what God has done for me in Christ?

Look with me at verse 39, “*But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil.*” The one who is evil is the person who is wronging you, offending you, treating you in ways that make you angry or hurt you or are upsetting to you. By not resisting what Jesus is saying is as Christians our attitude when someone wrongs us **is not to take matters into our own hands**. I need to stop for a moment and say this, context is vitally important any time we study and seek to understand and accurately interpret the Bible. The context here is not only the Sermon on the Mount, but the order in which we receive this teaching from Jesus. It’s not in isolation, it comes and is connected to what’s come before in this sermon, namely the beatitudes. Another thing to notice, as with the whole of the sermon, is that Jesus’ words are not directed to nations or people generally – they’re exclusively directed to Christians, those who’ve repented of sin and put their faith alone in Jesus Christ.

So Jesus says to Christians, do not resist the evil one, do not resist, when you are offended, hurt, slighted, whatever, do not take matters into your own hands. And this is important to understand because in the examples that Jesus is going to give, we are to move **from an attitude of taking to giving**. Jesus gives four brief examples of common realities we'll face where people will purposefully intend to hurt you and wrong you in your life, and what the response of a Christian is to be.

Looking again at verse 39, "*But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.*" This person is **the insulter**. In a right handed dominate culture, much like ours is today, if I use my right hand to slap someone on the right cheek the only way I can do that is to do it with the backside of my hand. Have you ever been slapped in the face, I have and not by Cyndi, but it's difficult not to want to lash out when something like that happens. But to be backhanded by someone, that is an indignity of a completely different sort. Here's the principle: Jesus is calling Christians to die to self. Every action He will say is to be a response to not resisting someone who would do evil to you, is not a call to be a doormat and allow others to walk all over you, but rather a call to control my own passions, my own responses, and to die to the self that wants to rage and retaliate in order to protect myself. I think dying to self is clearly what Jesus is getting at when he says, if they slap you on the right cheek turn to them also the left. We don't like to hear it, but there is tremendous power when someone insults you, in not insulting them back but rather returning their insult with grace.

The second illustration Jesus gives is what I'm calling a **legal oppressor**. Verse 40, "*And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well.*" Jesus' example draws Jewish minds back to the Old Testament Law which said that a cloak, the outer garment traditionally worn at that time, could be taken in pledge, but at the end of the day would need to be given back for the person to sleep in, and in the morning could be retaken, until the debt was paid off. Here again is the principal: someone is seeking to oppress you; legal or otherwise, don't be so quick to exercise your own rights. Jesus is not saying don't exercise your rights at all. Again, Jesus is seeking to deal with the heart and the attitudes and affections of the heart. He is saying, there will be times as disciples of Jesus that you'll need to let things go. We live in a litigious society that's constantly demanding our rights, and many times with intended expense or pain to another. The principle Jesus is giving His followers is to not insist on their rights, but rather to walk in deference and humility as much as possible.

The third illustration is what I'm calling **the military oppressor**. Jesus says in verse 41, "*And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles.*" Jesus lived under a political dictatorship. Jesus lived within the Roman empire of the first century, and Roman soldiers had the right to force anyone into labor for any reason at any time. We see this in the account of Jesus' crucifixion and Simon of Cyrene who is forced by a roman soldier to pick up Jesus' cross and carry it the crucifixion site. The principle for Christians is this: when someone asks us or perhaps demands of us that we do something, unless it is absolutely sin, we should do it and go the extra mile. In one sense the illustration is concerned with our natural resentment of the demands of government. And the Bible is clear that our default position as Christians should be to honor the governments we find ourselves in. But we can also see the principle of going the extra mile from an overbearing boss, or an overbearing spouse, or anyone who might demand that we do for them. Again, this illustrates why this teaching is so difficult for us to live out. There is a seeming insanity to Jesus' teaching, but it is in an insanity that comes from having bought the worlds perspective on things. If we would stop and think about our Lord Jesus Christ, we would see this is the exact way He lived, and what He modeled for us.

The final illustration is found in verse 42, "*Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you.*" I call this **the unscrupulous person**. The word unscrupulous means dishonest, immoral, crooked, or deceitful. That's the type of person the original language is describing as the person who would beg or borrow from you. They may or may not have real need. But Jesus says, we are not to judge whether or not the need is real, but as the Bible teaches on the whole, when it is in our power to be able to help or give, as Christians our default position is to help or give.

