

Week 10 – I Don't Get Mad I... – Matthew 5:38-42

Scripture Reading: Romans 12:17-21

Introduction

“Justice” is a word that we are hearing a lot these days

Of course, these days, the word “justice” typically has a modifier attached to it depending on context and what grievance is seeking redress

Such as “Social Justice” or “Racial Justice” or “Economic Justice” or “Restorative Justice”

People talk about a lot of justice these days – and much of it is anything but just

But it's the idea of “Retributive Justice” or “Payback Justice” that we will be considering today – the right to get even – and most of us think that is perfectly fine because getting even seems only fair

At a recent rally in Kenosha, one of the speakers proclaimed, “If you kill one of us, it's time for us to kill one of yours.”

Not to be outdone, Punjab Chief Minister Captain Amarinder speaking of India's ongoing clash with China was quoted just last week saying, “Our soldiers at the front should be clearly told that if they kill one of ours, you kill three of theirs”

The sad reality is, payback justice leads more often to one-upmanship than it does to feelings of satisfaction

Still, payback seems to be the order of the day as we have twisted the Golden Rule around 180 degrees from it being a restraint on our own behavior to making it a call for revenge saying not “do unto others as you would have them do unto you” but rather “do unto others *as they have done unto you*”

We have an innate sense of what we consider to be our “rights” and that turnabout is fair play leading us to boldly proclaim, “I don't get mad, I get even”

To justify that view many people look to the Old Testament Law and quote, “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth” while others argue that following that logic will just leave us all blind and toothless

Still, no one wants to accept personal injustice – that goes against every instinct we have – when we've been wronged, we want to get even – after all, it's our right

Or is it?

This morning we come to the fifth of six examples Jesus uses in his Sermon on the Mount to show how the Jewish religious leaders had twisted and mishandled the Old Testament Law and led the people astray with their teaching

Thus far we have seen Jesus redirect his hearers in the areas of anger, sexual purity, divorce, and truthfulness

And this week we are going to see Jesus take up the topic of retaliation and how a citizen of the kingdom of heaven should respond to being personally wronged

Like each of the other preceding examples, what Jesus taught had to have come across as revolutionary and his original audience was likely taken aback by it

And, as we will see, what Jesus teaches remains contrary to popular thinking today when retaliation isn't just seen as normative but also as necessary unless one wants to be seen as weak

After all, even followers of Christ have the right to get even – right?

Let me encourage you to open your Bible to Matthew 5

If you are taking notes our Roman numeral one will be The Traditional Teaching: Retaliation

Roman numeral two is Jesus' Teaching: Relinquish Your Rights

And then Roman numeral three is The Results of following Jesus' teaching

So, if you haven't done so already, let me encourage you to join me in Matthew 5 so you can follow along as I read verses 38-42 [**Matthew 5:38-42**]

"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.

First, let's consider the traditional teaching as Jesus states it here which is to retaliate

I. The Traditional Teaching: Retaliate

In verse 38, Jesus quotes the rule for revenge as it is found in a few different passages

First, **Exodus 21:23-25** which in addressing the case of a woman giving premature birth as the result being struck during a fight –

But if there is harm then you shall pay life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe.

Then in **Leviticus 24:19-20** we read –

If anyone injures his neighbor, as he has done it shall be done to him, fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth; whatever injury he has given a person shall be given to him.

Lastly, in **Deuteronomy 19:18-21** when discussing the penalty to be imposed on a false, malicious witness we read –

The judges shall inquire diligently, and if the witness is a false witness and has accused his brother falsely, then you shall do to him as he had meant to do to his brother. So you shall purge the evil from your midst. And the rest shall hear and fear, and shall never again commit any such evil among you. Your eye shall not pity. It shall be life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot.

