

**The Sermon on the Mount**  
**An Eye for an Eye, Part 4**  
**Matthew 5:38-42**  
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This morning, I want to continue working our way slowly through the Sermon on the Mount. We are in the second half of Matthew 5 and we're considering the illustrations Jesus gave, several illustrations, six of them actually, to show how the obedience of His disciples to the Scripture radically surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees. The obedience of those who are Jesus' disciples shows a changed heart. It is not mere external conformity, but rather it is a heart that has been changed, longs to desire and obey God, and lives the truth from the heart out to the behavior.

We've already examined four of the six illustrations that our Lord gives here. Today I want us to finish the fifth illustration. In the fifth illustration Jesus gives of how His disciples' righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees. He pictures how it is that His disciples respond to personal offenses and personal wrongs, compared with how the scribes and Pharisees taught that you should respond. Let's look at the paragraph together. Matthew 5:38 Jesus says,

“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 an evil person; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also. If anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, let him have your coat also. Whoever forces you to go one mile, go with him two. Give to him who asks of you, and do not turn away from him who wants to borrow from you.”

Now the theme of this paragraph is important for us to grasp because all of these verses ultimately relate back to this theme. The theme is this: when we are wronged, when we are sinned against, Jesus will not allow us as His disciples to harbor grudges or to seek personal revenge.

Now for those of you who may be newer with us or perhaps visiting today, there's much we've talked about in this passage and I really can't reconstruct all of it, but let me just give you a brief reminder of what we've studied so far. We first examined the popular misunderstanding of *an eye for an eye*. That expression comes from the Old Testament law. So we started by looking exactly at what is it the Old Testament means by this command. And when we looked at the

three places in the Old Testament where these words appear, in context it becomes very clear that the Old Testament law was intended to be a protection against personal vengeance. And wherever this law occurs, it was not given to individuals to carry it out, but rather it was the standard by which Israel's judges were to pass their sentences that were prescribed for various wrongdoing. In other words, the basic point this law was making is the foundation of all good legal systems, and that is: the punishment must fit the crime. In the ancient world, that was a revolutionary thought. This isn't a barbaric command at all. This is in essence the heart of a just legal system. The punishment must fit the crime. That's what the law taught.

Unfortunately, the scribes and Pharisees had made this law something entirely different. They taught that this law permitted, even encouraged, personal retaliation. What God had intended to be a protection against personal revenge they turned into biblical justification for revenge. Jesus told His disciples that the scribes and Pharisees had gotten it all wrong. And then He turned to give us His own revolutionary teaching about personal revenge. In verses 39 to 42, Jesus says, They're wrong in what they did with that Old Testament law. Now let Me tell you how you should respond when you are personally wronged. He begins with a general principle in verse 39: "But I say to you, do not resist an evil person..." Or you could put it this way: *a person who intends evil to you* is the idea. The word *resist* has the idea of setting yourself in opposition. Jesus says when someone personally wrongs you, you are not to set yourself in hostile opposition to that person who has sinned against you. There's the general principle. And let's just be frank with one another. That is exactly what we're tempted to do. When someone wrongs us, when someone offends us in any way, our first reaction as human beings is to set ourselves in hostile opposition, to declare war if you will, against that person, and to return in kind what they have done to us. Jesus says: Not if you're My follower.

And then Jesus proceeds to give us four specific examples of what that principle looks like fleshed out in life in the first century. Now the examples He gives are tied to life in the first century, but the principles behind them are absolutely timeless. And again, we've looked at a couple of these. Let me just remind you of what we've studied so far. The first example He gives is: How do you respond to intentional attacks on your personal dignity? Look at verse 39. After the general principle, the second half of the verse He says: "whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also." Now this is not about self-defense. The Bible allows that. This is not about whether or not a Christian should be involved in war. That's a different story. We looked at that briefly in other places in scripture. This is about being insulted. In the first century, if you wanted to insult someone in a gross way, you would backhand them with your right hand across their right cheek. That was an intentional insult. It was an intentional violation of their personal dignity.

