

GETTING EVEN

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The scripture is from the fifth chapter of the gospel of Matthew, verses 38-42. In a series of illustrations of how to relate to your neighbor. How to go beyond the requirement of the Old Testament law so you have an inner righteousness, not a righteousness like the Pharisees but an inward quality of righteous. Verse 38 “You have heard that it was said, an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. But I say to you, do not resist one who is evil. If anyone strikes you on the right cheek turn to him the other also. And if anyone would sue you and take your coat let him have your cloak as well. If anyone forces you to go one mile go with him two miles. Give to him who begs from you and do not refuse him who would borrow from you.”

If you're anything like me you have had in your life at some point the tendency to want to get even with someone for something they said about you or did to you. It's amazing how this has no age category. Some of you younger people are wrestling with this tendency, to get even with somebody at school. Or maybe another young person in the church. It has no barriers on the other end of the age scale either. You can be very old and still have the desire to get even.

What is our responsibility to someone? To what extent is the Christian to kind of even the score or to let things pass? How do you know when you're doing something's right with a pure motive and something that's just being vindictive and is wrong?

Here is the Lord's statement on retaliation or getting even. What he does consistently throughout the New Testament in the Sermon on the Mount is to extend the Old Testament law that pertains to action into the Spirit. Pertain not only to action but to attitude. Because attitudes are of course the mother of the action. The Lord indicated for us that the Old Testament laws placed a limit upon retaliation. An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.

Exodus 21:23-25 is very specific “If any harm follows that you shall give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound and strike for strike.” That's keeping score so to speak. In Leviticus 24:19-20 “When a man causes disfigurement in his neighbor, as is done shall be done to him.” Fracture for fracture. He breaks your arm. You break his arm. He pushes in your nose, you push in his nose. Eye for eye, tooth for tooth, as he has disfigured a man so he shall be disfigured.” Deuteronomy 19:21 “You shall do to him as he meant to do to his brother. So you shall purge the evil from the midst of you.”

We think, how cruel the Old Testament was in establishing the laws of retaliation. But you must see the law of retaliation in the Old Testament not as cruelty. It was not a cruelty. It was an act of mercy. What the law of retaliation did was in limited the vengeance you could take out on someone. It said for example if he gave you a black eye you didn't have the right to cut off his arm. It said if a member of another clan kills someone of your clan you didn't have the right to go out and wipe out his whole clan. You could only go to the extent of the injury suffered and therefore the law of retaliation is initially an act of mercy in limiting the manner in which vengeance might come.

As people began to put the law of retaliation into operation they discovered all kinds of mitigating factors. So this is why in our nation we have law, redress in the court. No one situation is alike. What if somebody comes up to you and deliberately hitting you puts out your eye? It so happens your eye had 20-20 vision. But suppose the guy who knocked out your eye

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has extremely poor vision. Loosing an eye wouldn't matter that much. He couldn't see anyway. So it hardly seems fair that he did in your good eye and when you do it back you only can get a very poor eye.

Of course in biblical culture there were slaves. There was the feeling that the slave wasn't worth as much as a free person. Therefore if an injury were done to a slave if a free person did it should the slave get recompense from him? From the New Testament standpoint we'd say Certainly. But the culture operated in a different way. Over a period of time financial compensation came in. So that actually instead of taking a person's eye in return for taking yours you could have value established of what it cost you to lose your eye and therefore seek financial damages from that person. That whole Old Testament system of law under girds a lot of legal principle in regards to compensation. What this is doing is limiting the rights a person has to cause injury to you and gives you something of redress if he has caused you injury.

Interestingly enough what the Lord does not do is he does not do away with the law of retaliation in this text. Instead he does away with the spirit of retaliation. I know that may seem initially to you a fine almost legal definition. But it is nevertheless a very real definition for the Lord does not do away with the law of retaliation. Instead what he does is do away with the spirit of retaliation. I suppose I could express this in a number of ways.

