

Understanding Retaliation
Matthew 5:38-42
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The Gospel of Matthew opens with a series of proofs that Jesus is the Christ, the King of the Jews. The first four chapters of this book examine the person of Christ, including His incarnation and preparation for ministry. He is the rightful legal authority over God's people based upon His lineage as a descendant of Abraham and David and His fulfillment of many prophetic Messianic Old Testament passages. This led to the calling of His disciples and His instruction of the Sermon on the Mount in chapters 5-7.

Matthew 5:38-42 is the fifth in a series of six specific examples that contrast the traditional teaching by the scribes and Pharisees with the teaching of Jesus. It builds toward the conclusion of what it means to "be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:48).

The traditional teaching (5:38)

This fifth example by Jesus of the traditional teaching is introduced by the same wording as the second example, "you have heard that it was said." This statement regarding "an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth" is an accurate reference to what we find in the Old Testament.

"If men struggle with each other and strike a woman with child so that she gives birth prematurely, yet there is no injury, he shall surely be fined as the woman's husband may demand of him, and he shall pay as the judges decide. But if there is any further injury, then you shall appoint as a penalty 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 21:22-25).

If a man injures his neighbor, just as he has done, so it shall be done to him: fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth; just as he has injured a man, so it shall be inflicted on him" (Leviticus 24:19-20).

"Thus you shall not show pity: life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot" (Deuteronomy 19:21).

The context of these Old Testament verses are part of the civil code that was to govern the nation of Israel. They were not directives regarding personal conduct. The Law sought to establish justice in government.

Leviticus 24 governed how justice should be handled in regard to killing and injuries. Exodus 21 governed justice in light of damages resulting from violent crimes. Deuteronomy 19 governed how justice should be handled in regard to false witnesses in cases.

The nation was instructed to govern justly by providing a proportional punishment for crimes. Mankind gravitates toward disproportionate revenge. Unfair justice would be an eye for a tooth. The Law prohibited such revenge by establishing proportionality in punishment. Such justice is essential for any well functioning society.

While the Law required punishment that was fitting for the crime, this did not govern personal relationships. Leviticus 19:18 speaks against taking personal retribution, *"You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the sons of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself; I am the Lord."*

The Law also stated that God will take vengeance, *"Vengeance is Mine, and retribution, In due time their foot will slip; For the day of their calamity is near, And the impending things are hastening upon them. For the Lord will vindicate His people, And will have compassion on His servants"* (Deuteronomy 32:35). This verse was quoted by Paul in Romans 12:19, when we are taught to not take revenge but to be at peace with all men.

This concept of trusting God to bring about justice is found in the book of Proverbs.

"Do not say, "I will repay evil"; Wait for the Lord, and He will save you" (Proverbs 20:22).

"Do not say, "Thus I shall do to him as he has done to me; I will render to the man according to his work"" (Proverbs 24:29).

So we can conclude that proportional retribution was commanded by God for the government of the nation of Israel. This retribution was limited to fair punishment as was fitting for the offense. Regarding personal relationships, wisdom dictated that God would repay evil and people were instructed to not take vengeance.

The teaching of Jesus (5:39a)

Jesus countered the traditional teaching which governed retaliation by making a simple declarative statement against personal retaliation. His words "do not resist an evil person" is a clear, unambiguous directive against retaliation.

The word “resist” (ANTHISTEMI) means to set against, withstand, and oppose. It is used in the following New Testament verses:

*“But Elymas the magician (for so his name is translated) was **opposing** them, seeking to turn the proconsul away from the faith” (Acts 13:8).*

*“Therefore whoever resists authority has **opposed** the ordinance of God; and they who have **opposed** will receive condemnation upon themselves” (Romans 13:2)*

*“Just as Jannes and Jambres **opposed** Moses, so these men also oppose the truth, men of depraved mind, rejected in regard to the faith” (2 Timothy 3:8).*

*“**Resist** the devil and he will flee from you” (James 4:7).*

*“But **resist** him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same experiences of suffering are being accomplished by your brethren who are in the world” (1 Peter 5:9).*

So when Jesus taught to not resist an evil person, He clearly intended His words to be understood to not retaliate against the person. His contrast with the traditional teaching teaches us that if someone does something wrong to us, we are not to evaluate the damage and return an equitable retaliatory response.