Now that's not usually how we express insults today. You've probably not been insulted that way recently, but we certainly know what insults are and we experience them. In our case, most

of the time they're verbal. Jesus says, Okay. How do you respond when your personal dignity is affronted, when you are insulted in whatever form? Look at verse 39: "turn the other cheek to him also." In other words, don't slap him back. Don't return the insult. And in fact, if necessary, turn the other cheek and let him insult you again. Be so far from personal revenge that you endure that assault on your dignity without striking back in kind. Don't harbor grudges and don't pursue revenge when someone violates your personal dignity.

The second example Jesus gives, and again we've looked at this as well, has to do with intentional attacks on your personal property. Verse 40: "If anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, let him have your coat also." The shirt was the inner garment that a man wore, one loose-fitting robe that hung over the head and down to about the knees. And the coat was the outer garment that he wore. It kept him warm and, even for a poor person, was a blanket at night. Jesus says if someone wants to sue you with evil intent and motive, don't you dare misuse the command about *an eye for an eye* as an excuse to harbor a grudge and to carry out your own personal revenge. In fact, Jesus says if you have only two alternatives - if on the one hand you can seek personal revenge and the only other alternative you have is to literally give up the shirt off your back, all of your property - then give up all of your property if those are your only two alternatives. That's how strongly our Lord feels about seeking personal revenge.

Now that brings us to fresh territory and the third example that comes in verse 41. And it concerns governmental attacks on our personal liberty. In verse 41, there is a word that is very clearly a word that has to do with the Roman Empire and the occupying forces that were in Israel. This is not just anybody asking you to walk a mile with him. That's not what this is about and we'll see that when we get there. This has to do with government and government intrusion into our personal liberty.

Before we look at what it means, let's make sure again we know what it does not mean. These verses are some of the most misunderstood and abused verses in all the Scripture so let's sort of clear the ground a bit, make sure we understand what this does not mean. It is dealing with our response to government, but Jesus is not here condoning or justifying oppression by evil rulers or government officials. The Bible nowhere does that. In fact, read the Old Testament, and the Old Testament prophets are constantly decrying oppression by rulers and bringing God's condemnation to bear on it. The Old Testament's filled with that. Let me just give you one example. In Jeremiah 22, Jeremiah speaks to King Jehoiakim. Now King Jehoiakim is one of Israel's kings. Listen to what God says to Jehoiakim. Jeremiah 22:17:

Your eyes and your heart are intent only on your own dishonest gain, on shedding innocent blood and on practicing oppression and extortion. *(That's Israel's king. God says: I see it and I'm not going to tolerate it. How is God going to respond to an oppressive, wicked ruler even on the throne of His own nation? Listen to this.)*

Therefore thus says the Lord in regard to Jehoiakim... They will not lament for Him ... *(in other words, God's saying you're going to die and when you die, nobody's going to cry about it. And He goes on to say)* He will be buried with a donkey's burial, dragged off and thrown out beyond the gates of Jerusalem.

God says: Listen, I don't take oppressive rulers lightly. So this is not at all condoning such oppression.

Another thing this doesn't mean--Jesus is not forbidding Christians from speaking out against and even seeking to change unjust or oppressive laws, or unjust oppressive treatment. It's okay for you as a believer to speak out against injustice in your government and even to seek to change that injustice. You say is there biblical warrant for that? Absolutely! The strongest biblical warrant--our Lord Himself. You remember that during His Jewish trial, He called for the law to be followed. You remember at one point Jesus said something that one of the officers of the high priest thought was offensive to the high priest. You remember this in John 18:22? And after Jesus said this, "one of the officers standing nearby struck Jesus, saying, 'Is that the way You answer the high priest?'" Jesus answered him, 'If I have spoken wrongly, testify of the wrong; but if rightly, why do you strike Me?'" What was Jesus saying? He was saying, that's unjust. That's illegal. I'm still on trial. I haven't been convicted of anything. It's not right for you to strike Me. Jesus, during His trial (graciously yes, respectfully yes, but directly) confronts the injustice of the temple police and ultimately of the ruler.

