

## **Being Generous with Grace**

Matthew 5:38-42

Is there someone who has really messed you over? A co-worker who has stabbed you in the back? An annoying parent of your kid's teammate who just sucks the fun out of the game? An difficult neighbor who leaves their barking dog out all night? You have a lousy, good-for-nothing-cheating spouse? How about that kid at school who posts all kinds of lies about you? Well at certain revenge websites you can plan your perfect payback.

There you can order a dozen dead and wilted roses, a box of rotten melted chocolates, or even a dead smelly fish and have them anonymously mailed. You can get rude bumper stickers, phony parking tickets, or fake winning lottery stubs. You can send object of your ire a box of cow manure or doggie doo, or simply annoy them with anonymous text messages, fake emails, and nuisance phone calls.

A gal that calls herself the revenge lady offers the following advice on seeking revenge.

1. Get mad....then get even. It's justice, plain and simple.
2. Revenge is healthy. Don't listen to those mealy mouths who tell you otherwise. You're teaching people to behave better. At the same time you're getting icky poisonous feelings out of your system once and for all. What could be healthier?
3. Revenge is excellent self-therapy. It's far cheaper than a therapist and much healthier than pigging out on a box of donuts.
4. Always aim your revenge where it hurts the most. Go right for the jugular.
5. Let your creativity blossom. Don't go for clichés like slashing tires. Yawn. Be original. Enjoy yourself. Give your mark an experience they'll never ever forget.
6. If you have to do something you're not proud of, be sure to cover your tracks well.
7. Have fun. If you can end up laughing at the jerk who wronged you, you're well on your way to being over it.

Our sinful, human nature certainly likes to get back and get even. We demand our rights and give others what we feel they've got coming. But our Lord calls us to be generous with grace. Instead of getting even. He calls us to show the very same love he showed us, a love unearned and undeserved.

This morning we come to one of the more difficult passages in the Sermon on the Mount. Our text is found in Matthew 5:38-42. It may even be perhaps one of the most difficult passages in all of the Bible.

*38 "You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' 39 But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. 40 And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over*

*your coat as well. 41 If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles. 42 Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you. NIV*

### **A Very Old Law**

When Jesus says, “*You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth,’*” he is quoting directly from the O.T. law. In fact, it is mentioned three times: in Exodus, Leviticus and in Deuteronomy. This is actually one of the oldest law codes in existence. It is known as *Lex Talionis* or the law of retribution. It goes back more than 4,000 years. Its earliest known mention is in the code of Hammurabi, a Babylonian king who reigned before the time of Moses.

*Lex Talionis* meant that whatever wrong you did to someone else, that same thing should be done to you. If you cause someone to lose an eye, then you should lose an eye. If you cause someone to lose a tooth, you should lose a tooth. It wasn’t always applied literally. In the O.T. a price equivalent was set for many offenses. If you were guilty of one of these infractions, you would pay the financial equivalent in retribution.

This law served a couple of purposes. The first was to prevent vigilante justice, and endless cycles of revenge. The O.T. is very clear that *Lex Talionis* was a judicial law that belonged in the courts. This was a principle that to be applied by judges ruling in cases. “Eye for eye” was never intended to be license for individuals to take the law into their own hands. In fact, the law forbade people to personally exact justice themselves. Lev 19:18 says, “*Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD.*” Prov 24:29 echoes that, “*Do not say, ‘I’ll do to him as he has done to me; I’ll pay that man back for what he did.’*” Justice was to be done by the courts, not by individuals.

A second purpose of this law was to insure that justice was done and act as a deterrent to further crime. It insured that crime was punished and that the punishment fit the crime. It established what is known as proportional justice.

On the one hand, courts were not to be too lenient, and give criminals just a disapproving look. For instance, Dt. 19:20 gives the reasoning behind this, “*the rest of the people will hear of this and be afraid, and never again will such an evil thing be done among you.*”

On the other hand, the courts were not to inflict excessive sentences far more severe than the infraction. In either case, the people will resent their leaders and rise up against them, and society breaks down. Proportional justice was seen as foundational to a strong nation.

We see the impact that both extremes can have in our own nation. Whether it’s lenient judges who let criminals off with a slap on the wrist, or out of control law enforcement who abuse their position and power. If we listen, God’s word can guide a nation.

### **The Unrighteousness of the Pharisees**

If “eye for eye and tooth for tooth” had stayed in the courts and remained a standard of civil justice, Jesus may never have had to say what he did here in the Sermon on the Mount. However, the Pharisees twisted this law into something that God never intended.

The religious leaders used *Lex Talonis* as a guideline for personal conduct. It was a command to get even, a justification for personal revenge. I’ll get my eye. I’ll get my tooth. They were taking the law into their own hands.

