



Matthew 5:38-42  
A New Economy of Righteousness:  
Releasing Revenge  
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Let's remember the context prior to our reading our text for the day:

- This is God in the flesh speaking authoritatively on matters of life and salvation.
- In the Beatitudes, Jesus describes the character and nature of those in the Kingdom of Heaven
- Using salt and light, Jesus describes the purpose of those in the Kingdom of Heaven
- In contrast to the scribes and Pharisees, Jesus fulfills the law as God intended and becomes the only means by which one can enter the Kingdom of Heaven
- Now Jesus uses six examples to demonstrate God's intent in the law

Intro: One winter day 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!

Read Scripture Passage:

ESV | Matthew 5:38-42 <sup>38</sup> "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' <sup>39</sup> 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. <sup>40</sup> And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. <sup>41</sup> And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. <sup>42</sup> Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you.

Textual Idea: Personal revenge and retaliation reveal a prideful, selfish heart far from God and a life that is inconsistent with the claims of the Gospel.

Those who have been transformed from the inside out by the gospel respond to abuse and mistreatment in the same way that Christ did: with mercy, grace, forgiveness and service.

- 1) In God's justice, those who had done wrong were protected from disproportionate **PUNISHMENT** and **VIGILANTE JUSTICE**. Verse 38
  - a. ESV | [Ex 21:23](#) 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.
  - b. ESV | [Le 24:19](#) If anyone injures his neighbor, as he has done it shall be done to him, [20](#) fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth; whatever injury he has given a person shall be given to him.
  - c. ESV | [Dt 19:15](#) "A single witness shall not suffice against a person for any crime or for any wrong in connection with any offense that he has committed. Only on the evidence of two witnesses or of three witnesses shall a charge be established. [16](#) If a malicious witness arises to accuse a person of wrongdoing, [17](#) then both parties to the dispute shall appear before the LORD, before the priests and the judges who are in office in those days. [18](#) The judges shall inquire diligently, and if the witness is a false witness and has accused his brother falsely, [19](#) then you shall do to him as he had meant to do to his brother. So you shall purge the evil from your midst. [20](#) And the rest shall hear and fear, and shall never again commit any such evil among you. [21](#) Your eye shall not pity. It shall be life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot.
  - d. These three passages but particularly Exodus 21:23-27 serve as the basis for what has come to be known as the **Lex Talionis** (Latin for "law of retaliation")
    - i. which is the principle of retributive justice expressed in the phrase "an eye for an eye," (Hebrew: עין תחת עין) from Exodus 21:23–27.) The basis of this form of law is the principle of proportionate punishment, often expressed under the motto "Let the punishment fit the crime," which particularly applies to mirror punishments (which may or may not be proportional).
    - ii. At the root of the non-biblical form of this principle is the belief that one of the purposes of the law is to provide equitable retaliation for an offended party and protection for the offending party. It defined and restricted the extent of retaliation. This early belief is reflected in the [Code of Hammurabi](#) and in the laws of the Old Testament.
    - iii. The *Lex Talionis*, while not the perfect principle, still ensures that society's response does not exceed the original wrong.
  - e. Notice that the point of these three passages was to:
    - i. limit vigilante justice and personal vengeance

1. Proverbs 20:22 Do not say, “I will repay evil”; wait for the LORD, and he will deliver you.
  2. Proverbs 24:29 Do not say, “I will do to him as he has done to me; I will pay the man back for what he has done.”
- ii. Ensure justice for the offended party
  - iii. Be done by civil authorities not by individuals to protect the public and promote holiness
- f. In contrast to each of the first four examples that Christ uses in the Sermon on the Mount where the Pharisees had reduced or relaxed the application of God’s law, the Pharisees are now guilty of over-applying God’s law.
    - i. They had promoted the abuse of the lex talionis by promoting and encouraging personal vengeance and retaliation.
    - ii. Some leaders had gathered like minded people and caused uprisings against Rome (Zealots) so, this was a hot button issue in light of the Roman oppression and mistreatment of the Jews.
  - g. Not only do the Pharisees miss the letter of God’s law but that have likewise missed the spirit of God’s law as well.
  - h. Jesus commands that we not resist the one who is evil
    - i. The word resist here is often used in a legal sense to sue
    - ii. Here it means that we should not immediately appeal to our personal rights and legal options to defend ourselves in every case. That we should not demand our rights but ultimately that we should serve others.
  - i. The point here is that with justice left up to the civil authorities to administer, God’s people are liberated from the need to exact personal retribution and were able to pursue a higher ethical statement – namely loving and serving even those who mistreat them.
  - j. Not only must disciples reject all behavior motivated only by a desire for retaliation, but they also must positively work for the good of those with whom they would otherwise be at odds.
  - k. ESV | [Ro 3:21](#) But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it— [22](#) the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: [23](#) for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, [24](#) and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, [25](#) whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God’s righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. [26](#) It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.
  - l. *It is a picture of the Gospel in a sense* – that God’s justice has been satisfied in Christ as the payment of sins so now He is free to demonstrate His mercy and grace in Christ! With justice no longer in the way, mercy comes running!