This does not speak to the government’s role in establishing punishment. Romans 13:1-4 shows the government has a role in bringing punishment upon the evil doer. This only speaks of our personal involvement with others relationally.

The application of Jesus’ teaching (5:34b-37)

There are many questions that might arise from the Lord’s instruction to not resist the evil person and He provides four hypothetical, yet concrete, illustrations regarding the application of His teaching. Each of these circumstances will help us to understand the applications of what Jesus taught.

These illustrations will be consistent with Jesus’ demand that we be perfect as our Heavenly Father is perfect (Matthew 5:48). Our perfect Heavenly Father is love and applying “do not resist him who is evil” will be the manifestation of true godly love. *“The one who does not love does not know God, for God is love” (1 John 4:8).* In order to truly understand each of these illustrations we must consider the premise that underlies this instruction, that the Lord will care for His people (Matthew 6:25-34).

1. Physical violence (Matthew 5:39)

Most people's first concern of the instruction to not resist him who is evil is regard to the physical realm. Jesus taught that if we are slapped on our right cheek, we should allow the evildoer to slap us on our other cheek also. This goes beyond the Old Testament limit of retaliation, which would be to do no more than respond with nothing more than a slap. This even goes beyond teaching us not to retaliate against the evildoer at all. It instructs us to turn our other cheek to him.

This is certainly counter to what people are taught from a young age. We are told to stand up to bullies and we do not let ourselves be pushed around. We protect ourselves against those who might threaten us. We stand our ground. And if a physical altercation occurs we may not have started it, but we will end it. Unfortunately, there are times when the damage that ensues may be worse for us because of our retaliation.

Jesus' teaching is opposed to this philosophy. His teaching leads to the obvious objection that we are not allowed to defend ourselves against being attacked. If we desire righteousness, we have evidence of how Jesus conducted Himself when He was threatened. Not only that, 1 Peter 2:21-23 informs us that Christ's conduct was left for us as an example of how we should live.

"For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps, who committed no sin, nor was any deceit found in His mouth; and while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously" (1 Peter 2:21-23).

Not only did Jesus not attack anyone physically, He did not even attack them verbally. He did not revile in return. There were times when he was threatened and he fled.

"And all the people in the synagogue were filled with rage as they heard these things; and they got up and drove Him out of the city, and led Him to the brow of the hill on which their city had been built, in order to throw Him down the cliff. But passing through their midst, He went His way" (Luke 4:28-30).

"But the Pharisees went out and conspired against Him, as to how they might destroy Him. But Jesus, aware of this, withdrew from there" (Matthew 12:14-15).

“Therefore they picked up stones to throw at Him, but Jesus hid Himself and went out of the temple” (John 8:59).

“Therefore they were seeking again to seize Him, and He eluded their grasp” (John 10:39).

“So from that day on they planned together to kill Him. Therefore Jesus no longer continued to walk publicly among the Jews, but went away from there to the country near the wilderness” (John 11:53-54).

Jesus not only didn't fight but instead either hid or fled, He also instructed His disciples to do the same. *“But whenever they persecute you in one city, flee to the next” (Matthew 10:23).*

And so they did, *“And he was talking and arguing with the Hellenistic Jews; but they were attempting to put him to death. But when the brethren learned of it, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him away to Tarsus” (Acts 9:29-30).*

In this last case, we see how we should help others to flee. The one instance of the disciples taking up weapons for protection is when Jesus rebuked Peter.

“Then they came and laid hands on Jesus and seized Him. And behold, one of those who were with Jesus reached and drew out his sword, and struck the slave of the high priest and cut off his ear. Then Jesus said to him, “Put your sword back into its place; for all those who take up the sword shall perish by the sword. Or do you think that I cannot appeal to My Father, and He will at once put at My disposal more than twelve legions of angels?” (Matthew 26:50-53).