One other kind introductory thing. One of the New Testament principles is God has not dealt with us on a retaliation basis. But he has chosen not to respond to us in the manner in which we respond to him. Instead of relating to us on the basis of our sin or our transgressions God has chosen to relate to us on another basis of his mercy, grace, commitment. Therefore it seems only right that God has no spirit of retaliation against us but has nevertheless set an irrevocable law of retaliation in effect – the wages of sin is death. The law of retaliation. But he himself has no spirit of retaliation towards us. Only a spirit of openness and grace. The Lord in talking about the spirit of retaliation gives four concrete illustrations. The thing about the teaching of Jesus is he's forever talking about concrete things. One of the dangers of preaching or teaching is to deal with generalized topics.

I always know when I'm losing the interest of the congregation. Generally when I lose the interest is when I'm talking about something general. We can talk till we're blue in the face about the love of God but we need along with that to bring concrete illustrations which demonstrates the love of God. We understand concrete illustrations.

Jesus never allows his teaching to simply lie on general principles.

He says "Do not resist the one who is evil but if anyone strikes you on the right cheek turn to him the other also." What is Jesus saying? Is he prohibiting the exercise of law when he says "Do not resist the one who is evil." Is he saying do away with police and do away with courts and if someone goes out and robs you don't resist it. If someone kills somebody else, don't resist it. If someone is guilty of rape or guilty of assault don't resist it. Simply let the criminal lose. Do not resist one who is evil. When he says do not resist the one who is evil is he saying if your children feel like hitting you, let them hit you. Don't resist. Turn the other cheek and let them hit you there as well.

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When the Lord says, Do not resist the one who's evil is he saying for example when Hitler put all kinds of eastern Europeans and Jews in the ovens no one should attempt to resist what he was doing?

Were evangelical social reformers wrong when they resisted the slave trade and taught and practiced and preached against it? When they had child labor laws, is it wrong to resist this kind of evil? When Jesus says do not resist one who is evil is this what he's saying?

One of the things about the teaching of Christ is many people relate to Jesus Christ totally unimaginative. Jesus was the kind of teacher who would make a statement to make you think and he would make you turn something over in your mind. He still does. If you follow him through the gospels he's always saying something you'd say, "Wait a minute! What does that mean?" For example he said to the disciples, Beware of the leaven of the Saducees and Pharisees and they think he means real leaven. But he doesn't mean that at all. And on numerous other occasions, like when he said drink my blood and eat my flesh. The disciples get all hung up. They can't think of being cannibalistic. What does the Lord mean?

So when Jesus says, Don't resist one who is evil he's already tripped our mind to thinking, "Lord, what do you mean do not resist one who is evil.?"

What the Lord is really talking about in this is personal relationship. You'll find as you go through the Sermon on the Mount and particularly the illustrations from 5:17 through the end of chapter 5. He's talking about personal relationships and not giving laws and codes and economics are for legal systems. He notes very carefully the first illustration about retaliation. He says "If anyone strikes you on the right cheek turn to him the other also."

I got to thinking about that phrase "right cheek." That indicates that Christ is being very specific in something in the way of a blow would be delivered. If you were right handed, which most people are, how do you strike a person on the right cheek. If you make a blow to sock him where are you going to hit him? You're going to hit him on the left cheek. How are you going to hit him on the right cheek? You're going to hit him on the right cheek if you slap him. You're really not going to hurt anybody too much when you do that. But it's a real mark of insult.

So the Lord says there's something about the way you respond to a personal insult that he's speaking of. As you look at the Lord you will find there were times when he resisted evil and times when he submitted to evil. Look at the times he resisted evil.

Look at the times he resisted evil. He cleansed the temple twice. It doesn't sound like in that instance he turned the cheek. He excoriated the Pharisees and the hypocrites for their hypocrisy. He prevented the stoning of the woman who was taken in adultery. He resisted the one who was evil.

On the one hand he cleansed the temple and he resisted the those who wanted to stone the woman taken in adultery, he on the other hand gave his life to the nails on the cross. He submitted to evil. Therefore as you look at the Lord's example you'll find that he resisted and submitted to evil. If you're looking for a motif which determined where he would submit or resist you will find it in this. That he resisted evil wherever the matter of justice and right was at stake. That is why he cleansed the temple, people were being defrauded of their income and they

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were being treated wrongly. He resisted evil. But where it was a matter pertaining to himself, personal injury for example. The way of the cross he submitted. Even when he cleansed the temple and he excoriated the scribes and the Pharisees he never did so from the standpoint of having a spirit of retaliation. Never once. He never became a self-serving sort of a person with his anger. But if he expressed anger it was for the establishment of that which was only just and right.

