

Retaliation and Resistance

Matthew 5:38-42

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Our text is the very well-known, provocative, and, in our circles, almost completely ignored, gospel lesson from Matt. 5. We will make three points: Retaliation (v.38), Resistance (v.39a), and Righteousness (vv. 39b-42).

I. Retaliation

First, retaliation. Jesus, the fulfiller of the law, starts with: You have heard it said: “Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.” This comes straight from Israel’s law (Ex. 21, Lev. 24, Dt. 19). And it’s known as the *lex talionis*, or the law of retaliation. This law does three very important things.

First, it establishes the basic principle of (public) justice in society. The punishment must fit, it must be proportional to, the crime. And here we must note that this is a principle for CIVIL justice in the law. In Deuteronomy it is Israel’s judges who enforce this legal precept.

The second thing it does, then, is restrict or limit revenge. The punishment must suit the crime, no more and no less. No blood-feuds, no escalating violence. It was rarely applied literally, but would often, at the victim’s request, be met by some form of equivalent monetary damage.

And the third thing this principle does is it forbids taking vengeance into one’s own hands. Even Lev. 19 forbids an Israelite from seeking personal vengeance against his brethren. Here we should note that the principle is something that God himself adheres to. The whole coming final judgment depends on the validity of this principle. Retaliation in the *lex talionis* – eye for eye, and tooth for tooth, is simply publicly administered justice.

II. Resistance

That brings us to the second point, resistance. Since God is the giver, the enforcer of the *lex talionis*, it’s jarring when Jesus says: but I tell you, do not resist an evil person. What a shocking sentence this is! I say to you: do NOT resist an evil person. It’s impractical and on its face it seems absurd.

Before we expound this, let's say what it's not. Because here our minds are already saying "but what about?" But what about if this happens. AS we've mentioned before, the history of interpreting the Sermon on the Mount is the history of avoiding it.

But to be fair here, there are legitimate caveats. So let's make them. Jesus is not eliminating the role of the state or its courts (or agents of the state such as police). He himself said render to Caesar the things that are Caesars. He submitted to the corrupt courts that held sway over him. And in his own way, defended his cause when questioned. As did Paul in official legal proceedings. He certainly is not saying we can't resist sin or Satan, or even false and deceitful men, as he resisted the scribes and Pharisees. He could not consistently be saying that churches can't resist evil persons through church discipline. He himself established the procedures for such discipline later in this very gospel. And he does not have self-defense in view in a situation where your life or the life of your family is threatened (should be done through non-lethal force if at all possible).

Calvin puts it this way: where a man may, without revenge, protect himself and his own from injuries, Christ's words do not stop him from peaceably and nonviolently deflecting the force as it runs onto him.

And Jesus certainly does not prohibit you from fleeing evil. He slipped away from a murderous crowd, Paul escaped by being let down in a basket. Mary and Joseph fled from Herod. So, we DO have to be careful about absolutizing this command, and the examples Jesus gives. For it would lead to absurdities. You should not allow someone to rape you. You should not give the whole of your estate to anyone who happens to ask or who refuses to work. You should not refuse to defend yourself if someone seeks to dismember you. Jesus is not giving a license to injustice and tyranny here. This is not a charter for violence or a precept of folly. He is seeking to break the cycle of violence NOT make it easy. Love itself my set limits here.

So those are the caveats. However, there's a danger in endlessly qualifying. We can dilute the shock of the text. We can feel like we've been let off the hook. If that's the case, we should think again. For what Jesus is calling us to here, is radical and demanding. It cuts deep down into our instincts for self-preservation, our Americanism. As if there is NO tension at all between what Jesus says here (or in the beatitudes or anywhere in the SOM, or his own example in the way of the cross) and a kind of robust ethos of self-protection. And thus, that there really is nothing for us to change in the deep ethical structure of our souls.

So, what is Jesus doing, exactly? Minimally, he is saying something like:

Do not use the *lex talionis*, the law of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, the rule of strict justice, as a principle of your private conduct. So: I tell you, do not resist an evil person. He doesn't pretend they are not evil, that they don't intend unjust harm, and he doesn't condone the evil.

