

Doing Good When It's Difficult

Matthew 5:38-42

Intro

A few Sundays ago I talked about *The Power of Forgiveness*. We looked at how we need to forgive those that have offended us with God's forgiveness. We also learned that if we want our sins and wrongs forgiven that we need to forgive those who have wronged us. Last Sunday we talked about *The Trap Offense* on how we need to be free from holding offense against a person who has wronged us. Today I want to look at how we need to control our emotions and reactions when we are mistreated or insulted.

As human beings we have the right to be treated with basic respect and dignity. Because every person is created in God's image, God demands that we treat one another with respect. But often that's not the case. People offend people, people mistreat and insult people. As Christians it is most important how we react to mistreatment and to insult.

In this passage of Matt. 5:38-42 Jesus addresses this very issue of retaliation. He talks about what our attitude should be toward the one who mistreats us. Often when we are insulted our natural human response is to retaliate.

When our supreme concern is getting and keeping what we think is rightfully ours, then whoever or whatever gets in our way becomes expendable. Since it is not possible for everyone to have everything they want, to insist on our own way invariably tramples on the rights and welfare of others.

When self is in the foreground, everything else and everyone else is pushed to the background. When self interest dominates, justice is replaced by vengeance and retaliation. And that can be ugly.

Matt. 5:38 "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth"

This is an expression from the Old Testament found in Leviticus 24. It says, "*If anyone injures his neighbour, whatever he has done must be done to him: fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth. As he has injured the other, so he is to be injured*" (Lev. 24:19-20).

Simply put, it required that punishment should exactly match the crime. It was a law to curtail further crime and also to prevent excessive punishment based on personal vengeance and retaliation. Punishment was to match, but not exceed the harm done by the offense itself.

Distinction Between the Law of Court and Retaliation in Interpersonal Relationships

In Hebrew law, justice operated on an eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth bases. In interpersonal relationships which Jesus teaches that it operates on a love and forgiveness bases.

The problem here is that the religious people missed the point and they took "*an eye for an eye*" out of the law courts and put it in their personal lives. This was the way they operated in their relationships - with vendettas and vengeance.

That's not the way God intended it. God's purpose behind the law was an expression of mercy. The law was given to the judges and said, in effect, "*Make the punishment fit the crime.*" It was not a guide for personal revenge. Those laws were given to limit vengeance. However some people were using this phrase, "*an eye for an eye*" to justify their vendettas against others. Today people still try to excuse their acts of revenge by saying, "I was only doing to him what he did to me."

The problem with human nature is that at times we are tempted to get more than just even. Anger and resentment demand retaliation. Human vengeance is never satisfied with justice; it wants a pound of flesh for an ounce of offense. Instead Jesus said we should do good to those who wrong us. Our desire should not be to keep score, but to love and forgive. This is not natural – it's supernatural. Only God's Spirit can

give us the strength to love as He does. Only the Holy Spirit can help us produce love and self-control. What about when someone butts in line; or a driver annoys you on the road? How do you react? That's why God restricts vengeance to himself. He says, "*It is mine to avenge; I will repay*" (Rom. 12:19).

Matt. 5:39 "*But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek turn to him the other also.*"

Jesus does not teach that Christians are not to resist evil. What He forbids is that Christians do not seek to retaliate in personal relationships. Here Jesus opposes the Pharisees' misinterpretation and forbids retaliation in personal relationships over petty issues.

Slap

A slap or strike on the face was among the most demeaning and contemptuous of acts. A slap in the face was an attack on one's honour and was considered to be a terrible indignity. According to Rabbinic law to hit a person with the back of the hand was twice insulting as to hit him with the flat side of the hand. To strike someone on the "right cheek" would then be a vicious angry reaction, indicating an act of insult. So what Jesus is saying is this; "Even if a man should direct at you the most calculated insult, you must on no account retaliate, and you must on no account resent it."

But when we are insulted, we are to turn to the person the other cheek. Jesus' point pertains more to what we are not to do than what we are to do. Turning the other cheek symbolizes the non-avenging non-retaliatory and gentle spirit that is to characterize true believers.