Jesus now gives four specific illustrations to show two expected attitudes in the face of mistreatment:

- 2) Those changed by the power of the Gospel consider **SERVING OTHERS FREELY** more valuable than demanding **PERSONAL RIGHTS!** VERSES 39, 41
- a. Verse 39 – slap in the face, turn the other cheek
    - i. This was a common way Roman soldiers would demean Jews as they flaunted their power over them.
    - ii. It was seen as a huge insult more than an act of violence
    - iii. Hence the expression “a slap in the face”
    - iv. Jewish law had developed a heavy fine for anyone who slapped another in the face so a victim would have the right to pursue legal action against an assailant
    - v. Jesus tells us to turn the other cheek
      - 1. This is not a command to endure physical abuse. Physical violence cannot be tolerated and must be prosecuted but one should not engage in personal physical retaliation
      - 2. This is a command not to stand and trade insults. To refuse to assert your dominance in a situation by demeaning the other person and asserting yourself as right. It is a command to refuse to worry about your reputation ahead of worrying about the spread of the Gospel.
  - b. Verse 41 – compel to go a mile
    - i. Allusion to the practice of the Roman soldiers of commandeering Jews to carry a burden for them.
    - ii. The law limited the distance that could be required to one mile (more accurately, 1000 paces)
    - iii. This was very demeaning, often excessively inconvenient and often done with contempt for the Jews.
    - iv. Jesus commands here that we should not only do that which is required by the law but that we should go an extra mile and willingly serve those who would mistreat us.
  - c. How is it that anyone can have this kind of attitude in the face of mistreatment?
    - i. Because those who belong to the Kingdom of Heaven have been transformed from the inside out (new BIOS installed) and now live not according to any worldly kingdom but according to the Kingdom of Heaven
    - ii. That Kingdom is more concerned with declaring the fame and glory of God than advancing personal reputation or protecting personal rights.
    - iii. That Kingdom was ushered in by our example Jesus Christ who did not demand that he be treated as the Son of God but took on humanity and willingly served those who would crucify Him in order to achieve salvation for any who would believe in Him, even those who mistreated Him and killed Him.
    - iv. It is a Kingdom hard-wired with faith and love –much needed attributes if one will stand and turn the other cheek and make oneself vulnerable to more mistreatment
    - v. It is a Kingdom of ultimate justice. That one day every wrong will be eternally punished so we can trust every injustice to be corrected.