Paul was no different. He demanded his governmental rights to be granted after his wrongful arrest at Philippi. You remember he was arrested at Philippi as a Roman citizen. He was beaten, imprisoned. And the next day they discovered, 'Uh oh. He's a Roman citizen. The law doesn't allow that.' And so the city fathers said, 'Look. Let's just get him to leave quietly. Let's just kind of hush this whole thing over.' "But Paul said to them (Acts 16:37), 'They have beaten us in public without trial, men who are Romans, and they have thrown us into prison; *(in other words, they've broken the law. Roman law doesn't allow for this. They have violated the law and now they are sending us away secretly? No indeed! Let me translate that for you: 'Not going to happen.)* But let them come themselves and bring us out.'" Now Paul wasn't being petty here. He's thinking about those new converts in the church in Philippi. He's looking to protect them. He wants to make it clear that Christians haven't broken laws and don't deserve to be treated like this, but he calls for justice to be done with the authorities that are over him.

Later, you remember, when he realized he was being railroaded through the Roman legal system, he appealed to Caesar. Acts 25:11 "If then, I am a wrongdoer and have committed anything worthy of death, I do not refuse to die; but if none of those things is true of which these men accuse me, no one can hand me over to them. I appeal to Caesar." He says, This is unjust. This is wrong and I'm not going to stand for it. I appeal for my legal rights. So Jesus, then, is not

forbidding Christians from speaking out against or using every legitimate legal means to change unjust or oppressive laws.

There's another thing Jesus doesn't mean. Jesus does not mean that you must obey even those human laws that are contrary to the scripture. This is crystal clear. You remember in Acts 5 the apostles are called before the Sanhedrin, the Supreme Court and president of the nation. And they say stop witnessing. Stop talking about Jesus. And Peter and the apostles answered in Acts 5:29: "We must obey God rather than men." Listen. When the law of God and the law of man come into conflict, there's no decision to be made. We must obey God.

So Jesus doesn't mean any of those things. So what does He mean? Well, Jesus' statement here has to do with our heart response to governmental attacks on our personal liberty. Let me show you why this is true. Notice first of all the word *force*. The Greek word that's translated *force* there means to press into service, to force or to conscript, to draft. Both the Greek word that's here as well as the concept ultimately can be traced back to the Persians. And the Persians had their massive empire over the world at that time. They decided (the Persian kings) that nothing should delay the transmission of the king's decrees across the kingdom. And so the king made a law that the Persian Royal Post and its couriers had authority to conscript any person or any person's animal in order to get those decrees delivered. The Romans eventually adopted that same concept and even that same word. Any Roman soldier had the legal authority under Roman law to order anyone including Jewish people in first century Palestine, to stop what they were doing at any moment in time and to carry their pack or their baggage or whatever it was that was needed. It's interesting too by the way, the Greek word that's translated *mile* here is actually a Latin word referring to the Roman mile which was about nine tenths of our mile.

If you were conscripted like this, you had no recourse. What's the most famous example of this kind of conscription? It was during the crucifixion. In fact, the only other two places in the New Testament this word appears, it appears in the same basic context. Listen to Matthew 27:32 "As they were coming out, they found a man of Cyrene named Simon, whom they pressed into service (*same Greek word as in our text*) to bear Jesus' cross." Now think about for a moment living in that culture when this could happen to you. Think of how infuriating it was to the Jews. And also, it was a constant reminder that they were in bondage to a pagan nation. Let's say for a moment you were going somewhere important. You were going to a neighbor or friend's wedding and a Roman soldier happened to see you. You happened to be there when he needed you and he exercised his authority and he stopped you in your path, said, 'I need you to carry this for a mile.' You had no choice, no argument. You had to stop what you were doing and do it. So you tell me. What would be the normal human response with that kind of intrusion by government into your personal life? How would you respond? Well, they were angered by it. They resented it. And if they were forced to carry the load, they kept a careful eye on their little pedometer and, boy, when they got to nine tenths of a mile, that load was going down. It's

