

Sermon preached at Woodbury Community Church, Woodbury, MN on Sunday, May 29, 2011, by Rev. Brian D. Schulenburg

MATTHEW 5:38-42

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 someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. 40 And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. 41 If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. 42 Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.

THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT: LIVING AS CITIZENS OF GOD'S KINGDOM #16
GOING THE EXTRA MILE

One of the occupational hazards of being a youth pastor is that on occasion your home is subject to being TP'd. A group of teenagers, and sometimes the volunteer staff, will come to your home in the middle of the night and put as many rolls of toilet paper in your trees as they can. I think our record was 137 rolls of toilet paper in our trees.

On one such occasion, Cyndi and I heard giggling and loud voices as the students were in the process of TP'ing us. So, I put on a dark hooded sweatshirt, snuck out our back door, and joined the kids in the front of the house. I said, "Hey, I'm out of rolls, can I have another one." Someone passed me a small bag of toilet paper. I threw one roll into our front tree and then took the rest to the getaway car in the front of our house. The car was running and empty, so I got in the driver's seat and drove it two blocks away to the home of one of the students who was tp'ing us and tp'd her house with those three rolls! It was such sweet revenge.

One winter day not so long ago a man went shopping at the local neighborhood mall. When he returned to his car he noticed a rather foul odor coming from under the hood and so he checked the engine. In the compartment he discovered a dead cat rather mutilated from being caught in the fan belt. The poor cat had sought shelter from the snow and cold and didn't realize the dangers of resting on the engine block. Mr. Jones was lucky though, one of his shopping bags was made of plastic and so he emptied its contents and proceeded to scrape, pull and push the cat corpse into the bag. With a bang he slammed the hood down and walked off to wash his hands, but looking back he noticed something unusual. He had left the bag on the hood of the car. He was about to return and pick it up but just then a lady walks by, looks suspiciously in both directions, she grabs the bag, and with her cart she then speeds off for the mall. "Well this is too good to be true!" the man thought as he laughed at the lady. He decided to follow her and see what would happen next. She went to a restaurant and proceeded to survey her prize. "Yeek!" she screamed as she looked in the bag. And then over she fell. Of course, the management was equally alarmed that a customer had fainted in their establishment and so they called the paramedics. The woman in no time at all was strapped to a cart and ready to be hauled off

to the ambulance. But the man couldn't resist. "Hey lady!" he shouted, "don't forget your package!" And with that he gently laid the cat corpse filled bag on the lady's chest, just as the ambulance doors were closing!¹

Do you ever feel like revenge is sweet? Our English language includes the phrase sweet revenge. Our motion picture and publishing industries are full of stories about revenge. Even our music has songs about revenge. There are times that getting even seems so much better than just taking the abuse hurled upon us by someone else, which makes Jesus' words in Matthew 5:38-42 rather hard to swallow.

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 someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. 40 And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. 41 If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. 42 Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.

Really, Jesus? You want us citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven to be a bunch of wimps? Is that what you have in mind?

At first glance, that may be what you think. But, like all that Jesus' teaches, there is more to His words than meet the eye.

The Old Testament Law - vs. 38

Jesus begins this section of teaching with a direct quote from three Old Testament passages.

38 "You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.'

He's quoting Exodus 21:24, Leviticus 24:20 and Deuteronomy 19:21. Taken literally, this verse might seem a barbaric sense of justice.

On Easter Sunday, earlier this spring, a couple of my boys were in the backyard of our home having an airsoft gun war. They had taken proper precaution. The boys always wear protective lenses when playing and have always been very careful. You can imagine how surprised we were when our Easter celebration was interrupted by the cries from one of our sons, whose tooth had just been shot out by the other son. It was a freak accident. An airsoft pellet found its way to our son's mouth, just as he was ducking to try to dodge the pellet.

I suppose you could say that Old Testament law gave one of our sons the right to demand our other son to give up his tooth to make restitution for the loss suffered by the one. After all, "eye for eye, and tooth for tooth."

¹ http://www.sermoncentral.com/print_friendly.asp?ContributorID=&SermonID=39117

But, that was never the intention of the Old Testament law. The law wasn't given to tell you what you deserved in a court of law, it was made to demonstrate what the maximum extent of the law of restitution could demand. In other words, those who served as judges could demand up to a tooth for the loss of a tooth, or up to an eye for the loss of an eye. This was allowed, but not demanded by the law.

This Jewish law became a foundational law for almost all societies that practice the rule of law. In Latin this law is known as *Lex Talionis*, literally the law of retaliation.²

Kent Hughes writes, "Far from being savage legislation, it was intrinsically merciful because it limited vengeance. The typical primitive blood feud knew nothing of equity. A small infraction by one tribe against another – for instance, trespassing – was met with a beating, which was returned by homicide, which was then countered by genocide. *Lex Talionis* did away with this – on paper at least. . . Individuals were not permitted to use this law to settle disputes with others. Only the courts were permitted to do so. . . So we have the traditional Old Testament teaching regarding one's response to personal wrong in the principle of exact retribution. There was nothing intrinsically wrong with that, apart from man's manipulation of it. It brought equity and stability to human relations."³

Then Jesus said something that may have riled those listening.