The conclusion is when Christ's followers are threatened they do not fight, they flee. They seek to avoid physical violence. They do not resist the evil person.

These teachings involve personal relationships, not governmental entities. There is a case to be made for conducting a just war to deliver those who are suffering. There is also a case to be made for delivering others who are in danger, as we saw in Acts 9 with the disciples who helped Paul. But self-defense involves fleeing and hiding, not attacking. We must defuse any conflict with regard to our personal conduct. By following the path of nonviolence we entrust ourselves to Him who judges righteously.

2. Legal disputes (Matthew 5:40)

This scenario involves being taken to court over a debt. Paul taught to not let any debt remain outstanding (Romans 13:8) and Psalm 37:21 tells us, *“the wicked borrows and does not pay back.”* So we should never be taken into court over an outstanding debt but this does not eliminate the possibility of being taken advantage of by evil people.

This illustration involves personal clothing. The translation “shirt” (NASB) or “tunic” (ESV) is the inner garment while the translation “coat” (NASB) or “cloak” (ESV) is the outer garment. This may appear to be a lesser matter than suffering physical violence but this clothing could become our safety if we lost what is necessary for a basic need. Not only does this involve what is the most basic of human needs (*“if we have food and covering, with these we shall be content”* 1 Timothy 6:8), it teaches that we should allow the evil person to have our heavier outer garment if we are required to give our lighter inner garment.

The Old Testament recognized this need in Exodus 22:26-27, *“If you ever take your neighbor’s cloak as a pledge, you are to return it to him before the sun sets, for that is his only covering; it is his cloak for his body. What else shall he sleep in? And it shall come about that when he cries out to Me, I will hear him, for I am gracious.”* Therefore, the hearers of Jesus would have recognized His words as going beyond what the Jewish Law allowed a plaintiff to legally take in a lawsuit.

The abiding principle when we are being taken advantage is 1 Peter 2:20, *“For what credit is there if, when you sin and are harshly treated, you endure it with patience? But if when you do what is right and suffer for it you patiently endure it, this finds favor with God.”* Jesus teaches in Matthew 5:40 that we not only are willing to lose our case but we are even to be willing to go beyond what is being asked of us or allowed to be taken from us. By patiently enduring such injustice in the legal system, we find favor with God.

3. Excessive demands (Matthew 5:41)

The historical background of the practices of the Roman Empire is helpful to understand what being forced to go one mile means. It was common for invading armies to use the civilian population for their purposes. The Romans permitted their soldiers to press anyone into service to assist them. In order to aid their travel and give themselves a reprieve, it was customary for a soldier to require a civilian to carry equipment up to the Roman imposed limit of one mile.

So being forced to go one mile was in reference to being pressed into service by a Romans soldier. We see an example of this in Matthew 27:32, *“As they were coming out, they found a man of Cyrene named Simon, whom they pressed into service to bear His cross.”*

It is likely that most of Jesus’ hearers would have experienced being pressed into service for one mile themselves by the Romans. This would have been inconvenient at the least since it was done without warning, required a degree of exertion and left the civilians a mile away from where they began. Beyond this, it was done at the demand of the occupiers and the Jews were forced to serve people who they considered to be evil oppressors. Jesus was instructing the Jews to do twice what was being asked when they hated the imposition of the demand in the first place.

We obviously have different demands placed upon us by governing authorities, usually much less arduous. We ought not to create conflict with them but be willing to even exceed what is being demanded of us for the sake of the Lord. Personal sacrifice for the sake of peace is explained by the words of Jesus, *“My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, then My servants would be fighting so that I would not be handed over to the Jews; but as it is, My kingdom is not of this realm”* (John 18:36).

4. Financial impositions (Matthew 5:42)

The fourth illustration of not resisting the evil person is in regards to money and possessions. We are to give to those who ask us and followers of Jesus ought to be generous. Our attitude toward money ought to recognize in faith that the Lord is able to provide for us (Matthew 6:25-34). Because what we sow, we will reap, we are able to be generous and even cheerful in giving.