Here’s where I’m going to go from preaching to meddling. The problem is we always think the other person started it. We always think they bear the bulk of the blame. We have a right to a little bit more before we’re even. The problem is the other person thinks we started and we bear the bulk of the blame. and so taking the law into our own hands starts an ever growing cycle of revenge.

In the movie *Fiddler on the Roof* after the villagers are evicted they are discussing their response, and one of the villagers shouts, “an eye for an eye or tooth for a tooth.” The wise old man Tevye said, “Very good, and the whole world will be blind and toothless.”

Our selfish human nature is never satisfied with getting even. We want a pound of flesh for an ounce of offense. We want to get them back one better than they got us. You start the fight. I finish it. It starts with tit for tat, and then we try to one up the other person, and it escalates from there. In Genesis 4:15 Lamech boasts to his wives that he killed a man merely for wounding him.

In 1878 Randolph McCoy claimed that Floyd Hatfield’s pig was his because it was on his land. Randolph McCoy disputed the claim and the matter ended up in court. Bill Stanton, a relative of both men testified on behalf of Floyd Hatfield. In June 1880 Stanton was killed by two McCoy brothers, Sam and Paris, who were both acquitted on self-defense.

Later Roseanna McCoy began an affair with Johnse Hatfield. Johnse was then kidnapped by the McCoy. Johnse was saved with William Hatfield organized a rescue party.

Then in 1882, Ellison Hatfield, brother of William Hatfield, was brutally murdered by three of Roseanna McCoy’s brothers. He was stabbed 26 times and then shot. The three brothers were then murdered by members of the Hatfield family.

The vendetta continued to escalate over the next ten years. More than a dozen people were killed throughout the feud. There were kidnappings, arson, illegal extradition, several terms of life imprisonment, and a public hanging. The Supreme Court got involved. The governors of both Kentucky and West Virginia called in the National Guard to restore order after the disappearance of several bounty hunters sent in to calm the situation.

### **From Revenge to Grace**

Jesus doesn't want us trapped in this cycle of revenge. He calls from revenge to grace. Instead of "eye for eye and tooth for tooth," Jesus says, "*But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person.*" This doesn't mean that we let evil triumph in society, that we let theft or violence run rampant. Jesus is talking about personal revenge— where we take justice out of the courts and out of the hands of the proper authorities to exact our own private retaliation.

Jesus is correcting the Pharisees misinterpretation saying we are not to seek retaliation or revenge. We are not to play judge, jury, and executioner when others have wronged us. In the end exacting personal revenge only lowers us to their level. Instead of getting even with those who wrong us, He wants us to live above them.

Jesus is not asking us to do anything he hasn't done himself. The Apostle Peter talked about Christ's example when undergoing personal attacks and insults,

*When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. 24 He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. 1 Pet 2:23-24 NIV*

When we respond with grace instead of revenge we are demonstrated the love of Jesus. We are pointing the way to the Savior. Giving people the opposite of what they deserve has been called a "visible participation in the cross."

There has been a lot of confusion and misunderstanding about what Jesus means here. Fortunately, he gives us four examples to show us what he is talking about. For the sake of the cross, for the sake of Jesus, and for the sake of the Kingdom we can suffer loss. We can endure personal insults for the sake of a greater good. Jesus lists four areas where we do not need to seek revenge or retaliate for wrongs suffered.

### **A. Personal Dignity**

The first area Jesus identifies is our personal dignity. In verse 39 Jesus says, "*If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.*" Jesus isn't describing a violent assault here. This was a back handed slap with the right hand across your right cheek. It was not intended to injure. It was meant as an insult.

Jesus is not speaking against self-defense here, nor is he saying we have endure physical assault. In the ancient near east, striking someone on the right cheek was considered the highest form of personal insult. It was an act of spite, an attack your dignity and honor.

We are not return insult for insult. 1 Peter 3:9 says, "*Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult, but with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing.*"

### **B. Personal Rights**

The second thing we are willing to give up when we suffer a wrong is our personal rights. In America, we demand and insist on our rights. The founders of our nation recognized the inalienable rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. In modern America, however, that list of rights is much longer. There are women's rights, civil rights, children's rights, student's rights, workers' rights, and the list goes on and on. When one of our perceived rights gets trampled on, we get angry, "I have my rights!" Jesus says there are some things more important than our rights. For the sake of relationship, for the sake of the gospel of Jesus, the best thing we can sometimes do is lay aside our rights.