A couple of observations about these examples to note. First, **every one of these examples are everyday, personal offenses**. These are not outliers or abnormal offenses that someone might face, but things that are ordinary. Jesus uses these kinds of ordinary examples to help us understand that His command not to resist the one who is evil will be a constant struggle in our lives.

Second, in each of these examples **retaliation is expected, but blessing is given**. Each example calls us to set aside our self, to die to self, to not retaliate but rather bless those who seek to do us harm. I find this to be one of the most difficult areas of discipleship personally, to set aside my own ego and self, but that is what Jesus is calling us to do. I, too, naturally want to defend myself and defend my honor, want to set someone in their place when they offend or hurt me, but often, when I'm

really honest, it's just about ego. And Jesus is teaching us a hard learned truth – retaliation brings no peace, so be a blessing instead.

Third, **escalation is expected, but de-escalation is given.** Again we naturally tend towards escalating situations when someone harms us or offends us. I need to quote Proverbs 15:1 to myself often as it says, “*A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.*” It is far easier to escalate conflict than it is to de-escalate it. Yet in these examples de-escalation is exactly what Jesus is calling His disciples to do.

The final observation from these examples is as difficult to carry out as any of them because it runs so counter to everything the world around us says. **Personal-preservation is expected, but others-focus is given.** In all of these examples, our natural tendency would be to applaud someone who stands up to an insulter or an oppressor or an unscrupulous or dishonest person. But the responses that Jesus gives are what the Bible calls disciples and followers of Christ to do as a first response, to look not only to our own interests but also to the interests of others. Now I know what you might be thinking, but Pastor Malcolm the people Jesus gives as examples are evil, why should we look to bless the evil person, to seek the welfare of the evil person, to do good to someone who is treating me badly?

The answer is profoundly humbling, why do we as followers and disciples of Jesus Christ, as Christians not resist the one who is evil, but rather seek to do them good as they do evil to us – because this is precisely what the Lord Jesus Christ has done for us. Jesus is our example to follow. Turn quickly to 1 Peter 2:20. Peter gives us a powerful picture of the principle of non-retaliation that Jesus is speaking of in Matthew 5, but showing us how Jesus Himself responded in the horrors of His torture and crucifixion. Peter writes, “*For what credit is it if, when you sin and are beaten for it, you endure? But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God. For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in His steps. He committed not sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When He was reviled, He did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but continued entrusting Himself to Him who judges justly. He Himself bore our sins in His body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness.*”

Three applications for us to take home today. Number 1, **be the blessing of a peacemaker.** What governs Jesus teaching here is what He started His sermon with – the beatitudes. In the seventh beatitude, we are blessed when we are peacemakers, begin called the sons of God. This means, in a world that is often seeking to maim, kill, and destroy, as Christians we never look more like our Father in heaven than when we respond to this world as peacemakers rather than with an eye for an eye justice.

Number 2, **bridge the offense to the gospel.** Notice in the four examples Jesus gives, that the responses called for are looking for opportunities within less than ideal circumstances to bring the gospel to bear on the situation. What if as someone insults you and you choose not to retaliate but rather to turn the other cheek, in doing so you are able to share Christ with that person? You do not know how God is going to use your obedience to change the life of another. So see trials, persecutions, insults, oppressions, and offenses first as opportunities for gospel witness.

Number 3, **trust God to bring revenge, retribution, retaliation, and judgment.** Peter said this of Christ in the passage we looked at – Jesus did not revile when reviled, did not threaten when suffering, rather He entrusted Himself to Him who judges justly. Friends, the God of the Bible is concerned, deeply concerned with justice. But the Bible clearly teaches us that God is the one who brings justice, God is the one who will avenge – that is His job, not mine and not yours. We are to be His witnesses, we are to be His servants.

I said at the beginning, if Jesus' teaching in this passage was simply a matter of try harder, we would indeed be lost. But it is not a matter of try harder, it is a matter of trust the gospel. Trust Christ, trust the work of the Holy Spirit in your sanctification. Trust that God gives the strength and ability when we look to Him.