

RETALIATION AND RIGHTEOUSNESS

Let's turn to Matthew 5:38-42, and continue in our study of Matthew. As we have seen for several weeks, Jesus is in the process of explaining what He means by Matthew 5:20,

Matthew 5:20 (ESV) – 20 For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

What does He mean by exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees? He tells us in Matthew 5:48:

Matthew 5:48 (ESV) – 48 You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

The methodology of the scribes and Pharisees – the way they went about doing righteousness – was wrong from the start. They thought that righteousness was all about how you acted. Jesus reveals that righteousness is about who you are in your heart and soul, and that true righteousness is perfection.

The tradition of the scribes and Pharisees, built on the letter of the Law, was a massive checklist; as long as you checked off the right outward behaviors, you were righteous. Jesus tells us that the spirit of the Law is being righteous inwardly; true righteousness is not CREATED by what we do, but REVEALED by what we do.

Let's read Matthew 5:38-42.

Matthew 5:38–42 (ESV) – 38 “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ **39** 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. **40** And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. **41** And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. **42** Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you.

TRANSITION: Let's begin by looking at the tradition of the scribes and Pharisees, the letter of the Law.

THE LETTER OF THE LAW

Matthew 5:38 (ESV) — 38 “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’

These words from the Law of Moses are directly quoted. There are several places it could come from, but let’s look at Deuteronomy 19.

Deuteronomy 19:15-21 says,

Deuteronomy 19:15–21 (ESV) — 15 “A single witness shall not suffice against a person for any crime or for any wrong in connection with any offense that he has committed. Only on the evidence of two witnesses or of three witnesses shall a charge be established. 16 If a malicious witness arises to accuse a person of wrongdoing, 17 then both parties to the dispute shall appear before the Lord, before the priests and the judges who are in office in those days. 18 The judges shall inquire diligently, and if the witness is a false witness and has accused his brother falsely, 19 then you shall do to him as he had meant to do to his brother. So you shall purge the evil from your midst. 20 And the rest shall hear and fear, and shall never again commit any such evil among you. 21 Your eye shall not pity. It shall be life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot.

There are two things I want to highlight from this passage.

First, the purpose of eye for eye, tooth for tooth was to limit the penalty for wrongdoing. The punishment had to fit the crime. If a man stole a lamb, he was required to pay the price of a lamb; he was not required to pay with his life; an eye for an eye, not an eye for a tooth.

Second, this is not about personal revenge but civil justice. Parties were to appear before the priests and judges, who were to inquire diligently, and then issue a judgment. There was no right to PRIVATE vengeance. **Vengeance is mine,** says the Lord in Deuteronomy 32.

So we see that the Law called for righteous judgment, issued by a court defined by the Law. The Law did not permit private judgment to take or, or allow justice to be replaced with vengeance.

While the tradition of the scribes and Pharisees did quote eye for eye, tooth for tooth, they made it a matter of private retaliation, and not true justice. There was a council in Israel – the Sanhedrin – and lower courts as well. But when they caught a woman in the act of adultery and brought her to Jesus (John 8), what did they want to know? Whether she should be brought before judges and tried? No, they wanted to know if Jesus agreed that she should be immediately stoned, apart from any legal proceeding.

TRANSITION: What does the spirit of the Law say?

THE SPIRIT OF THE LAW

Matthew 5:39–42 (ESV) — 39 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. 40 And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. 41 And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. 42 Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you.

Jesus brings us back to the spirit of the Law with His words, **But I say to you.**

Remember, the letter of the Law reduces the focus of the Law to the smallest possible point of application. The spirit of the Law broadens the focus of the Law to the fullest possible application. When the Law says **love your neighbor** the letter of the Law wants to argue about who, and who isn't, my neighbor, while the spirit of the Law says that everyone is ultimately my neighbor.

TRANSITION: Jesus summarizes the spirit of the Law with the words, **Do not resist the one who is evil.** We need to take a moment to really understand this before we move on.

DO NOT RESIST THE ONE WHO IS EVIL

If we take this out of context the result will be the triumph of evil and overwhelming injustice. The reality is that the Bible DOES call for us to resist evil.

In Galatians 2:11-14 Paul publicly rebukes Peter for joining the Jews in their prejudice against Gentile Christians.

Galatians 2:11 (ESV) — 11 But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned.

In First Corinthians 5 Paul commands the Corinthian church to publicly remove an unrepentant, sinning member of the church, and makes it clear that the church is responsible not for the world, but for itself:

1 Corinthians 5:13 (ESV) – 13 God judges those outside [the church]. “Purge the evil person from among you.”

And in Second Timothy 4:14-15 Paul says names Alexander the coppersmith as an enemy of the Gospel who caused him much harm, and warns Timothy about him.

2 Timothy 4:14–15 (ESV) – 14 Alexander the coppersmith did me great harm; the Lord will repay him according to his deeds. 15 Beware of him yourself, for he strongly opposed our message.

You see, we ARE to oppose evil, and the church IS to resist evil.

TRANSITION: So, what does Jesus mean in Matthew 5:39-42?