This code of law is known by its Latin title *lex talionis* or, in English, the Law of Retaliation

And as God prescribed it, it was a good law – but it was a law that had been perverted by Jesus' day

As we consider the three texts I just mentioned it becomes clear that the law of retaliation was given to the Jewish people as a nation – God never meant for it to be carried out by individuals as a means of personal payback

It was a part of their legal code and was intended to be administered only by the judiciary

And even then it served to restrict punishment as much as it prescribed it

We have to remember that when the law was given to Israel the culture was one of intertribal warfare and blood feuds

If a man killed another man his kin might well wipe out the first man's entire family

Or if he knocked out a tooth payback might be to knock out all the offender's teeth and to break his jaw in the process

We see that kind of "rough justice" in Genesis 34 when a man named Shechem violated Jacob's daughter Dinah and her brothers wiped out every male in Shechem's village and then plundered the city

But God sought to reverse the tendency to go overboard so he prescribed that justice had to be of the same kind as the original injury and it couldn't exceed the original injury – again, it was both prescriptive and restrictive

But by Jesus' day the question had become how far one could go in personal retaliation without breaking the law

And that is pretty much the way most people understand the saying today – you harmed me so I can harm you – the Bible says so

When applied this way it can hardly result in true justice and it actually foments bitterness, vengeance, malice, and hatred – because it's hard to define "fair" – after all, what if a good tooth is knocked out as payback for a bad tooth?

And we really don't tend to be too concerned with getting even – not really – if we're honest, we know we would prefer to get ahead just to be sure justice was truly served – and that just leads to an escalation of retaliation until someone gives up or there is nothing left

But along comes Jesus and in **verse 39a** he teaches something completely different as he says –

But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil.

Before we continue on with looking at the four illustrations Jesus used to clarify his meaning we need to consider briefly how many have wrongly interpreted his words

Some have interpreted Jesus' admonition against resisting those who are evil as an absolute prohibition

And that has led them to determine that a Christian should never be a policeman or soldier or even involved in the legal system because all of those roles require resistance against evil men

The great Russian novelist, Leo **Tolstoy** was one who, after reflecting on the Sermon on the Mount came to just that conclusion –

That Jesus meant exactly what he said and that he absolutely and unconditionally outlawed force against evil in any form whatsoever

That's an extreme pacifistic view and there are other pacifists who would allow for police and the courts but not the military and their involvement with war and killing but even that goes further than Jesus intended

Jesus' statement cannot be taken to be an absolute prohibition against all such force, especially force exercised by the state, or else the Bible contradicts itself

Keep your finger in Matthew 5 and turn with me to Romans 13 (948) and look with me at verses 1-4 [**Romans 13:1-4**]

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer.

It's quite obvious from these verses that government has the God-given power to punish those who do wrong and to do that that requires forceful means – it would be hard to get more forceful than using a sword for punishment

To properly understand what Jesus teaches in these verses we have to consider the context of the passage and that includes the flow of the entire sermon and the cultural understanding of his original audience

Jesus was teaching that his followers are to willingly relinquish their rights and to make his point clear he used four illustrations that his original audience would have readily understood

And while it takes a bit of explanation for us to see his meaning behind the illustrations, once we understand them properly we see that the general principles they contain are still relevant to us today

II. Jesus' Teaching: Relinquish Your Rights

The first illustration Jesus uses is found in the second half of verse 39 [**Matthew 5:39b**]

...if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.

We commonly refer to this principle as to "turn the other cheek" but it probably doesn't mean what you think it does

Jesus was not describing a physical attack – his original audience would have readily understood that he was describing a gross, calculated insult and we would be wrong to think that Jesus is saying we can't defend ourselves or resist being struck

Notice that Jesus specifically mentions being struck on the right cheek which tells us he is most likely describing a backhanded slap across the face because that is the natural way a right-handed person would strike the right cheek

And according to rabbinic law, to be struck with the back of the hand was twice as insulting as being struck with the palm

So backhanding someone was a calculated putdown designed to show that you held them in complete contempt

Therefore, rather than talking about absorbing physical blows; Jesus is describing how his followers should respond to a personal insult

I believe we are safe in saying that the response that Jesus prescribes is particularly relevant when they are insulted because of Christ but his teaching shouldn't be restricted to that circumstance alone

And Jesus says, rather than trading barbs and jabs and getting even, his followers should meekly absorb the insult and be willing to take another

Remember what we saw when we looked at **Matthew 5:5** – meekness is not weakness

