

The King's Sermon

Getting to the Heart of Retaliation (Matthew 5:38-42)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on June 25, 2017

Introduction

- ❖ When we started this series through the Sermon on the Mount, I mentioned how there are two erroneous ways of reading this Sermon that are diametrically opposed to each other. And I think that difference is most obvious when you get to today's passage. Jesus's teaching to 'turn the other cheek' is arguably one of his most well known sayings. But though we might equally admire it, we don't read it in the same way.

- ❖ Some people are going to read these verses **idealistically** and won't expect anyone to actually live them out. 'Turn the other cheek' is definitely a great ideal and maybe in an ideal world we'll actually live like this. But it's not realistic. If you tried to turn the other cheek in the real world, people will walk all over you like a doormat. They'll abuse you and take advantage of you. So it's an idealistic teaching for an idealistic age, but, you can't practically live it out today. That's how some people are going to treat this passage.
 - ▶ But then there are others who read these verses **ideologically** and expect everyone to live them out. 'Turn the other cheek' becomes an ideology that takes the form of pacifism. It begins to shape public policy or foreign policy. We just have to educate the public, rehabilitate the criminals, and negotiate with our enemies. There is no justification for using force ever. That's the ideological approach to 'turn the other cheek' where it's applied indiscriminately to society at large.

- ❖ But I'd argue that both approaches are misreading the text. **One side is not taking Jesus seriously enough as a King.** They're not reading his commands as commands. **The other is not taking the Sermon seriously enough as a sermon.** They're reading it like a compilation of ethical statements. A list of proverbs to pick and choose from.
 - ▶ But you can't just start in v38 and expect people to turn the other cheek. You have to start at the beginning, in the Beatitudes. The commands in our text are given to those who know they're poor in spirit, who mourn their sinfulness, who hunger for righteousness. Jesus is preaching to his disciples, to those in the kingdom of heaven.

- ❖ My point is, unlike those who read this idealistically, I believe the King's Sermon was meant to be taken realistically and actually obeyed. But unlike those who read it ideologically, I don't think these commands were meant for the world. They weren't meant to be indiscriminately applied. **The King was preaching to his Church. Turning the other cheek is only possible for born-again people.** For those regenerated by the Spirit of God.
 - ▶ So does Christ expect you to turn the other cheek? If you're in Christ, then certainly. **If you're a Christian, today's passage is totally relevant and completely realistic.** And my goal is to help you see that. To have a better sense of what it means and what it looks like to not resist the one who is evil, to turn the other cheek, to volunteer your cloak as well, or to walk a second mile.
 - I've divided this message into three parts. 1) I want to help you appreciate the OT law of 'an eye for an eye' – because I don't think Jesus was rejecting it. 2) I want to clarify any misinterpretations of what it means to refuse to resist evil. 3) I want to demonstrate the heart behind non-retaliation.

Appreciating an Eye for an Eye

- ❖ Thing first thing I'd like to do is to explain the Mosaic law's teaching on an eye for an eye. Jesus mentions it in v38. **Remember, in this section Jesus is trying to illustrate the kind of righteousness that defines his followers, the citizens of the kingdom.** It's a righteousness exceeding that of the scribes and Pharisees, meaning it goes deeper than surface-level behavior and touches on heart-level obedience.
 - ▶ And in each of the previous illustrations, he's applied the same formula. He starts off by quoting what they heard, so he's not just referring to the Mosaic law (otherwise he would've said "what was written"), but rather the focus is on the popular rabbinic interpretation of what was written in the law. **He's not challenging Moses. He's challenging the scribes and Pharisees's interpretation of Moses.** So look at v38 again, "*You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.'*"