JESUS' MEANING IN MATTHEW 5:39-42

Jesus tells us in Matthew 5:39-42 that judgment is not to be personal or excessive. He gives us three examples of what He means.

FIRST, THERE IS THE LOSS OF DIGNITY.

Matthew 5:39 (ESV) – 39 ... But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.

Being slapped did not generally result in serious injury; the point of a slap was to insult and belittle the other person. Ungodly people will insult and revile and show contempt for Christians; it's become part of our culture to make fun of pastors and ministers and anyone who holds to a strong Christian faith.

Jesus says that our response to the insults and contempt of others is to turn the other cheek – to accept more insults and contempt, rather than answering back with insults and contempt of our own.

That's hard, but let's move on for the moment.

SECOND, THERE IS A LOSS OF RIGHTS.

Matthew 5:40 (ESV) — 40 And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well.

Everyone except the extremely poor had at least two pieces of clothing. The **tunic** was like a long, linen undershirt or nightshirt, hanging to the knees, and it functioned as an undergarment. The **cloak** was made of heavy material; it was sometimes like a robe with sleeves, and sometimes just a long piece of cloth with a hole for the head. Working men would remove their cloak while they did physical labor.

Now, the cloak was so important that the Law gave it specific protection; no one could take your cloak from you. Even if you gave it as a pledge, it had to be returned at night, to make sure you had a blanket. The Law protected your right to your cloak.

But Jesus calls us to yield up our rights, even the rights granted to us by the Law of God, rather than insisting on having everything promised in the Law.

This is hard, I know, but let's look at the next example.

THIRD IS THE LOSS OF LIBERTY.

Matthew 5:41 (ESV) — 41 And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles.

The word **forces** specifically refers to an issue of Roman Law: a Roman official or soldier could grab a man passing by and make him carry a burden up to, but not over, one mile. I imagine men who were required to do this counted the steps in frustration and even anger.

But Jesus says that our response to being forced to go one mile against our will is to go a second mile voluntarily, willingly.

This, too, is hard.

WHAT IS BEHIND THESE RESPONSES?

Love. Love drives each of these responses? When we are insulted, we are demonstrate love by not returning the insult. When we suffer the loss of our rights, we are to demonstrate love by giving more than required. When our freedom is restricted, we are to demonstrate love by turning involuntary servitude into willing service.

Where the scribes and Pharisees took advantage of the Law to justify their antagonism toward others, Jesus calls for a humble, loving, godly response to all people, regardless of their spiritual state. He illustrates this with a final point, which I see as a summary of His meaning:

Matthew 5:42 (ESV) – 42 Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you.

So, we are to treat beggars – those who cannot repay – as neighbors in need who can repay, and to treat neighbors in need – those who can repay – as beggars who cannot repay. All for the sake of love.

JESUS' LOVE FOR US.

But remember, this love did not begin with us. Jesus was insulted and mocked; He continues to be held in contempt by the world. Until the moment you were born again and joined to Jesus as your Lord and Savior, you held Him in contempt, or would have, if you were old enough. Jesus was robbed His rightful glory; His tunic was literally stripped from His back, and Roman soldiers gambled for it. A little bit was forcefully taken from Him; think about how much more He has willingly given us. And Jesus, in taking human flesh, became subject to the pains and difficulties of this life. Once He began His public ministry, He rarely had much peace and quiet. People clamored for Him on a nearly constant basis. And yet He continued to teach and serve and heal and bless, until the moment that He was literally taken into custody and sentenced to death on the cross. We come to Him as beggars, and He gives all things to us. We cannot repay Him, and yet He withholds nothing from us.

TRANSITION: Let's bring this home.

BRINGING IT HOME

Our world is utterly consumed with dignity and rights and liberty. But Christians can't lose their dignity. We are God's chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession (First Peter 2:9). It doesn't matter if an ungodly person insults us and shows us contempt, or even if the entire world mocks us. We are who God says we are, and that will never change.

Our world says that rights fragile, temporary things that can be lost in the blink of an eye, and therefore must be forcefully defended. But Christians can't lose their rights. Oh, the world will try to deny us what they think are our rights; tens of millions of our brothers and sisters around the world are denied the right to public worship. But the right to worship can't be lost, because it was given to us by our God. Nothing given to us by God can be taken away by man.

Our world says that liberty means, ultimately, the freedom of self-determination, or putting it differently, the freedom of self-worship, the freedom of being your own god. But Christians know that liberty is safe and sound in our union with Christ. True liberty is the freedom of being in Christ: freedom from sin, and freedom of righteousness – freedom to live for the glory of God. Paul wrote Timothy that we can be imprisoned, but the Word of God is never imprisoned, because the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit can't be imprisoned. **Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.**

Since we have received all things in Christ, we have no need of guarding our dignity or rights or liberty. Since our infinite, enormous needs have been met by Christ by His grace, we then can show grace to others in their small and trifling need. Freely ye have received, Matthew 10:8 says; freely give, and in the giving, show that man or woman a little of what it means to know Jesus.