somebody else's turn. Also, as always happens with occupying armies, the Jewish people looked for small and subtle ways to carry out little acts of personal rebellion and revenge. So if you were waiting on a Roman soldier, before you came out of the kitchen, you spit on his food. Or if there was a small street, a narrow street down which they were marching and you could get away with it, you hurled a brick from over the wall and ran. And on and on it went.

Jesus says don't do that. How should followers of Jesus respond to such Roman indignities, to attacks on their personal liberty? Verse 41: "Whoever forces you to go one mile (*this is a Roman soldier conscripting you to do his bidding, interrupting your life, reminding you of your servitude - Jesus says*), go with him two." When a Roman soldier demands that you carry his pack for a mile, I want you, Jesus says, to volunteer to go twice as far. Now, can we just be honest with each other? What Jesus is teaching here is radical in any age and it certainly was at odds with what the Jewish zealots of the first century believed. It was even at odds with what the normal Jewish patriot felt. And it's just as radical in the twenty-first century in America and especially in Texas. Jesus is saying that when government or government officials attack our personal liberty, we are not to respond with resentment, anger, grudges and acts of personal revenge. And we are not merely to do what we are told by those officials but with a heart of anger and resentment; instead, we are to do it wholeheartedly, even being willing to go beyond what is demanded of us. And we must even seek the good of the person who's carrying out that unjust law.

Now let's fast forward to the twenty-first century. What is Jesus forbidding us from doing here? Well, clearly he is forbidding passive resistance and civil disobedience, even toward unjust rulers and laws. If you doubt that, look at Romans 13:1:

Every person (*no exceptions*) is to be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God (*folks, that is our government at every level*). Therefore whoever resists (*governmental*) authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and they who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves. For rulers are not a cause of fear for good behavior, but for evil. Do you want to have no fear of authority? Do what's good and you will have praise from the same; (*watch verse 4*) for it(*that is, government*) is a minister of God to you for good."

Do you realize that even the worst human government is better than no government, better than anarchy? I had just a tiny taste of that when we lived in Los Angeles during the L.A. riots when the government authorities were nowhere to be seen and people carried out whatever they wished. It's an expression of God's common grace. Even bad government to some extent is an expression of that.

But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who breaks its laws. Therefore it is necessary to be in subjection, not only because of . . . (*what might happen to you if you break the law*), but also for conscience' sake (*before God*). For because of this you also pay taxes, for rulers are servants of God . . . (verse 7). Render to all what is due them: tax to whom tax; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honor to whom honor.

Peter says the same thing in 1 Peter 2:13-15. Listen, the only time that civil disobedience and passive resistance are allowed by Scripture is if government demands that we act contrary to the clear commands of Scripture.

What else does this statement of our Lord forbid? I think it forbids armed revolution. Ironically, there were many at the time of the American Revolution who tried to use Romans 13 to say that Christians only have to submit to government if government's doing good, and if they have a voice in that government. By the way, that obviously isn't what Romans 13 says. And if you want to know how they got there, I would really encourage you to read a book that I'm reading right now written by a friend of mine and a member of the Master's College faculty, the history faculty there. The book is entitled *The Religious Beliefs of the Founding Fathers* by Gregg Frazer. He takes not their public rhetoric but their private correspondence and shows what they believed. But he also shows how the American pulpits turned Romans 13 on its ear. Sadly, there are many Christians even today in the Christian Right who have hinted at, even in some cases spoken in justification of armed rebellion if the wrong person is elected in November and tries to enact some agenda with which they don't agree. Listen. Their approach to government with which they disagree is: 'I'll only stop fighting them when they pry the gun from my cold, dead fingers.' That is absolutely contrary to what our Lord is teaching here. Folks, I didn't say this. I know that I'm saying this in Texas, alright? But we need to stop being Texans and start being Christians. What did Jesus say? When Paul wrote Romans 13, he wrote it to the Romans, people who were living in Rome under unjust Roman laws, oppressive Roman laws, and were under a man named Nero. And I don't care who's elected in November; it won't be that bad.