Rather, to be meek is to exhibit the gentleness and self-control that comes from a proper appreciation of one's condition or position

In the case of the believer, leads to a sense of humility but also to a state of confidence that allows insults to simply wash over them without effect and allows them to forgo retaliation where a personal insult is concerned

So, this first illustration shows us how we should respond when we are **put down** and in the second illustration Jesus tells us how to react when we are **ripped off**

Look with me at verse 40 [**Matthew 5:40**] where we read about a lawsuit where a believer stands to lose the very shirt off of their back

Now, to rightly appreciate what Jesus meant, we need to understand the two articles of clothing mentioned

The tunic was a long garment that was worn next to the skin – what we would think of as a shirt

Whereas the cloak was a person's outer garment – what we would think of as a coat

In Jesus' day, a tunic was often used for bartering or making payments but the cloak was too valuable for that

A cloak was indispensable for living in the Mideast as it served not only as necessary protection from the elements but also as bedding for those who often had to sleep outdoors where it could get quite cold

In fact, a person's cloak was so valuable and necessary that Old Testament law prohibited anyone from keeping another person's cloak given in pledge overnight

We see that clearly spelled out in **Exodus 22:26-27** which says –

If ever you take your neighbor's cloak in pledge, you shall return it to him before the sun goes down, for that is his only covering, and it is his cloak for his body; in what else shall he sleep? And if he cries to me, I will hear, for I am compassionate.

It's in the context of using a garment as collateral that we can see how a dispute might arise whereby a lender could sue and be awarded the tunic

Given the context of this illustration I believe we are safe in assuming that the lawsuit was decided unfairly but whether fair or unfair Jesus says if your adversary wins the shirt off of your back make him a present of your coat

And in doing so, Jesus went beyond the requirement of the Old Testament law and instituted a radically new standard of righteousness for the citizen of the kingdom of heaven

Of course, today we would view the loss of a coat as a rather trivial matter but the universal principle that we must recognize is that we must be willing to abandon even those things that are clearly ours by law

And we can do so because we understand that God is our provider and protector –

And that recognition allows us to exhibit a radical sense of generosity because we know that our well-being isn't dependent on our things

Next, Jesus uses an illustration that speaks to how we should react to being **put upon**

In verse 41 [**Matthew 5:41**] Jesus is probably referring to the practice of Roman soldiers of commandeering civilians to do tasks for them

At the time, Israel was occupied territory and Roman law said that ordinary citizens could be compelled to assist the Roman military any time a soldier demanded it

We see an example of this when Simon of Cyrene was forced to carry Jesus' cross in **Mark 15:21**

Legally then, a Roman soldier could compel a Jewish citizen to carry their pack for them up to a mile which was reckoned to be a thousand paces

Imagine how degrading and irritating it would be to have anyone, let alone a hated enemy, interrupt your day and force you to do a task for them without any regard to the inconvenience it caused you

But in his illustration Jesus says don't count your steps and abruptly drop the pack when you reach the mile mark – be willing – eager even – to carry it for another mile

There are two ways to go about any undesirable task – grumbling or grinning – and Jesus says to face unfair demands on your time and efforts cheerfully and with a willingness to go beyond what is required

Jesus isn't laying down a new system of legalism with his illustrations to be grudgingly obedient to and he wasn't saying to drop the pack as soon as you hit the two-mile mark either

Rather, he says the believer is to be disposed to exceeding tolerance and a setting aside of legalistic "fairness"

Then having looked at being put down, ripped off, and put upon Jesus turns to what to do when **hit up**

Verse 42 [**Matthew 5:42**] might well be the most difficult of Jesus' illustrations to understand and apply properly simply because it seems so definitive –

Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you.

