

# LOVING your enemies

Matthew 5:38-48

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Late one summer evening, a weary truck driver pulled his rig into an all-night truck stop. He was tired and hungry. The waitress had just served him when three tough looking, members of the Hell's Angels motorcycle gang pulled into the diner, and decided to give this truck driver a hard time. They verbally abused him, then one of the gang members grabbed the hamburger off his plate, another took handful of his French fries, and the third picked up his coffee and began to drink it.

The truck driver calmly rose, picked up his check, walked to the front of the room, put the check and his money on the cash register, and went out the door. The waitress placed the money in the cash register, then followed after him, and stood watching out the door as the big truck drove away into the night. When she returned, one of the cyclists said to her, "Well, he's not much of a man, is he?" She replied, "I don't know about that, but he sure isn't much of a truck driver. He just ran over three motorcycles on his way out of the parking lot."

Our initial reaction to that story is what? "Yesssssss! Way to go truck driver!" It reminds us of the old saying, "Don't get mad, get even!" "Well he pushed me first ..." "He took mine ..." Have you ever felt like getting even with someone? Getting back at someone for what they did to you?

*An eye for an eye. A tooth for a tooth.* What's the point? To get back at someone, right? To seek revenge. That's what we think, but that wasn't the point at all.

In this section of Matthew, the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus has been speaking about what? The commandments and what they really mean. You have heard it said .... But I say to you. The commandments are not first and foremost about what you have to do or not do. They're actually about your heart. Anger, hatred, envy, pride, lust. Problems that, even if you gouged out your eyes and cut off your hands, would remain.

"You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' Where had they heard that before? Jesus was quoting from the Old Testament (Ex 21:24, Levit 24:20, Deut 19:21). These phrases are now associated with vengeance. Is that what the Old Testament was teaching? Ways to get back at people? Not at all. Rather, it had to do with justice. Just punishment. Today, we would say what? The punishment must what? The punishment must *fit the crime*.

And in each of these passages, it's about civil justice, not personal vengeance. It's a passage for the government of Israel and its judges. It was a theocracy, where God gave the laws, not the legislature. God was setting up their government and how it should be run, how people should be dealt with, especially concerning the courts and sentencing.

The original intent of the law was to *limit* vengeance, not encourage it.

You may have heard about the Hatfields and the McCoys, one of the more famous feuds in U.S. history. In 1878, a dispute over ownership of a pig ended with the McCoys killing one of the Hatfields. From here, the conflict escalated into an all-out war, with both sides regularly perpetrating killings, beatings, and kidnappings against the other. A life for a pig isn't just punishment. That's what? Vengeance. God knew what would happen if He left it up to individuals to settle things on their own.

A biblical example would be Simeon and Levi (two sons of Jacob). A crime was committed against their sister Dinah. So what did they do? Instead of seeking justice for their sister against the perpetrator, they sought vengeance. They attacked the city the man was from and killed every male in it. (Gen 34)

So, what God's law does, goes against the natural, tribal, vengeful nature of human beings and limits vengeance. An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth means that only the man who committed the crime is to be punished, and his punishment must be no more than equal to the damage he inflicted.

This idea of just punishment is reflected in our own constitution, in the 8<sup>th</sup> Amendment. "*Excessive bail shall not be required, nor excessive fines imposed, nor cruel and unusual punishments inflicted.*"

Retaliation is our default mode. What does that tell us about what's inside us? And when vengeance and retaliation are the name of the game, what happens in the end? Sooner or later the entire world ends up blind and toothless. Or like the Hatfields and the McCoys, dead or in jail.

Jesus is telling us that "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth", as commonly understood, is not the righteousness that exceeds the scribes and the Pharisees. It doesn't come close. It's actually the opposite. It doesn't reflect the true righteousness that's reflected in the heart and character of God. It doesn't fulfill the law, which is to love. The commandments are not first and foremost about what you have to do or not do. They're actually about your heart.

*You have heard that it was said (eye for eye) ... But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person.* Jesus isn't saying that we shouldn't defend ourselves or others. We're to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. What we're not supposed to do is fight evil with evil; return evil with evil.

Jesus gives four examples of what a true righteousness looks like in situations where you might be tempted to return evil with evil. Don't just react in kind, but respond in love. Respond to evil with good. Respond to hate with love.

*"You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' 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.* According to many, a blow on the right cheek was one of the most grievous insults possible in the ancient world. The equivalent today might be spitting in someone's face. What would be the right way to respond? The loving thing? The righteous thing? Evil with evil or evil with good?

*You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world. Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.*

In the second example someone is out to sue you and take your shirt. (at that moment, they're likely your "enemy") The tunic, in Jesus' time, was something like a woman's slip, or a man's undershirt, a light, semi-undergarment worn for modesty and protection. Even the poorest of people generally had at least two tunics.