There's a third thing I think Jesus forbids here and that is resentment against specific laws and specific governmental officials. Listen to Martyn Lloyd-Jones: "This passage is concerned with a man's natural resentment at the demands of government upon him. It has reference to our dislike and hatred of legislation of which we do not approve, which we do not like and which we have opposed. Yes, we tend to say they were passed by Parliament (*or in our case Congress*), but why should I obey? How can I get out of this? That is the attitude our Lord is condemning." Now can we just ask, what are some of the laws right now that are the most challenging for us as Christians, or for many Christians? Well, higher taxes to pay for programs we don't agree with. That's a hard one. For many, the new health care law, and the list goes on and on. As a Christian,

you can use the legal system. You can use the legal processes that government allows. You can peacefully protest. You can get involved in the political system. You can and should vote. You can try to change the laws that you see as unjust through the legislatures. But at the same time that you do that, you must never harbor anger or bitterness about those laws or those who sought to pass them. And until the law is changed legally, you must obey every human law for the Lord's sake. And throughout that process, you must show respect and honor for every governmental official, even those you didn't vote for and don't agree with. That's what Jesus says. Lloyd-Jones says: "Our Lord says that not only must we not resent these things. We must do them willingly and we must even be prepared to go beyond what is demanded of us. Any resentment that we may feel against the legitimate government of our land is something which our Lord condemns." Not only disobedience, but resentment. I know, I've stopped preaching and gone to meddling.

Let's look at the fourth example our Lord uses – intentional attacks on our personal generosity. Verse 42: "Give to him who asks of you, and do not turn away from him who wants to borrow from you." Again, this does not mean that you must always give a person what they ask you to give them. Don't give money to someone if you know that's going to facilitate their sin. You say, is there biblical justification for that? Absolutely. Try 2 Thessalonians 3:10. Paul says, "If a man won't work, he shouldn't (*what?*) eat" - even if he begs you for food. God Himself doesn't give us everything we ask of Him. James 4:3 – "You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures." We have people who regularly come by the church and ask for financial help. And we do our best to help them, but we try to do so wisely. Some of them, sadly, are professional beggars so we never give cash. If someone says they need food, we have a system in place to help get them food. If they say they need money for gas, then we take them to the local gas station and put gas in their car. I've done that myself on several occasions. But sadly, far more than half the time when a person learns that we won't give them money (and you can imagine some of the uses they have in mind), they just leave. They didn't want the groceries. They didn't want gas. They wanted the money to spend the way they wanted to spend it, and we're not going to give them that and facilitate that sin. We want to help them if there's a legitimate need, but we don't want to facilitate sin. So Jesus does not mean that you must always give a person whatever they ask or you must always loan a person whatever they ask to borrow.

So what does He mean? Remember the context. These commands are in a paragraph with a central theme. He's talking about how to respond when people do evil things to you. So in verse 42, the person looking for financial help is not a friend or family member looking for legitimate financial help. It's a person who is asking this of you with evil intent and motive. In the Jewish context of the first century, the Old Testament law required that Jewish people give to other poor Jewish people interest-free loans. Which, by the way, is exactly the opposite of the way we do it



in our culture. The poor people bear the brunt of the highest interest rates. The law demanded a generous spirit.

