

Turn the Other Cheek

Matthew 5:38–42 ESV

³⁸ “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ ³⁹ 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. ⁴⁰ And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. ⁴¹ And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. ⁴² Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you.

If our true words demonstrate a security in Jesus’s final work of salvation, then our true deference demonstrates a confidence in Jesus’s future work of justice.

- When teaching about the life in the kingdom, Jesus has been exposing the ways that we seek to minimize the holy life.
- “Eh, sure I lose my temper, but at least I’ve never killed a guy.” “Eh, sure maybe I peek a little bit, but at least I’ve never cheated on my husband.” That, *that* attitude right there is the one Jesus is exposing in this Sermon. He is exposing that minimizing life because it is so profoundly self-righteous.
- What is self-righteousness? Self-righteousness is the delusion that we are better judges of our sins than God Almighty. And you know who often doles out the harshest punishments in justice: self-righteous people.
- But people who have seen the depths of their heart, know who they truly are, freely surrender their circumstances can look past insult with indifference and give generously to the needy.

The kingdom life endures insult without exacting return.

- This familiar phrase “eye for an eye” is the *lex talionis* from Exodus 21:23-27.

Exodus 21:23–27 ESV

²³ But if there is harm, then you shall pay life for life, ²⁴ eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, ²⁵ burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe.

²⁶ “When a man strikes the eye of his slave, male or female, and destroys it, he shall let the slave go free because of his eye. ²⁷ If he knocks out the tooth of his slave, male or female, he shall let the slave go free because of his tooth.

- The principle behind a law of retaliation is one of reciprocal justice. We reflect this in our legal system to this day: you cannot be given capital punishment for a misdemeanor crime.

- That this phrase “eye for an eye” is also found in Code of Hammurabi is not evidence that Moses plagiarized his neighbor’s legal code because the principle itself stretches back to to Genesis 9:5-6.

Genesis 9:5–6 ESV

⁵ And for your lifeblood I will require a reckoning: from every beast I will require it and from man. From his fellow man I will require a reckoning for the life of man.

⁶ “Whoever sheds the blood of man,

by man shall his blood be shed,

for God made man in his own image.

- God’s word to Noah here is instructive to us, and it bears direct implications on Jesus’s teaching in the Sermon.
- In Genesis 9, God is teaching us that human beings are worth more than their economic productive capabilities: a king and a peasant are both men, and the shedding of blood by one must be answered by the shedding of another’s blood. Why? Not because of lost economic potential. No: because human life has value because it is made in the image of God.

An “eye for an eye” did two things: it restrained excessive punishment while upholding the value and dignity of a given person.

Jesus gives us an interesting qualification to “Do not resist.” Do not resist what or who? NIV: “An evil person.” ESV: “The one who is evil.” KJV: “Resist not evil.”

What is in view here is an evil actor who assaults the kingdom’s advance through someone.

- Remember two things here: like Josh pointed out with anger, the Beatitudes frame these “you have heard, but I say” antithesis. This 1) isn’t a general call for world-shaping; Jesus is describing and prescribing the nature of the kingdom and 2) is in light of the promise that saints would be persecuted. Remember Matthew 5:10-11

Matthew 5:10–11 ESV

¹⁰ “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

¹¹ “Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.

- Jesus here is not prohibiting capital punishment or the law’s reach to arrest or punish criminals.

- Multiple times in his ministry, Jesus critiques and denounces the leadership practices of Gentiles over Palestine, but never once does he condemn the judicial process or the crucifixion of the criminals beside him. It is instructive for us that Jesus does not remove the law's responsibility for a thief even though he received a death row conversion.
- St. Augustine made a parallel argument using an example from Paul's life Acts 23:17-24. Paul asked for an armed escort to his court hearing. An ambush was waiting for him, and Paul asked for swords to protect his life, knowing full well that the Roman soldiers would kill any of the forty ambushers seeking Paul's life.
- That isn't meant to be a commentary on our current national discussions. It clues us in on the sorts of actions which are to be reciprocated and those which aren't.
- He holds up the law of retaliation and clarifies how his disciples are now commanded to live.

Reciprocation

- When you enter the kingdom, you renounce retaliation if you are slandered by the world on account of Christ's name.
- When you enter the kingdom, you renounce retaliation if you are plundered by the world on account of Christ's name.
- When you enter the kingdom, you renounce retaliation if your body is physically coerced by the world on account of Christ's name.

Each of these three examples orbits around violation on account of evil acts committed against the kingdom, and they proceed from least violating to most violating.

Matthew 5:39 "39b But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also."

Insults cannot be reciprocated.