In verse 40 Jesus says, "And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well." John MacArthur does a great job of explaining this:

*Jesus is not speaking of a robbery, in which a person tries to steal your clothes, but of the legitimate claim of anyone who wants to sue you. When a person had no money or other possessions, the court often would require the fine or judgment be paid by clothing. The attitude of a kingdom citizen, one who is truly righteous, should be willingness to surrender even one's coat, his extremely valuable outer garment, rather than cause offense or hard feelings with an adversary. The court could not demand the coat, but it could be voluntarily given to meet the required debt. And that is precisely what Jesus says we should be willing to do.*

### **C. Personal Liberty**

A third thing that is expendable for the sake of Christ and for the sake of the kingdom is our personal liberty. God's original intention was for everyone to live in freedom. The Garden of Eden had only one law. They were not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Everything else was in the area of freedom. Once sin entered the picture, however, we began to lose that freedom. Bondage and oppression are results of sin. They are not a part of God's plan. The best of human governments try to secure and protect some of the most basic rights and freedoms for their people, but even the best of human governments fall short. They may make unfair demands on their people. They may have unjust laws. As important as freedom is, it isn't more important than doing what is right, and it isn't worth protecting our personal liberty if it costs us our Christian witness.

Jesus says in verse 41, "If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles." This may seem a little unfamiliar to us. 1<sup>st</sup> Century Israel was under Roman occupation and under Roman law. Rome had a law that was designed to give relief to her soldiers. By law, any Roman soldier could force a civilian to carry their weapons and equipment for one Roman mile, which was a thousand paces. Roman soldiers were already despised as oppressors, but they were never more hated than when they forced you to carry their pack.

Jesus says not only should you carry the pack, you shouldn't do it begrudgingly, but you should happily carry it another thousand paces just because it's the loving, giving thing to do. Whoa! Jesus, this is tough stuff! How can we do this?

We all have certain obligations that just grate at us. We dread it. We hate doing it. Maybe it's some state requirement. FAFSA anyone? The DMV? Maybe it's some stupid school rule. Perhaps it's some nitpicky regulation at work. It could be some stupid policy of your company.

How do we do those things we feel we shouldn't have to do? Do you clench your jaw and mumble under your breath? Do you devise all sorts of ways to get out of it? Do you fantasize about all the things you'll say when you finally tell them off? I know I do. Do you do little things to show your displeasure?

Our Savior says the attitude we display when we're asked to do something unreasonable is more important than our personal liberty. When someone steals a bit of our personal liberty by asking us to do something unfair, instead of revenge or retaliation, we're willing graciously go beyond what is required if we need to. We know that in Jesus we have a freedom far more precious that the world can never take away from us.

#### **D. Personal Property**

It seems with each example that Jesus is picking at more and more sensitive areas. It's like a doctor saying, "Does this hurt?" "How about this?" and as he gets closer to the area that's not well we go, "A little, oww, OOOUUCH! That hurts!" As Jesus probes ever closer to the core of the sinful nature in our hearts, he's getting to that spot infected with pride where we say, "OOOUUCH, that hurts!"

As red blooded Americans, we really like our stuff, and that's exactly where Jesus probes next. Listen to what Jesus says in verse 42, "*Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.*"

Jesus is not saying we should give stuff away to any and every stranger who asks, or respond to every foolish or selfish request. If that was the case, five minutes in East St. Louis could clean you out. Jesus isn't asking us to enable the shiftless in their laziness, but we should be willing to help others out of the resources with which God has blessed us.

To understand what Jesus was talking about, we must understand his words in the same context as those who first heard him speak these words. Jews understood that the Law asked them to help those in need who asked for help. Jesus' words here assume that the one asking here has a genuine need. This isn't someone stealing your stuff. They are asking with the intent of borrowing it. They intend to pay it back, but Jesus' point is that when we help someone in need, it shouldn't matter whether they can pay it back or not.

Possessiveness is a part of our sinful nature. We love to gain, hoard and acquire, and we hate to lose it. We don't want to give up, even temporarily, what is ours. There is a fear that we will never get it back. But we must remember there is a reward that only Christ can repay. Let me quote MacArthur again here:

*Even as Christians, we often forget that nothing truly belongs to us and that we are only stewards of what belongs to God. But as far as other people are concerned, we do have a right to keep that which we possess. By right it is ours to use or dispose of as we see fit. But that right, too, should be placed on the altar of obedience to Christ if required.*

Jesus purpose here in this passage isn't to redefine civil justice, but to redefine our personal relationships. We are not to selfishly seek revenge or retaliation, rather we are to extend a generous grace. Because of what Jesus has done for us, and because of what He wants to do through us, we can take an insult, we can have our rights violated, we can go the extra mile, we can freely give to those in need, even if they can't pay us back.

But there's still a part of us that still wants to scream, but it's not fair. It's not right. What about the wrong they did? What about justice? They can't just get away with it.

The reason we can turn the other cheek, the reason we can go the extra mile is two things. **The first is God's wrath.** God is the one who will handle the justice. He will set all things right. In His own time and in His perfect way, He will take care of it.

*Rom 12:17-21*

*17 Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. 18 If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.*

*19 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. 20 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 burning coals on his head."*

*21 Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*

The second reason we don't need to seek revenge or retaliate is **forgiveness.**

Let me leave you this morning with this thought provoking video clip:

(Show How Often Video)