- ❖ Moses uses that particular phrase three times in the OT: Exodus 21:24, Leviticus 24:20, and Deuteronomy 19:21. Those passages were all dealing with personal injuries, when someone personally wrongs you. 'An eye for an eye' is referring to the ancient principle known as *lex talionis* (Latin for 'the law of retaliation'). Now before you write it off as barbaric, you've got to put yourself in that ancient context where you don't have an established police force and court system and no Bill of Rights protecting you from 'cruel and unusual punishments'.
 - ▶ Just imagine the alternative. Without *lex talionis*, if I poke your eye with my finger, you might try to do the same to me but with a stick. Or if you knock out my tooth with a fist, I might try to knock off your head a club. **If you leave the pursuit of justice in the hands of individuals sinners, we just make things worse by escalating violence.**

- ❖ So in that context, *lex talionis* accomplishes two important things. **First, it ensures a measured, evenhanded justice.** The punishment needs to fit the crime. If someone steals from you a bundle of wheat, you can't retaliate by burning down his whole field. That's not justice – that's pure revenge.
 - ▶ **And secondly, when it comes to the responsibility to exact justice and carry out punishment, *lex talionis* takes it out of the hands of the offended and puts it in the hands of authorized judges.** 'An eye for an eye' should not be a personal motto and a personal ethic for how you respond to people who offend you. But that's how it was before the Mosaic law. People sought justice with their own hands and routinely perverted justice due to their inherent sinfulness.
 - *Lex talionis* is realistic. **It accounts for human sinfulness and human inability to exact justice, on our own, in a just manner.** It intends for any retaliation to be a matter for a court to decide and for any punishment to be equivalent to the offense. **So I think if you were living in ancient Israel, you probably would've appreciated 'an eye for an eye' – for restraining human evil and limiting retaliation.**

- ❖ That's what Moses taught. But what the scribes and Pharisees taught regarding Moses's teaching was not the same. **Their error was their failure to recognize that *lex talionis* was not a personal ethic for the people of God.** It's a principle governing the realm of the legal system but not the realm of personal relationships.
 - ▶ The scribes and Pharisees were teaching God's people that if someone hurts you – you can hurt them back as long as you limit your retaliation and only hurting them as much as they hurt you. That's still considered righteousness according to the scribes and Pharisees.

- ❖ But that's what Jesus is confronting in our passage. He says God's people don't live according to that standard of righteousness but to an exceeding righteousness enabled by the gospel.
 - ▶ **Civilized humanity will do what it can to limit retaliation. But gospel-ized humanity will reject retaliation altogether.** Jesus goes beyond trying to restrain our desires for revenge. Through the gospel, he finishes the job by redeeming us, regenerating us, transforming our hearts altogether so that we don't even want revenge. So that we leave the responsibility of exacting justice to the courts and ultimately to God himself.
 - So Jesus is not rejecting *lex talionis*. He's just saying to leave that in realm of the judicial system and don't bring it into the realm of personal relationships. 'An eye for an eye' should not govern the relationships of God's people.

Clarifying the Refusal to Resist

- ❖ **Remember, he's preaching to disciples that he assumes are not just civilized people but gospel-ized people.** This is how he expects Christians – those changed and motivated by the gospel – to respond when someone hurts you or wrongs you. Look at v39, "*But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil.*"
 - ▶ Now because there's so much potential for misunderstanding here, I want to spend some time clarifying what Jesus means when he says not to resist the one who is evil. This is our second point.

- ❖ **The first thing to be said is that Jesus is not suggesting that nothing can be done to restrain evil in society.** 'Do not resist the evil person' is *not* a principle for public policy. There have been well-meaning Christians – **Leo Tolstoy** being one of the most well known – who took Jesus's words at face value, disregarded the context of the Sermon, and taught that having soldiers, police officers, and judges was unChristian because they resist evil persons.

- ❖ **Along that line of thinking, some will also argue that Christians should be against the principle of retributive justice and only support rehabilitative justice.** That's the idea that our judicial system's primary objective should not be to punish convicted criminals of their crimes but to rehabilitate them and reintroduce them back into society. Of course, this leads to debates about capital punishment and whether or not Christians can support it.