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.

Citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven can handle insults. I wonder how many of us are more like the weary truck driver who pulled his rig into an all-night truck stop in Broken Bow, Nebraska. He was tired and hungry. The waitress had just served three tough looking, leather jacketed motorcyclists - of the Hell's Angel's type. The motorcyclists decided to give him a hard time. Not only did they verbally abuse him, one grabbed the hamburger off his plate, another took a handful of his french fries and the third picked up his coffee and began to drink it.

How did this trucker respond? How would you respond? Well, this trucker did not respond as one might expect. Instead, he calmly rose, picked up his check, walked to the front of the room, put the check and his money on the register, and went out the door. The waitress followed him to put the money in the till 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?"

² Kent Hughes, *The Sermon on the Mount: The Message of the Kingdom*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway books, 2001), p. 131.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 131-132.

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.”⁴

How many times do we respond like that trucker? None of us likes to be insulted.

When Jesus told the crowd who had gathered to hear him preach that they were to turn the other cheek to the person who struck them on the right cheek, he was addressing one of the ultimate insults. Since most people are right handed, to strike a person on the right cheek meant that the person had to use the back side of their right hand or they had to use the front side of their left hand, which was considered unclean. Either way, it was a double insult that according to Jewish law allowed the offended party the right to sue for retribution. Jesus is essentially saying, “Don’t do it! Don’t sue. Offer the person your other cheek too.”

Hughes writes, “The back of the hand meant calculated contempt, withering disdain. It meant that you were scored as inconsequential – a nothing. Imagine how you would respond. My blood would boil. Not only was it a calculated insult, but it was here, as the great German scholar Jeremias argues, a slap given because of Jesus – a heretic’s slap.

When Jesus spoke of being slapped on the right cheek, he was describing an insult that comes because of one’s faith. . . What this means for us is that when we are insulted or abused for Christ’s sake (whatever form that insult may take), we must not respond by getting even, by getting our pound of flesh according to the *Lex Talionis*, but must turn the other cheek. Jesus calls us to swallow our pride and give up our ‘rights’ to reparation and fairness. . . we are to set aside our petty ways of getting even – the kind of living that punishes others by returning their own sins to them.”⁵

That goes against all human nature, and that’s what makes it so beautiful. What Jesus is calling us to do in His Sermon on the Mount is that which only God can do in us When we respond with true Christian love to the greatest of insults, the world takes notice.

Jeff Anselmi tells the story of Richard Weaver in a sermon that he preached on this passage. He writes, “Richard Weaver, a Christian worker, earned his living in the mines. He had the higher priority, however, of trying to bring his associates in contact with the savior and His soul-restoring Word. While most of the men were indifferent, one became offended by his witness, and finally exclaimed, ‘I’m sick of your constant preaching. I’ve a good mind to smack you in the face!’ ‘Go ahead if it will make you feel better,’ replied Weaver. The man immediately struck him a stinging blow. The Christian did not retaliate but turned the other cheek. Again the unbeliever struck him and then walked away, cursing under his breath. Weaver called after him, ‘I forgive you, and still pray that the Lord will save you!’ The next morning his assailant was waiting for him when he came to work ‘Oh, Richard,’ he said, his voice filled with emotion, ‘do you really forgive me for what I did

⁴ http://www.sermoncentral.com/print_friendly.asp?ContributorID=&SermonID=39117

⁵ Hughes, p. 133.

yesterday?’ ‘Certainly,’ said Weaver extending his hand. As he told him again the message of salvation, God opened the man’s heart, and he was ready to become a Christian.”⁶

It’s tough to act like Weaver. We naturally want our pound of flesh, but Christ is calling us to accept insults if it will draw people closer to Christ. When we love Christ, even our enemies are people we see as those who need to be forgiven by Christ. How much more can they understand forgiveness, when they have experienced the forgiveness of Christ through His people?

Jesus continued His teaching on rights and wrongs in verse 40.

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

Citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven love people more than they love things.

The tunic and the cloak were two very important articles of clothing to the Jewish person. Jewish law stated you could be sued for your tunic, but never your cloak. A tunic was an inner garment that was made of cotton or linen. Even the poorest people of Israel had an extra tunic. But the cloak was expensive. It was the most valuable piece of clothing that the average person owned. It was what people saw you wearing when they saw you on the street. The cloak was the outer garment that would also be used as a blanket on cold nights. Jewish law required if you lost your tunic in court, and then you lost your cloak as well, the person who won the cloak was required to bring it back to you every evening so that you could sleep in it. That’s how important the cloak was!