The slap in view here is not one a physical assault. So, an abused person ought not understand this verse to imply they must give themselves up for more abuse. Instead, the details about which cheek clue us in on the fact that this is a backhanded slap intended to insult someone for something they've said or done.

We turn the other cheek because an insult on account of Christ isn't really a real insult. It is no longer we who live but Christ who lives in us.

Matthew 5:40 "40 And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well."

Plundering cannot be reciprocated.

- Context matters here: Israelites were forbidden from taking the cloak from their fellow human even as a deposit or downpayment (Ex 22:26-27; Deut 24:12-13). The first is for the same reason it is illegal in the North and Midwest to shut off utilities when it is less than 32 degrees outside: human life is more valuable than profits for utility companies. Your cloak was your sleeping bag and your winter coat. Remember, Israel isn't a desert climate like Phoenix, Arizona; its more similar to Salt Lake City, Utah. You probably wouldn't freeze to death without a sleeping bag in a Phoenix winter, but you certainly would freeze in a Salt Lake winter.
- Second, if someone stole your cloak, you would be functionally naked. Who among us would want to be stripped to our underwear? We'd be significantly more humiliated and exposed.
- A culturally translated example might be this: if someone sued your for your car, that would be irritating but you'd be able to recover. You should also give your house to them as well---to feel totally exposed.

Coercion cannot be reciprocated.

- In occupied Palestine, a Roman soldier could compel a random person to carry their pack and gear for one mile. For light infantry, this was usually an 80lb pack. For those heavy infantries positioned throughout Palestine, these could be 100lb packs.
- The offer of control over your own body in this situation subverts the occupiers' force.

When you willingly go an extra mile under coercion, you maintain your humanity in the midst of occupation.

When you make yourself to be plundered, you aren't allowing others to plunder you.

When you offer the other cheek, you evaporate the intended effect of an insult.

In each, you are quite literally insisting that you are in control of your body, possessions, and reputation, but submitting to a higher authority than the one compelling you.

You know what the Romans said about Christians who did these things? Lucian of Samosata wrote that Christians were "misguided deplorables who have convinced themselves, first and foremost, that they are going to be immortal and live for all time."

Indifference to a power's coercion eradicates power's allure.

Indifference to an evil power delegitimizes its authority.

The kingdom life gives without expecting return.

- Be generous without the expectation of reciprocation. By putting this very generic command, without any clarifying examples, in the context of the *lex talionis* we are to understand that Jesus wants us to be generous without expecting the same back.
- You know what this type of generosity does? It turns people's lives upside down.

The kingdom life waits for ultimate justice.

How do we put it into practice? Make a habit of not taking offense when someone insults you, harasses you, or annoys you on account of Jesus's kingdom.

I want you to see with the eyes of faith how Jesus walks the talk.

- Matthew tells us later in the 26th chapter that Jesus will be dragged before Caiaphas who backhands him, and mockingly says, "Prophecy to us, you Christ! Who is it that struck you?"
- In the 27th chapter, we see Jesus stripped of his tunic and cloak, given a mock salute, and humiliated before the soldiers.
- John 19 tells us that Jesus is forced to carry the cross until, according to Matthew, Simon the Cyrene is compelled to carry the half a mile journey to Golgotha.
- Something amazes me about this part of the sermon.
 - Jesus is tempted but never loses his temper in anger
 - He is tempted but never loses his purity in lust.
 - He isn't married so he won't get divorced
 - He needs not make oaths because his name is the one in whose everyone will swear.
- But he does suffer slaps, stolen coats, and carrying the cross.

He does this to give God's final answer to evil: it will not stand. And because it will not stand, you do not need to give an answer now. He will give an answer then, a final ultimate justice:

2 Peter 3:1–13 (ESV)

¹ This is now the second letter that I am writing to you, beloved. In both of them I am stirring up your sincere mind by way of reminder, ² that you should remember the predictions of the holy prophets and the commandment of the Lord and Savior through your apostles, ³ knowing this first of all, that scoffers will come in the last days with

scoffing, following their own sinful desires. ⁴ They will say, “Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all things are continuing as they were from the beginning of creation.” . . .

⁸ But do not overlook this one fact, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. ⁹ The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance. ¹⁰ But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed.

¹¹ Since all these things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, ¹² waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set on fire and dissolved, and the heavenly bodies will melt as they burn! ¹³ But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.

- Now, going back to the beginning, as we come to our close, the one person who is not self-righteous said these things knowing he was going to be backhanded, stripped, and coerced. He alone had the right to exact death of an eye or limb for a tooth.
- So, what does it say about our own sense of self-righteousness if we demand retribution when we're insulted, plundered, or coerced?