- ❖ To all of that, I'm sure Jesus would say, "You're missing the point of my Sermon." He's not dictating public policy or foreign policy. He's not advocating an absolute prohibition of using force to stop evil persons. And he's not rejecting all systems of retributive justice intended to punish those same evil persons. Otherwise Jesus's teaching would be in direct contradiction to other passages of Scripture like Romans 13.
 - ▶ **In Romans, there's an obvious distinction being made between the responsibilities of the individual from that of the state.** In Romans 12, individual Christians are commanded not to repay evil for evil and to never avenge yourself but leave it to the wrath of God (12:17, 19). That sounds a lot like Jesus in our text.
 - But then chapter 12 gives way to chapter 13 where the state is described as a servant of God instituted by him to bear the sword in order to punish wrongdoers and to reward those who do good.

- ❖ So the state has a God-given responsibility when it comes to restraining and punishing evildoers. **And we, as individual Christians, have a different God-given, God-redeemed responsibility towards evildoers.** I like what John Stott says about the difference. He says, *"If my house is burgled one night and I catch the thief, it may well be my duty to sit him down and give him something to eat and drink, while at the same time telephoning the police."*
 - ▶ His point is Jesus wasn't forbidding a police force. He's just forbidding us from taking the law into our own hands. And he's not entering a debate between the principles of retributive versus rehabilitative justice. **He's saying that our personal relationships shouldn't be governed by any principle of justice – but by the principle of love.**

- ❖ Like I said at the beginning, this is the problem with reading our passage ideologically, failing to read it as a Sermon where you start at the beginning. **All of Jesus's commands to not resist evil or to turn the other cheek are impossible to obey if you lack the gospel-ized qualities in the Beatitudes.** We've said before the Beatitudes are like a guest list. Only those who fit the description (born again people) can live out these commands. **To expect unregenerate people to live this way is to contradict the gospel.** You're suggesting that a non-Christian can live the Christian life without the Spirit of God.
 - ▶ 'An eye for an eye' is what a stable society needs to maintain order and restrain evil. **'An eye for an eye' is the best we can expect and hope for.** But once the Spirit of God enters and changes a man, then (and only until then) can we legitimately raise our expectations for that man to not resist evil and turn the other cheek.

- ❖ Now there's a second clarification needed. Because there are those who would agree that we can't impose pacifism on society at large, but they would upon the Church. **They'd argue that pacifism is the Christian position.**
 - ▶ So while a sane society will have an army, a police force, penitentiaries, and law courts, Christians should not participate. If you enlist in the army or enroll in the academy, you won't be able to keep Jesus's command to not resist the one who is evil. What do we say to that? Can you be a Christian police officer? A Christian soldier? Or just a Christian with a licensed firearm?

- ❖ I'm sure many of you are curious to know the answer, but I'm sorry, you're not going to find it here in our passage. That's the point I've been making. If you're looking for passages that speak to the Christian's relationship to the state, to the larger society, then don't look here. Look to Romans 13. Look to 1 Peter 2. Our passage is about a Christian's personal relationships, about how to respond when someone personally wrongs you.