So, what was Jesus getting at?

Maybe he was encouraging us to give the person to whom you are in debt to your cloak so that they will have to bring it back to you each evening. This allows for a relationship to develop. It shows that you intend to repay your debt, even if it was a frivolous case.

Mark Opperman writes, “. . . even if the cloak was a permanent loss, it would be a sign to the other person that you value your relationship with them more than you value your material possessions. Better to take a moderate loss and stay on good terms with others than prove your point or win your case, but lose the opportunity to show God’s generous nature to them.”⁷

The Apostle Paul wrote about the importance of living at peace with others, even those who sue us unjustly. In Romans 12:17-21 he wrote:

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

⁶ http://www.sermoncentral.com/print_friendly.asp?ContributorID=&SermonID=39117

⁷ http://www.sermoncentral.com/print_friendly.asp?ContributorID=&SermonID=126692

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.

To Christians who were undergoing extreme persecution, Paul writes to not take revenge. He tells us to feed our hungry enemies; to give drinks to our thirsty enemies; to overcome evil by doing what is good.

Hughes writes, "We should note here that our Lord is not referring to the average lawsuit so characteristic of our litigation-happy society. Wrongly applied, this would do away with the possibility of law or legal redress. Rather, it is advice for the righteous who are pushed against the wall for the name of Christ. We should listen well, because some day we may need it."⁸

Jesus gives us a third example of how the citizen of the Kingdom of Heaven responds to rights and wrongs. **Citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven serve beyond what is expected.**

41 If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles.

Those listening to Jesus in First Century Israel knew exactly what Jesus was referring to. You see, in Roman occupied Palestine there was a law that said that a Roman citizen could require any Jew to carry whatever it was that he wanted carried for a distance of one mile. The Jewish people hated this. They felt that it demeaned them. They would carry the items, begrudgingly. There is a powerful image that someone created years ago that demonstrates the power of Jesus words. It shows Jesus walking with a Nazi soldier, carrying the Nazi soldier's items.

Like the other examples given it is implied by the text that Jesus is talking about being forced to carry something for His sake. In other words, because you are follower of Jesus, if you are put into forced labor, do it cheerfully. Let the world see something different in you! Going two miles not only sets you apart, but it gives you twice as much time to develop a relationship and share Christ.

Jesus shows us that we can be a witness in the most humiliating of examples. Christians in the early church understood the humiliation that came from following Christ. The Apostle Paul wrote the book of Philippians from a prison cell. He viewed those humiliating circumstances as an opportunity to honor Christ. In Philippians 1:12-14, he wrote:

⁸ Hughes, p. 134.

12 Now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel. 13 As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. 14 Because of my chains, most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly

Jesus used one more example in Matthew 5 to show us how to respond when it comes to our rights as Christians. In this case He showed us that **a citizen of the Kingdom of Heaven is gracious to those in need.**

42 Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.

Jesus isn't saying that we give foolishly to people with needs that aren't legitimate. But, when we have a chance to be a blessing to others, then we should do so. I was so blessed to see how this congregation recently responded to the needs of our new refugee family. They arrived this week, but in one of those God moments, it wasn't the family we expected. For a number of reasons, the family that we were expecting to arrive chose to stay in Thailand. And in less than 24-hours, a group of people on our refugee team helped meet the needs of a new family.

Writing to the church in Corinth, about a need for a persecuted and impoverished church in another part of the world, the Apostle Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 8:12-13, "12 For if the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what he does not have.13 Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard pressed, but that there might be equality."

In other words, if you want to help others and can help, do it. If you don't have the resources to help, then don't help. But always be generous with what God has blessed you with.

So often, we become concerned about what our rights are in this world. And, if this world is our focus that will continue to be an issue. We overcome this world as we begin to focus on and respond to things the way that God has called us to respond.

I'll close with this illustration from the life of pioneering missionary, Hudson Taylor.

Hudson Taylor, dressed in a Chinese costume, while waiting for a boatman to take him across the river, stood on a jetty. At the same time a richly dressed Chinese national came and also stood waiting. When the boat drew near this man not seeing that Mr. Taylor was a foreigner, struck him on the head and knocked him over into the mud. Mr. Taylor said the feeling came to him to hit the man, but God immediately stopped him. When the boat came up, the Chinese citizen looked at Mr. Taylor and recognized him as a foreigner. He could hardly believe it, and said, "What, you are a foreigner, and did not strike me back when I struck you like that?" Mr. Taylor said "This boat is mine. Come in and I will take you

where you want to go." On the way out, Mr. Taylor poured into that Chinaman's ears the message of salvation. He left the man with tears running down his face. Such is the power of the Gospel of Christ.⁹

⁹ http://www.sermoncentral.com/print_friendly.asp?ContributorID=&SermonID=39117