What he does is say: do not retaliate/resist. In the sorts of situations he covers here (examples – not exhaustive, he has a wide range in view), he means for us to accept the injustice without redress. Even legal redress. Do not retaliate with force, do not retaliate in kind, do not exert coercive power. Do NOT resist. BUT if it were ONLY, MERELY, don't use the *lex talionis* in your private life, Jesus could have simply said – don't retaliate, let the courts handle it. Let the courts administer the reply slap to one who slaps you.

But he does not say that – he is saying: we should forsake the retaliation principle, period. The state may use it – you can't. It's a principle of the fallen, temporal, old-creation. There are no states, no sword bearing institutions, no need for the eye for an eye principle, in the Kingdom of heaven, or in the age to come. And you belong to the kingdom of heaven, therefore, do not physically, coercively, or violently resist an evil person. Those who live by the sword will die by it. And you are called to a greater righteousness, the righteousness of the kingdom, the ethic of heaven itself, so show it forth now.

III. Righteousness

That brings us to the third point, this kingdom righteousness. Jesus gives four mini-illustrations of the non-resistance principle. Let's look at them.

The first concerns your bodily well-being. If anyone (no exceptions, anyone) slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. Now, a slap on the right cheek would be a backhanded slap. As opposed to an open-handed slap. In this world that is considered a great insult. It may not be a threat to life and limb, but means the other person is demeaning you, publicly humiliating you, treating you as a slave. Your blood would boil.

Jesus says: turn the other cheek also. And this means if someone hits you in the face, you should offer (turn to them) to have them to hit you again. Spurgeon: we are to be the anvil when evil men are the hammers. Jesus says: Accept the second slap, don't give the second slap. It's an ironic fulfillment of the law. Eye for eye, tooth for tooth, cheek for cheek, only here Jesus says YOU provide both cheeks. You break the cycle of violence. Forsake retaliation – double your absorption of injury.

Here, Jesus is our example. In fulfillment of Isaiah 50 where we read: he GAVE his back to those who strike, and his cheeks to those who pull out the beard; he hid not his face from disgrace and spitting.

Or as Peter puts it: He was reviled, he did not revile in return. When he suffered he did not threaten. But he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. What kind of political strategy is that? Doesn't he know what his natural rights are? It's the strategy which absorbs violence to end it. And Peter says that, in this, he left us an example to follow in his steps. You want to follow in the steps of Jesus? Then follow him in his response to public humiliation.

The second example, dealing with clothing (by extension property), is clearly legal in context. If anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. Sounds exactly like we talk, right? I speak as a madman. It sounds like the exact opposite of what we would say. Better to lose more, our Lord says, than to rush to court with its lawsuits and counter-lawsuits. Offer a generous settlement, give them more than they want, it's just stuff, end the hostilities. (In Paul's words: Why not rather be defrauded?)

Here Jesus moves clearly beyond the OT law. There you could not take a poor person's cloak from them overnight. Jesus says to his poor flock – give it before they even ask for it. Crazy talk. And he knows what it is to be stripped of your clothing – all of it – in an unjust legal proceeding. It is this spirit – this imitation of Christ --- which the early church had and which we've utterly lost – they accepted joyfully the seizure of their property -- we hire lawyers to keep ours.

Calvin, (might influence the reform people) on the other hand says: Christians should be ready, whenever anyone attempts to strip them of any of their earthly goods to lose the whole lot. There is a grace, an ethic operative here, which is simply beyond the realm of law, of calculation, of measuring. Beyond thinking about what I am owed. It is the ethic of the kingdom. It is the ethic of those whose treasure is in heaven and NOT on earth. It is the greater righteousness; it is the law of Christ.