Demonstrating the Heart of Non-Retaliatio

- ❖ So let's go there. Let's focus on the main point of this passage. **I'm arguing that it's about a personal ethic for born-again people and their personal relationships – that centers on the principle of non-retaliation.** This is our third point. What Jesus does in vv39-42 is to offer us four scenarios that illustrate the heart behind non-retaliation.
- ❖ Now I realize the person reading this idealistically is going to criticize non-retaliation as being too passive. *Are you just going to stand by while people take advantage of you?* But I'd argue, based on these four scenarios, that there's nothing passive about non-retaliation.
 - ▶ My seminary professor, Darrell Johnson, used to say that non-retaliation, according to Jesus, is an active response. **You go on the offensive to act in such a way as to change the dynamic of the encounter you have with the offender.** Let me explain as we consider the four scenarios Jesus gives us.
- ❖ **The first is when your honor is attacked.** Look at v39, *“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.”* This slap on your right cheek would've likely been a backhanded slap from the other person's righthand. Or even if it was an open handed slap using their left hand, that would've been the unclean hand. **So either way we're dealing with a humiliating, degrading gesture.**
 - ▶ Civilized man will respond by defending his honor, but gospel-ized man will respond – not passively by waiting for another slap – but will respond actively by offering the other cheek. **In other words, don't just surrender to evil – engage evil with goodness, kindness, and a form of self-sacrifice.** In regards to this verse, Charles Spurgeon said, *“we are to be as the anvil when bad men are the hammers.”*
- ❖ Think about that. **An anvil is a very different thing than a doormat.** No one walks all over an anvil. Anvils are strong. In fact, they're stronger than hammers. So the point is that a Christian who practices non-retaliation is no weakling. That Christian is stronger than his or her offender. That kind of self-restraint and self-sacrifice takes a vast amount of strength.
- ❖ But here's where we need to be careful. **Notice Jesus didn't instruct us to turn another person's cheek.** Meaning if you see someone else being physically abused or attacked, there's nothing in this passage deterring you from intervening and resisting the evildoer.
 - ▶ ‘Turning the other cheek’ is only concerned with how you respond to personal attacks against *your* honor and reputation. **The focus is not on the physicalness of the slap but the humiliation behind the gesture.** How will you handle the insult? Are you going to lash out in retaliation or respond with Christ-like strength in kindness?

- ❖ This is why I'd also argue that this passage has nothing to do with **legitimate cases of self-defense**. It's not talking about what to do if you ever find yourself face to face with a violent drunk or crazed madman. It's not speaking to the woman in an abusive relationship or the student victimized by a bully.
 - ▶ In those situations, you have every right to shield yourself from harm, to turn to authorities for protection, and to pursue any legal recourse. **Non-retaliation needs to be distinguished from the reasonable response of not letting someone physically hurt you or even kill you.** Please don't misunderstand Jesus as somehow permitting or enabling abusive relationships. Again, this first scenario has to do with how you respond to someone attacking your honor.

- ❖ **The second scenario is when your legal rights are violated.** Look at v40, "*And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well.*" In those days people wore three layers of clothing – a loincloth, a tunic, and an outer coat. What's being described in v40 is a situation where someone wrongfully sues you to deprive you of your tunic. How do you respond? Do you retaliate?

- ❖ Jesus tells his disciples not to. But again a response of non-retaliation is far from passive. It would mean volunteering your coat as well. According to Mosaic law, your coat was considered an inalienable right (Ex. 22:26). You could not legally deprive an Israelite of his coat. That's what makes this so significant. **The civilized man will countersue to protect his rights, but gospel-ized man is willing to lose rights to win the soul of his offender.**
 - ▶ That's how you turn the table on your enemy. He approached the situation thinking he's in charge. It was an opportunity for *him* to exploit *you*. But by offering your coat as well, you've changed the dynamic of the encounter. Now you're in charge, and you've changed the scenario into an opportunity for *you* to serve *him*.

- ❖ There's a story about **Hudson Taylor**, the missionary to China, who was the first among Western missionaries to intentionally look and dress like a local. One day he came to a river and hired a boatman to ferry him across. Soon after a wealthy Chinese gentleman approached the same boatman but was rejected being told he'd been hired out by another man. The gentleman didn't bother to look Taylor in the eye, just assumed by his dress that he was a local commoner, and rudely punched Taylor in the face and tried to commandeer his boat. When the boatman protested and pointed out that he just struck a foreigner, the Chinese gentleman was shocked and quite ashamed. Taylor later recounted that his impulse was to push the man back in retaliation, but by the grace of God, he shook it off and actually invited the man to share his boat and shared with him the gospel along the way.
 - ▶ That story encapsulates the first two scenarios. Someone tries to deprive you of your legal rights and attacks your honor with physical violence, **and yet the follower of Christ responds in an active manner, to change the dynamic of the encounter, with Christ-like strength in kindness.**

