



Part 35: Jesus and Revenge

Matthew 5:38-42

Rather than follow our natural impulse for retribution, we seek to deescalate the situation and look for creative ways to engage and bless the offender.

I. A Radical and Countercultural Command

“These last two antitheses bring us to the highest point of the Sermon on the Mount, for which it is both most admired and most resented, namely the attitude of total love which Christ calls us to show towards the one who is evil (v.39) and our enemies (v. 44). Nowhere is the challenge of the Sermon greater. Nowhere is the distinctiveness of the Christian counterculture more obvious. Nowhere is our need of the power of the Holy Spirit (whose fruit is love) more compelling.” – John Stott

II. Jesus' Main Point

A. Old Testament Background

“You have heard it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’” Matthew 5:38

Jesus is referring to the law of retribution or in Latin, *lex talionis*, found in the Jewish torah (Ex. 21:23-25; Lev. 24:18-20; Deut. 19:20-21).

“But if there is serious injury, you are to take life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise.” Exodus 21:23-25

These commands took retribution out of private hands and put it into the public law court. In doing so, they made two positive contributions. They checked wild revenge, and they taught justice. The punishment must fit the crime.

By the time of Jesus, financial compensation had essentially replaced of physical retribution. Jesus is likely condemning the way the law of retaliation had been abused to promote personal revenge especially under roman occupation.

B. Resistance or Revenge?

“But I tell you, do not resist an evil person.” Matthew 5:39a

Q – What does Jesus mean by his statement? No resistance at all or no revenge? Church history has seen this translated both ways, giving rise to those who are pacifists (more next week).

“Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people but love your neighbor as yourself.” Leviticus 19:18

“Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written, ‘It is mine to avenge; I will repay,’ says the Lord. On the contrary: ‘If your enemy is hungry feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap coals on his head.’ Do not be overcome with evil but overcome evil with good.” Romans 12:17-21

C. Four Illustrations

1. Insult.
2. Greedy lawsuit.
3. Roman oppression.
4. A needy person requests help.

“Jesus gives direction, not directions, a compass not a map...it is clear that to be a peacemaker is to outwit the opponent, using the tactic of surprise and refusing to retaliate in the way the opponent expects.” – Dale Brunner

D. Jesus’ Main Point

“Jesus’ teaching offered a nonviolent initiative that would deliver people from the cycle of revengeful retaliation.” – Glen Stassen

“On a personal level, the disciple’s first responsibility is to reverse the dynamic of the situation from taking to giving. The evil person has attempted to take, but Jesus’ disciples are to give to the offender by serving him or her. Jesus’ disciples are not to think first about retribution. Even when they are being abused, they must think of ways to advance the kingdom of heaven and its influence on earth.” –Michael Wilkins

Rather than follow our natural impulse for retribution, we seek to deescalate the situation and look for creative ways to engage and bless the offender.

III. What is Jesus Not Saying

- A. Jesus is NOT saying that what the person does to us is alright – he calls them evil (v.39a).
- B. Jesus is NOT calling us to be passive and shrink away.

In each of the illustrations Jesus offers, we are to take the initiative to seek creative ways to engage the person. We are called to try to overcome evil with good.

There is a certain kind of strength that is required in our response.

“Jesus’ actions depict rather the strong man whose control of himself and love for others are so powerful that he rejects absolutely every conceivable form of retaliation.” – John Stott

Note: There is no call here to willfully subject yourself to physical abuse, i.e. domestic abuse.

Note: The question of bullying.

- C. Jesus is NOT saying we let others be mistreated.
He did not say – “If someone slaps your brother...”

Part of loving our neighbor is doing what we can to protect them from injustice or evil.

- D. Jesus is NOT saying that we don’t need police or military.
- E. Jesus is NOT saying that we give to the person whatever they ask of us.

IV. The Power and Reason for Obedience

- A. The Power for Obedience – abiding in Jesus (John 15:4-5)
Long-term spiritual training that is opposed to the counter-formation of our culture. This is not anymore possible than running a marathon without training.
- B. Jesus is Our Example (Isaiah 50:5-9; 1 Peter 2:)
“I offered my back to those who beat me, my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard; I did not hide my face from mocking and spitting. Because the Sovereign Lord helps me I will not be disgraced. Therefore, I have set my face like flint and I know I will not be put to shame.” Isaiah 50:6-7

“To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps...When they hurled insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.” 1 Peter 2:21-23

Back to Jesus four illustrations:

1. He was insulted for us...
2. He was convicted in court instead of us...
3. He allowed the Romans and those in power to abuse him in our place...
4. When he saw our great need, he gave all he had – himself!

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.” Matthew 5:9

Discussion Questions:

1. Have you ever heard any teaching on this Scripture? How was it taught?
2. What difference does it make if Jesus is commanding us not to retaliate or seek revenge rather than not to resist an evil person?
3. Compare what Jesus says here with what Paul says in Romans 12:17-21. What similarities do you see? Do you think Paul helps us understand what Jesus may have been saying?
4. Consider Doug’s interpretation of Jesus’ main point. Do you think this is correct? Why or why not?
5. Have you faced a situation where this command would be instructive?
6. What do you think is necessary to become the kind of person who could actually obey this command of Jesus?