What the Lord is saying when he says to us turn the other cheek he is saying when you receive an insult check your self-centered responses. Watch the temperature of your life, which at that moment rises up and seeks to get even. When you see that happening then yield. You'll find that God gives you grace to the extent of your humility.

Bill Gothard gave the illustration of a man whose wife had left him. The natural tendency is to get back at her through words or actions – justify himself. But this guy heard Gothard lecture about the more you are humble the more God gives you grace to deal with the situation. He called his wife who was estranged and asked “May I come over and baby sit for you while you are out on your date?” She agreed. When she returned he asked, “May I ask you a question? What it was that you admired in the person you went out with, a quality that you saw in him that you haven't seen in me? I want to know, not from the standpoint of putting you down or getting into an argument, I honestly want to know how I can become a better husband to please you.” That's called turning the other cheek. That is exhibiting a total lack of a spirit of retaliation for what she had done.

Gothard went on to say that how God through that humility had given the man grace. The more he was humble in the presence of his wife, the more God gave him grace to handle the situation with evenness. The upshot of the whole thing was that humility and love won his wife and changed her.

This is the kind of thing that Jesus is talking about here. There are obviously times if you want reply blow for blow you can get yours in. But that doesn't mean that anything will be accomplished or another person will be reached or won. The Lord is saying look at the self centered responses in your life and watch it and take them out. If someone's attacking you or saying things about you, it's not any great principle of justice or anything that's involved in your striking back, go ahead and take it.

The second example which the Lord uses is the example of the lawsuit. “If anyone would sue you and take your coat let him have your cloak as well.” In biblical days there was an inner garment and an outer garment that was worn. The other garment was a more expensive garment. That is the cloak. It could be used as an overcoat or a blanket at night. Generally if a person was of an average income or poor income he only had one cloak. Whereas he might have more than one inner garment, called here the coat. So the Lord is saying if someone comes up to you and sues you for your inner less expensive garment, then, Jesus says, give to him your more expensive garment as well – your cloak.

If you take this from a crudely literal point of view without thinking what the Lord is saying you might come up to some wrong conclusions. You might wind up with having to go without any clothes at all because once people learn you're giving away all your clothes you're liable to not wind up with any. You never want to be a Christian clothier!

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How therefore do you respond to this matter if someone sues you for your coat, give to him your cloak as well? There's a principle at work. A principle that sometimes, so to speak, the Lord did not throw in the cloak. Even in his own teaching and his example and the example and teaching of his apostles. At other times they didn't throw in the cloak.

Luke 18:1-7 Jesus commends the widow who kept pressuring the judge to give her civil lawsuit successfully settled so that she could have something to live on. The Lord in that teaching is not telling her to throw in her cloak. In Matthew 18:15-17 the Lord gives a teaching about if your brother sins against you go and talk to your brother. If he won't listen to you take someone else with you. If he won't listen to them then tell it to the whole church. In that particular instance again he's not saying throw in the cloak. In John 18:22-23 when Jesus is illegally struck by an officer of the priest, Jesus reprimands him and protests the action. And in Acts 16:37 when the magistrate at Philippi unjustly and illegally beaten the apostles they say, "We will not leave this town until the magistrates come down and apologize."

What is therefore the principle which allows an individual at some point in his life not to throw in the cloak? It comes again when a principle is at stake that is so basic and right and honest and moral and true that one cannot throw in the cloak or the principle will be sacrificed.

But if you are acting in reference to a lawsuit from a principle again of selfish motivation of a get-even type of attitude then you are stripped of that by the Lord saying to you, you cannot even keep what you have. You must yield on this particular point.