But as you might guess, there were those in the culture who sinfully took advantage of the generosity that the Old Testament law required and this is what Jesus is addressing here. If I had time, I'd take you to Luke 6:34, 35, a parallel passage where Jesus says I want you to lend to your enemies. That's what He's talking about here. Here is a person who knows what the law required and they're trying to take advantage of that with a Jewish believer. So here's a Jewish believer in Christ caught between a rock and a hard place. They're commanded to give interest-free loans. They're commanded to give generously. But there were times when they knew that person was intentionally trying to take advantage of all of that. Now if that happened to you, what would the temptation be? Anger, resentment, spirit of revenge, grudges. Jesus says don't do that; instead, just be wisely generous. And by the way, that's still commanded of us in the New Testament as believers. First Timothy 6:18 "Instruct (*those who are wealthy in this world*) to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share..." First John 3-

whoever has the world's goods, (*by the way, that's all of us*) and sees his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him? Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue only, but in deed and truth.

I want you to think about a person who has tried to take advantage of your generosity. How do you respond to that? Jesus says, Don't resent them. Don't get angry. Don't get bitter. Don't seek revenge. Be wisely generous and let God deal with their heart. Jesus says when people do evil to us, we must not respond sinfully. When they attack us sinfully, we must not hostilely oppose them. Don't declare war against that person. Don't harbor a grudge. Don't seek revenge. Why? Well, remember what Jesus said just a few verses before this, back up in verses 13 to 16? He said in the world, we are (what?) salt and light. When you don't respond to personal offenses against you the way everybody else does, (guess what?) you are incredible salt and light. Let me just ask you. When people sin against you, when they wrong you, whom does your response most clearly reflect – Jesus, or all the unbelievers around you? The scribes and Pharisees twisted the Scripture to justify their anger and their bitterness and their grudges and their revenge – *an eye for an eye* – but Jesus says as His disciples we must never tolerate that. Instead, we must respond totally differently. We must intentionally do good to those who attack us. We must return good for their evil. We even should do good to those whom we know are trying to take advantage of us. We must love them and pray for them and genuinely seek their best interest. That's how Jesus demands that we respond.

Here's the really amazing part. It's how Jesus always responded. Think about just during His crucifixion. Jesus experienced all of this. They attacked His personal dignity. He was slapped

and spit on and insulted and ridiculed again and again and again. They attacked His personal property. He was wrongly convicted of a crime and, as a result of that, they took away literally everything He owned. They took away the shirt off His back, literally. Jesus' personal liberty and even His life were taken from Him, both by a corrupt Jewish leadership and by a corrupt Roman governor. Jesus' personal generosity was attacked. Think about this. Who does the Bible say holds all things together? It's Jesus Christ. Jesus was the One who was helping the oxygen those Jewish leaders and Roman soldiers were taking that their body convert into life. He's the One who was keeping their hearts beating. He's the One who provided for their daily needs. And they took those good gifts and they took advantage of it to crucify Him. But how did Jesus respond to those attacks? How did He respond to all those indignities? He loved His enemies, He prayed for them and He continued to do them good. Those Jewish leaders who hurled their insults at Him and wrongly convicted Him went home to enjoy the fruits of His goodness that night. As I think about that this week, my mind went back again and again to one passage – 1 Peter:2:

*. . .while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but He kept on entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously; (but here's where it gets to us, listen to this) He Himself bore our sins (plural, think about the sins you've committed this week. He bore our sins. God credited those sins that you've committed to Jesus and then treated Jesus as if He had sinned those sins. He Himself bore our sins) in His body on the tree...*

That's what we celebrate in the Lord's table.

Our Father, we thank You for this powerful reminder of our Lord. Lord, help us not merely today but every day to live at the foot of the cross - to remember our Lord, to remember what He accomplished for us and to live at the side of an empty tomb remembering that He is alive and is in Your presence and one day will return for us. Father, we bless You and thank You for the gospel proclaimed, even through this celebration together. Lord, as we go from here, we pray that You would help us to live in a way that honors Him, that honors His sacrifice. Lord, may we not return evil for acts of evil, but may we be those like Him who return good for evil, who pray for those who are our enemies, who love them. We pray it in His great name and for the honor of His name. Amen.