“Now this I say, he who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each one must do just as he has purposed in his heart, not grudgingly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that always having all sufficiency in everything, you may have an abundance for every good deed” (2 Corinthians 9:6-8).

This last illustration is different from the first three in that this is something that is being requested of us. In the first three examples, someone is forcefully coming against us. In this case, the issue is our choice in how to respond to requests. Therefore, in this case there is the ability to evaluate how to serve a person making requests of us.

One example is Peter and John in Acts 3:5-6, *“And he began to give them his attention, expecting to receive something from them. But Peter said, “I do not possess silver and gold, but what I do have I give to you: In the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene—walk!”* Peter did not give the financial assistance that was requested but gave something far more significant. This is a helpful illustration in that it shows the priority of helping people beyond what they might request. People can think their greatest need is money and we can help them in more profound spiritual ways as well.

This directive by Jesus does not need to mean there are no other considerations to be made when we are asked to give. One important criterion is 1 Thessalonians 3:10-11, *“For even when we were with you, we used to give you this order: if anyone is not willing to work, then he is not to eat, either. For we hear that some among you are leading an undisciplined life, doing no work at all.”* Another issue is when believers seek to shirk their responsibility to their family. *“But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever”* (1 Timothy 5:8). To give to people when it furthers their undisciplined life is not serving them. We can be tempted to give to people in order for them to leave us alone when it is apparent they are unwilling to work.

Borrowing is addressed like giving. If someone wishes to borrow from us, we should not turn away from him. The Jews already understood that they ought not to charge interest to those in need, *“If you lend money to My people, to the poor among you, you are not to act as a creditor to him; you shall not charge him interest”* (Exodus 22:25). This statement of Jesus goes beyond a mere financial transaction but also involves our relational attitude. Like when we give, lending should be cheerful and without expectation of return. We should not “turn away” thus rupturing the relationship.

The essence of the giving is love. In order to love our neighbor as ourselves, we must serve. There may be cases where we ought not to give money because it might bring harm rather than good. But these cases are the exception to the rule of giving to those who ask. Our first response should be to give to those who ask rather than to plot a way to avoid parting with any of our possessions.

Similar to physical violence, legal disputes and excessive demands, we obviously should not seek to be abused. There are evil people who will seek to take advantage of us financially and otherwise and 1 Timothy 3:5 teaches us to *“avoid such men.”* The goal is to avoid conflict with an evil doer and it is better to give our stuff than to endure increased hostility. The application of this in each circumstance requires wisdom as we seek to serve the Lord by loving our neighbor.

Conclusion

The essence of “not resisting the evil person” is to seek peace through non-retaliation. We ought not to retaliate physically, legally or financially. In the words of Paul, “*see that no one repays another with evil for evil, but always seek after that which is good for one another and for all people*” (1 Thessalonians 5:15). This is inconsistent with our sinful human nature and therefore requires walking by the Spirit so that we will not carry out the deeds of the flesh (Galatians 5:16). We walk by the Spirit through faith, meaning that we must trust that Jesus is right and we will live according to His principles.

The righteous person does not “*pay back evil for evil to anyone*” (Romans 12:17). It is through refusing to engage in conflict over these earthly matters we can apply Romans 12:18, “*if possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men.*”

As we look to Christ and the Apostles we find their conflict was never in regard to earthly matters but only heavenly matters. This is not only how Christ lived as an example to us to follow but also an attitude for us to live by as He “*kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously*” (1 Peter 2:23). God is able to right wrongs suffered and will reward our faithful service to Him in eternity (cf. Matthew 6:20). We will walk by faith when we trust that the Lord will judge and we do not have to insist upon our own judgment.

For the sake of the gospel of Christ and in the proclamation of truth, conflict may arise. Jesus, the apostles and prophets all suffered in teaching truth. When we do the Lord’s will and suffer for it, we are called to patiently endure. “*But if when you do what is right and suffer for it you patiently endure it, this finds favor with God*” (1 Peter 2:20). Patient endurance precludes retaliation.

This practice of non-retaliation will lead us into the sixth and final example of following Jesus rather than the traditional teaching of religious leaders: “*love your enemies.*”