If I could extend the Lord's illustration... If the person who demanded my coat and I knew that he had just gone around to a hundred different other people and collected their coats, should I then give to him my coat? I think not. The reason why: not that any personal wrong is going to be done to me but this man can't be left to deprive others of what is their legitimate right. He is taking something that does not belong to him and if I allow him to continue then I will all the more enforce his criminality. At some point he must be brought to justice. Not because I want to get even with him. Not because I wouldn't give him my coat if he needed it. Not any of those things. But because there is a principle of right at stake.

The third illustration which the Lord gives, if anyone forces you to go one mile go with him two miles. This was written in a day when many persons were slaves. The Roman army could conscript persons into short term service. We find an example of this in Simon of Cyrene who was forced to carry the cross of Christ. He was made, in effect, to go a mile if you will. Persons who didn't have means of redress on this subject with the Roman soldiers, very much resented being forced into any kind of service. So the Lord is saying at this point don't resent being forced into a service. About a third of the Roman world were slaves. A good many of these were a good portion of the Christian community itself. The Lord gave them a certain nobility about their slavery. The key was not to revolt in a totalitarian society. What the gospel did was give a nobility to the slaves. It said you have a higher purpose for the work than serving your master. It's to serve to your Lord. By serving your Lord you can even win your master to your Lord. So if you're pressed into service, serve and do it willingly.

This has some marvelous applications. If someone in the house is putting pressure on you to do something or someone at work or someone in the church, don't stand on your rights. Say, Fine, I'm not only going to do that but I'm going to do it the best you've ever seen it done.

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A fourth illustration which the Lord uses concerns requests for help. “Give to him who begs from you and do not refuse him who would borrow from you.” Again if we read this crudely and literally without attempting to look at we’re going to wind up with all sorts of strange things.

For example, what if a wino comes up to you on Skid Row and asks you for money? Should you give the wino money which you know is promptly going to be turned into more wine? Or should you give more creatively and helpfully to him?

If a small child asks for a knife, should I “give to him who asks of me”?

What does it mean to give to him who asks and to loan to him who wants to borrow? The Lord gives the story of the good Samaritan. The story of a man who in the course of his everyday duties runs across another person who needs help whom he has the power to help. That kind of request can never be refused. The Lord makes us responsible for the persons in our path who it is within our power to help. It is not an indiscriminant kind of giving or loaning lest our own ability to help is dissipated because we need the ability to discriminate between needs. We need to exercise that and that’s done prayerfully and carefully.

What the Lord is doing is saying even in regard to your finances, take away the self-centered approach and do not consume it on yourself as priority. Baptism instead be open. And if someone is in need, don’t clam up. But give freely.

What the Lord is saying here in this particular paragraph of this passage, he’s not introducing a new legal system or a new economic system but he’s asking us in a sense four questions. Four important questions which really determine a great deal of personal happiness as well as a kind of a quality in our Christian life and commitment.

The first question he’s asking us is how do you respond when someone insults you?

The second question, what do you do to persons who are trying to take from you? Are you simply responding to them in a self-centered fashion.

A third question, How can persons who legitimately need something you have and request it of you?

A fourth question, How do you respond to someone who is laying down requirements on you? Are you willing to meet those requirements and go beyond the letter of the requirements so that in your response you win that other person to the Lord and to the way of love?

Lord, help us in our daily life to live the way you have taught us to live. We do recognize the truth of your word that you give grace to the humble. Lord, there’s no desire on your part for us to adopt a feigned humility, a surface humility. Lord, there are times in our life when you really want us to yield. Times when you don’t want us at all to stand upon any rights. But to simply open ourselves and be willing even to be taken advantage of. Lord, we think about how the world and even we took advantage of you. We’d have never been won to you, Lord, if you had simply responded to us in kind. But you lavished great grace upon us and won us to yourself with your tender mercy and with your life that was totally given for us rather than live for self. Your example, Lord, is one which we want to follow. We want to follow in your steps. Give us discerning hearts and minds to be able to understand in our

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own lives where we should stand firm and insist that a higher principle of justice is involved. Give us on the other hand that yieldedness of character and life which finds us everyday submitting ourselves to you and to our brethren and to the world. In Jesus' name. Amen.