- ❖ **Now in v41, we have a third scenario where your rights are legally violated.** That assumes you live under an oppressive state that routinely violates your rights. Which perfectly describes the ancient Roman empire. Look at v41, “*And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles.*”
- ❖ Remember, the Jews were under an oppressive Roman rule. So it wasn't unheard of for a Roman centurion to forcefully enlist you to carry his baggage – treating you like a pack mule. That word for ‘force’ is the same Greek word used later in chapter 27:32 when Simon of Cyrene was forced by soldiers to carry Jesus's cross. **It was the oppressors legal right to essentially enslave you for that task.** What do you do? Do you retaliate?
 - ▶ Notice that Jesus's idea of non-retaliation in this situation is not a passive quietism where you simply accept your fate. No, he asks you to do something that takes a great deal of strength. Volunteer to go another mile. And in so doing, you'll change the dynamic of the encounter. Think about it. **If you volunteer to carry his pack, you're no longer his slave.** You're now a willing participant offering a voluntary service. You've liberated yourself!
- ❖ I realize this scenario is becoming more relevant for us today. With all the ugly stories of police brutality, racial profiling, or government coercion of businesses and non-profits to recognize a brand new definition of marriage or gender – **these are all cases where rights are being violated with legal sanction.**
 - ▶ Now within the ethic that Jesus brings, I think there's legitimate room for protest. We see Jesus protest when he was struck before the Sanhedrin (cf. Jn. 18:22-23) and Paul protested when he's illegally arrested in Philippi (cf. Acts 16:37). But Jesus and Paul weren't protesting in order to defend their honor but to defend the dignity of the law. They were protesting miscarriages of the law.
- ❖ So though there may be legitimate space for a Christian to protest, in our text Jesus is trying to move us away from a preoccupation with *our* rights. **It's this preoccupation with being fairly treated and getting what we deserve that leads us to retaliate.**
 - ▶ I say be ready to protest when you see injustice being done in society. But on a personal level, what's motivating you? Civilized humanity is preoccupied with fairness; while gospel-ized humanity is preoccupied with sacrificial service.
- ❖ **And lastly we have a fourth scenario, in v42, where your generosity is abused.** Look at the verse, “*Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you.*” Now given the context, it's safe to say Jesus is not thinking of the average panhandler on the side of the road. In all the other scenarios there's someone out to get you, so here too Jesus has in mind someone who wants to take advantage of you.
- ❖ What does non-retaliation look like here? **Notice Jesus doesn't say to give whatever you're asked but to give to the person who asks.** Just giving whatever is asked is not always the loving thing to do. It's the passive thing to do, the civilized thing to do.

- ▶ **But the gospel-ized thing to do – the active, more loving thing – is to discern and only give what will actually help the person, even if he's trying to take advantage of you.** Just like in the other situations, a non-retaliatory response would change the dynamic of the encounter. You're no longer the object of his manipulation. He becomes the object of your undeserved kindness.

- ❖ I know this all seems quite daunting. You're wondering: How am I going to live like this? How am I going to respond this way when my honor or my rights or my generosity is being disrespected, violated, and trampled on? It's so unfair!
 - ▶ **Church, I believe the only way we're going to let go of our preoccupation with fairness is by turning once again to the gospel.** By that I mean we should be so thankful that Jesus's relationship with us is not governed by principles of fairness. If we got what we deserve, we would all be condemned.

- ❖ That's why the gospel is the greatest news in the world. **The gospel says Jesus (out of great strength in kindness) became the anvil – rather he became the nail – while sinners like us are the hammer who put him on the cross.**
 - ▶ Let's get this straight: Jesus was no doormat. He was no pushover. But when his opponents literally slapped him (Mt. 26:67), and confiscated his garments (Mt. 27:35), and forced him to walk a blood-soaked mile towards Calvary (Jn. 19:16) – Jesus did not retaliate. Even though, he said he could call down twelve legions of angels – if he so willed – to rescue him from this injustice (Mt. 26:53).

- ❖ But he didn't. Rather, *“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.”* (1 Pet. 2:23)
 - ▶ **Remember this, Church, Jesus only calls us to do what he himself did, and whatever he calls us to do, he'll supply whatever it takes for us to obey.** We need to continue entrusting ourselves to him who saved us, to him who judges justly.