Third, Jesus deals with your service, your labor. If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles. The situation is such that Roman soldiers could conscript (coerce) the service of civilians. As they did with Simon of Cyrene in carrying Jesus' cross. This made people's blood boil – the anti-Roman, politically and earthly zealot party especially hated it. It reminded them that they were a subjugated people. They blogged and texted and shared links all day, about how outrageous it was, and how angry it made them, and how we need to stand up and to DO SOMETHING to stop it. And Jesus says: you guys are right. I can't believe the rest of your Jewish compatriots are so passive. They're collaborators. They're compromisers.

No, he says: Don't resist it – let your forced service be generous – go above and beyond what the oppressor desires. Exceed the unjust demand. For in submitting to this injustice, this evil, you indicate, not weakness, but that you serve another King. And belong to a kingdom from another world.

In the fourth example we see that Jesus is getting at an attitude of generosity -- even toward our enemies. Remember v.39 -- these illustrations are about not resisting EVIL people. And now he touches us in the pocketbook. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from one who wants to borrow from you. Here you are not being hit or sued or conscripted. You are under no legal obligation to lend, yet you should seek to give, even, in this context, to (most likely) an evil person. In Luke Jesus adds: "seeking nothing in return." Again, we are beyond the realm of desert or law or justice.

Now this passage has been historically misused. That's probably inevitable, since it is really difficult to know exactly where to draw the line in every case. Luther spoke of a "crazy saint" who let himself be eaten by lice, and would not kill the things, because, well, one should not resist evil. More plausibly, but still incorrectly, Tolstoy thought this passage meant there should be no police, no courts, no civil use of the sword. Many others have seen a call to pacifism here.

I think all these are wrong, but the passage still hits us where we live. Our body, our clothing/assets, our service/labor, and our money. Even in smaller areas than these, of which much of our life is made up, we find ourselves seeking to get back at people, to retaliate. Someone says something at work, someone slights us, someone ignores us, someone disagrees with or criticizes us. We feel our honor has been impugned. In dozens of ways, we find ourselves seeking to get even, to exact an eye for an eye. A slight for a slight.

It is often said that the passage is about non-resistance, after all, Jesus says, do not resist. But a closer look now shows that that is not quite good enough. It really is about not resisting evil by EVIL means. It is about what Paul calls not returning evil for evil, but OVERCOMING evil with good. Notice the ACTIVE nature of the resistance Jesus calls for in the text. If someone slaps you on the right cheek -- turn to them -- action -- the other cheek. If someone wants to sue and take your shirt, HAND OVER TO THEM --action -- your coat as well. If anyone forces you to go one mile -- GO WITH THEM -- action -- two miles. Someone wants to borrow -- GIVE -- action - to the one who asks. This is not passive non-resistance. This is about actively resisting evil men. It is about the strength to love. This is NOT about being a doormat. Grotesque slander. Unless one thinks Jesus was a doormat.

This sort of resistance is not about submitting to bullies. It is about unmasking them, disarming them, and exposing them as evil. Who is exposed and who triumphs in Jesus' suffering? This is about how people who have ALREADY died (have nothing of which they can be stripped), who have already forfeited their lives, deny themselves, take up their cross and follow him -- imitating his public witness. This is about what Bonhoeffer called a VISIBLE participation in the cross. Jesus, in this text, is reminding us of something we see throughout the Book of Revelation, something his whole life illuminates: we CONQUER by being

conquered. As John Howard Yoder put it: the cross and not the sword, suffering and not brute power determines the meaning of history.

And so we, like Jesus, entrust ourselves to the One who judges justly, the God who, in the resurrection, will bring perfect eschatological justice/vengeance. Thus, freeing us to utterly repudiate vengeance or retaliation now. The Zealots thought the Romans should be resisted/conquered by force. By revolution. Jesus thinks otherwise. His “non-resistance” is in fact the most radical form of resistance. His is a revolutionary way of being a revolutionary.

And that is what he calls us to here. In the little things of shame and honor, insult and injury. And in the bigger things concerning our bodies, our assets and our service. You are summoned to a revolutionary way of being revolutionary. Thus, shall your righteousness exceed the righteousness of the scribes and the Pharisees. Amen.

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