Jesus himself strongly resisted evil that was directed against him. He took the beatings and the nails, the spear and crown of thorns. He did not retaliate but asked His Father to forgive them for they did not know what they were doing.

Romans 12:17, 19 teaches, "*Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the sight of 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."

We are called to overcome someone's evil toward us by doing good to them (Rom. 12:21).

Matt. 5:40 "*And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well.*"

The tunic was worn as an undergarment and the cloak was an outer garment. When a person had no money or other possessions, the court often would require the fine be paid by clothing.

So what Jesus is saying here is that a believer thinks not of their rights, but of their duties; not of their privileges, but of their responsibilities. It's going the extra mile in doing good.

Matt. 5:41 "*If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles.*"

Here, Jesus is talking about a practice during the time of the Roman Empire. Roman law gave a soldier the right to force a civilian to carry his backpack for a Roman mile (a *milion* which was 1,000 paces.) This was no easy task considering a Roman soldier's backpack could weigh upwards of 100 pounds (or 45.4 kg). This law was designed to relieve the soldier and it was a great inconvenience to civilians. To civilians in Israel it was despicable by the fact that they were oppressed by the Romans, and they were made to carry the equipment and weapons of their oppressors. The Roman soldier was probably never more hated than when he forced someone to carry his backpack.

When a task is laid on you, even if the task is unreasonable, inconvenient and undeserving, don't do it as a grim duty to be resented. Do it as a service to be gladly rendered. Do it well and graciously whatever the task. BUT if the Roman soldier asks you to go a mile (1,000 paces) instead go TWO miles and in this way you will bless him.

The apostle Paul talks about this, *“Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything; and do it, not only when their eye is on you and to win their favour, but with sincerity of heart, and reverence for the Lord. Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving”* (Colossians 3:22-24).

How do we measure up to this? What is your attitude toward your employer or those who exert authority over you or demand more from you?

Matt. 5:42 *“Give to the one who asks you and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.”*

Possessiveness is another characteristic of fallen human nature. Sometimes as Christians we forget that nothing truly belongs to us and that we are only stewards of what belongs to God.

When someone asks to borrow something from us, we should not turn away from that person

In other words we should give them what they ***need*** to borrow. The implication here is that the person who asks has a ***genuine need***.

Deuteronomy 15:7-8 says, *“If anyone is poor among your fellow Israelites in any of the towns of the land the LORD your God is giving you, do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward them. Rather, be openhanded and freely lend them whatever they need.”*

We are not to respond to every foolish and selfish request. Sometimes to give a person what they want but what they do not need is a disservice. It is doing them more harm than good. It’s like giving to someone who has an addiction problem for drugs, or booze etc. Here Jesus is speaking of generosity that genuinely wants to meet the needs of others.

What Jesus is teaching in this passage is not that we are to be doormats for people to walk over us and to misuse and abuse us, but that when there is a genuine need we shouldn’t be reluctant but be willing to give.

Conclusion

The person who is not defensive, not vengeful, does not bear a grudge, and has no spite in their heart is the person who has died to self. (Matt. 16:24-25). It is impossible to live for self and for Christ at the same time.

Rev. George Mueller (1805-1898, Evangelist) once wrote, *“There was a day when I died, utterly died to George Mueller and his opinions, his preferences, and his tastes and his will. I died to the world, to its approval and censure. I died to the approval or the blame of even my brethren and friends. And since then I have studied only to show myself approved unto God.”* We need to die to self.

This is the spirit Jesus teaches in this passage, a spirit that many people fail to possess apart from saving grace. Jesus was our example of humility, meekness and servanthood. He even washed the feet of his betrayer, Judas (John 13). Christ did not mistreat his betrayer.

We need to emulate Christ in our lives. We are to die to self and let Christ live in us and through us and set aside our selfish rights. In 1 Peter 2:23 we read, *“When they heaped abuse on Him, He did not retaliate; when He suffered, He made no threats, but entrusted Himself to Him who judges justly.”* Jesus demonstrated practically how not to retaliate or make threats. Jesus showed us how we ought to live even in doing good when it is difficult.

Don’t be a bad light or witness – go the extra mile – that’s what God’s love in us does!