Once again, there are those who look at this verse and take it as an absolute when the question isn't about the wisdom or necessity of lending or giving money to everyone who comes along and asks for it – again we have to consider context

And the context here is that of being inconvenienced or mistreated in some way and our response to it – Jesus is specifically talking here about the attitude of a citizen of the kingdom of heaven toward their rights

We have all heard the accounts of the beggars who drive newer cars and live in fancier houses than we do – they have simply found begging to be a good way to make money

Then there are those who, frankly, are deadbeats or who are consistently in dire straits because of their own actions

And God expects us to be discerning even when it comes to those who beg and borrow

Scripture addresses those who are might be seeking money unworthily in other places such as **1Thessalonians 5:14** and **2Thessalonians 3:10** so Jesus has to be speaking concerning a person who begs or seeks to borrow out of real need

Let's look at an Old Testament passage that gives us a good background as to what Jesus was referring – **Deuteronomy 15:7-10**

"If among you, one of your brothers should become poor, in any of your towns within your land that the Lord your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart or shut your hand against your poor brother, but you shall open your hand to him and lend him sufficient for his need, whatever it may be. Take care lest there be an unworthy thought in your heart and you say, 'The seventh year, the year of release is near,' and your eye look grudgingly on your poor brother, and you give him nothing, and he cry to the Lord against you, and you be guilty of sin. You shall give to him freely, and your heart

shall not be grudging when you give to him, because for this the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake.”

It seems clear that the command to loan here is talking about someone you know, “one of your brothers,” who has fallen on hard times and that seems to indicate that you would know the legitimacy of their need

Then in **Luke 6:34-35** we read where Jesus taught –

*And if you lend to those from whom you expect to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to get back the same amount. But love your enemies, and do good, and **lend, expecting nothing in return**, and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, for he is kind to the ungrateful and the evil.*

In that we see two phrases that lend insight to our passage – “...love your enemies” and “expecting nothing in return”

And that fits in perfectly with the context of our passage which would indicate the beggar or borrower is someone you know who is asking for something that they know will put you in a bind

Suppose someone from the church were to lose their job, or have some other known financial need and they come to you asking for help

Jesus is saying here that a follower of his should give the money and, if the borrower pays it back, fine

And, I personally believe it’s wise for believers to treat loans to each other seriously and solemnly even putting their understanding in writing

But an iron-clad guarantee of payback should not be a condition for the loan being made

We must cheerfully be ready for the loan to be a gift even if it hurts us

Basically, what Jesus is saying here is that we cannot be punitively tight-fisted and apply the financial equivalent of “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth” and be ready to pounce if the borrower defaults

What Jesus has to say about being put down, ripped off, put upon, and hit up is a radically different way of thinking that our culture might think is impossible or impractical and, even we might wonder how it can be right

So let’s look quickly at **the result** of the attitude of relinquishing our rights

III. The Result

First, this way of thinking and being will result in the citizen of the kingdom truly being a peacemaker and, as we saw when we looked at **Matthew 5:9**, peacemakers will be called sons of God

The person who absorbs offense without retaliation will truly be like Christ who –

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. [1Peter 2:23]

Think of the radical difference that exists between the law of retaliation that insists on proportionate payback but only leads to escalation of harm and the de-escalation that occurs when the offended party not only forgoes their right to get even but extends a blessing to their offender

Do we think that it would go unnoticed?

Do we think that it would not lead to questions and the opportunity to explain and to share the gospel?

Think of what a difference there is between personal sacrifice and personal retaliation

The difference is really the difference between the way of the cross – which is the way our Savior took – and the way of the world which we are naturally inclined to follow

Conclusion

This is a very challenging teaching – there is no denying that it goes against our natural tendencies and often even against our desires

And one of the toughest things about this teaching is determining its limits

We've already seen that we can't stretch it to apply to governmental affairs be they military or the legal system

And Jesus isn't saying we cannot ever seek redress or protection under civil law

What Jesus is talking about here is specifically personal offenses and how we should react to them – not crimes and not how we can and perhaps even should react to harm being done to a third party

And the examples he gives are just that, examples

But when we properly understand what those examples represent we come to the conclusion that there is a multitude of things that we can plug into their place

People embarrass us, insult us, mock us, impose upon us, are inconsiderate of us, mistreat us, and take advantage of us all the time

The things we could plug into the formula Jesus teaches here that we could seek retaliation for are probably infinite as are the ways we might retaliate

But the bottom line question that we all should seek to answer is

Will anyone be won for the kingdom by my retaliation, by my standing on and demanding my rights in this matter even if I am justified in doing so?

Let's pray