Over the tunic a person wore a cloak, a blanket-like outer garment. At night, when it got cold, it was a person's blanket. Apparently, it wasn't unusual for the extra tunic of a person to be given as collateral or bond during a court proceeding. Sometimes, in a serious offense, a person's cloak was even required by the courts to be given to the party bringing a lawsuit. However, God had laid down rules regarding this practice.

*If you take your neighbor's cloak as a pledge, return it to him by sunset, because his cloak is the only covering he has for his body. What else will he sleep in? When he cries out to me, I will hear, for I am compassionate. (Exodus 22:26-27)*

The point is that in legal proceedings, a person had a right to get his cloak back before sundown. A person's right was that his cloak could not be taken away from him permanently. What is true righteousness like in God's eyes? What would be the righteous way of responding to your enemy? Not making your rights the most important thing on the planet. Not demanding your rights above everything else. It may be to sacrifice your rights for another. Not reacting to a wrong done, but responding in love. *Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.*

A third example of what true righteousness looks like. Apparently, a Roman soldier could legally make you carry something (usually all his military baggage) for him for one mile (At that moment, they're likely your "enemy"). Again, there's something like it reflected in our constitution. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Amendment. *"No soldier shall, in time of peace be quartered in any house, without the consent of the owner, nor in time of war, but in a manner to be prescribed by law."*

Suppose a Roman soldier comes to you and forces you to carry his suitcase one mile. What would be a righteous response? Being bitter, or resentful? *Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.*

Will you react or will you respond? Even though you're being forced to do this, that you have no choice, a righteous response would be to offer to walk a second mile.

Finally, true righteousness is generous, not stingy. *Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.* Not worrying about the legal requirements (How much do I have to give?) but responding in love.

*Eye for an eye. Tooth for a tooth.* What happened to this law is what happened to most of the laws of God. It was perverted by people to accommodate their own sinful desires. It was made into a law to allow for personal retaliation. It became the justification for inflicting wrong upon people in the name of justice. It simply fed the sinful, selfish human desire to get even. (David Hoke)

God has a higher purpose for our lives. He doesn't call us to retaliation. He doesn't call us to save our lives, but to lose our lives. When we are wronged, we have a choice. We can either live by the law of the jungle and assert our rights – survival of the fittest. Or we can live by a higher law. (the Law of LOVE) *Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.*

How many people are brought closer to the Kingdom of God by your asserting your rights? How many are brought closer to the Kingdom by your retaliation? "Do not be overcome with evil but overcome evil with good."

Again, Jesus isn't talking about allowing abuse/not defending self (get out/get help/contact the authorities – Rom. 13) ... but about retaliating/taking matters into your own hands (not a defensive thing, but rather a spiteful thing/sinful thing/selfish thing). Defending yourself is not a spiteful thing/sinful thing/selfish thing. Rather, it's a loving thing.

And this is not about being wimpy, but being truly strong (on the inside, strength of character). Any wimpy, self-centered, vengeful person can retaliate. If you have to retaliate, it only shows how weak you are on the inside. But one who decides to turn the other cheek, sacrifice, volunteer to go the extra mile ... give up rights instead of demand rights ... proves to be the stronger of the two. The wimp only thinks of himself and is deeply offended when he/she doesn't get his way or suffers loss. The strong has already lost everything for the sake of Christ.

The whole matter of getting even and demanding rights above all else isn't primarily a matter between you and someone else, but it's between you and whom? You and God. They're matters of the heart. It's something you work out before God. It's not something to be solved "out there", but rather "in here". "

"Lord, why must I get even? Why can't I let it go? Why can't I leave it with you?" Why am I so easily offended, when YOU are my life?" The commandments are not first and foremost about what you have to do or not do. They're actually about your heart.

*"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, [How liberating is that!] that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*

Who of us doesn't cheer inwardly for the truck driver who evens the score with a bunch of hoodlum bikers? What else could he have done, other than run over the bikes? How about pay the bills of those who gave him such a hard time? If you were that trucker, would you have thought of doing such a thing, returning evil with good? Turning the other cheek? Going the extra mile?

*Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.*

Who of us isn't out to defend our rights, to settle the score? Who of us is really that different from the self-centered scribes and Pharisees? Who of us has a righteousness/right heart before God that surpasses theirs? Who of us doesn't need a Savior?

Loving your enemies. What does that look like? It looks like a cross where God gave everything for us, His enemies. "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them."

*Give me understanding, so that I may keep your law and obey it with all my heart. Turn my heart toward your statutes and not toward selfish gain. Turn my eyes away from worthless things. In your righteousness preserve my life.* (from Psalm 119:33-40)