- d. We have for our example, Jesus Christ:
- i. ESV | [Jn 13:1](#) Now before the Feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. [2](#) During supper, when the devil had already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to betray him, [3](#) Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going back to God, [4](#) rose from supper. He laid aside his outer garments, and taking a towel, tied it around his waist. [5](#) Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was wrapped around him. [6](#) He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, do you wash my feet?" [7](#) Jesus answered him, "What I am doing you do not understand now, but afterward you will understand." [8](#) Peter said to him, "You shall never wash my feet." Jesus answered him, "If I do not wash you, you have no share with me." [9](#) Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!" [10](#) Jesus said to him, "The one who has bathed does not need to wash, except for his feet, but is completely clean. And you are clean, but not every one of you." [11](#) For he knew who was to betray him; that was why he said, "Not all of you are clean." [12](#) When he had washed their feet and put on his outer garments and resumed his place, he said to them, "Do you understand what I have done to you? [13](#) You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. [14](#) If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. [15](#) For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you. [16](#) Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. [17](#) If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them. [18](#) I am not speaking of all of you; I know whom I have chosen. But the Scripture will be fulfilled, 'He who ate my bread has lifted his heel against me.' [19](#) I am telling you this now, before it takes place, that when it does take place you may believe that I am he. [20](#) Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever receives the one I send receives me, and whoever receives me receives the one who sent me." [21](#) After saying these things, Jesus was troubled in his spirit, and testified, "Truly, truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me." [22](#) The disciples looked at one another, uncertain of whom he spoke. [23](#) One of his disciples, whom Jesus loved, was reclining at table at Jesus' side, [24](#) so Simon Peter motioned to him to ask Jesus of whom he was speaking. [25](#) So that disciple, leaning back against Jesus, said to him, "Lord, who is it?" [26](#) Jesus answered, "It is he to whom I will give this morsel of bread when I have dipped it." So when he had dipped the morsel, he gave it to Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot. [27](#) Then after he had taken the morsel, Satan entered into him. Jesus said to him, "What you are going to do, do quickly." [28](#) Now no one at the table knew why he said this to him. [29](#) Some thought that, because Judas had the moneybag, Jesus was telling

him, “Buy what we need for the feast,” or that he should give something to the poor. [30](#) So, after receiving the morsel of bread, he immediately went out. And it was night.

ii. Notice:

1. Love – verse 1 – completely – to the end, full
2. Faith in God – verses 2-4 – He knew whose He was, who He was, what He was doing, and where He was going.
  - a. If you are prone to insecurity and fear of man, you will likely never be able to comply with Jesus instruction here!
3. He was convinced of ultimate Justice – Philippians 2:5-11!

3) Those changed by the power of the Gospel consider **ADVANCING THE KINGDOM** more valuable than protecting **PERSONAL POSSESSIONS!** VERSES 40, 42

a. If someone sues you for your tunic –

- i. Standard Jewish clothing: loin cloth worn under a tunic (a long gown-like shirt) worn under a cloak, held in place by a belt, sandals and a head covering

ii. Cloak was a special piece of clothing

1. Since clothing was hard and time consuming to make, cloaks were very expensive and most people only owned one
2. Cloaks could be used as a blanket, sack to carry goods, pad to sit on and a pledge for a debt
3. If it was given for a pledge, it must be returned to the owner at night because many poor people used them to sleep in

b. Give to who asks and do not turn away those who want to borrow

- i. Ask here = **160** αἰτέω (*aiteō*): vb.; ≡ used in context of poor person begging for alms

1. ESV | [Ac 3:2](#) And a man lame from birth was being carried, whom they laid daily at the gate of the temple that is called the Beautiful Gate to ask alms of those entering the temple.

ii. Borrow here is in the context of lending money that will likely never be repaid

1. ESV | [Lk 6:34](#) And if you lend to those from whom you expect to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to get back the same amount. [35](#) But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return, and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, for he is kind to the ungrateful and the evil.

iii. As Augustine rightly noted, the text says “give to everyone that asks,” not “give everything to him that asks”

- iv. ESV | [2 Th 3:7](#) For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us, because we were not idle when we were with you, [8](#) nor did we eat anyone’s bread without paying for it, but with toil and labor we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you. [9](#) It was not because we do not have that right, but to give you in ourselves an example to imitate. [10](#) For even when we were with you, we would give you this command: If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat.

- v. When Helping Hurts – sometimes we do more harm than good, especially when we do for people what they can do for themselves.
- vi. While we must qualify Jesus statement in the context of the whole counsel of Scripture, Jesus makes no such qualification. He simply says give to those who ask.
  - 1. The issue here is having the world’s goods and shutting up our hearts to those in need.
- vii. Ultimately it boils down to this. “Kingdom people are generous people.”
- c. How is it that anyone can have this kind of attitude in the face of being taken advantage of?
  - i. Because those who belong to the Kingdom of Heaven have been transformed from the inside out (new BIOS installed) and now live not according to any worldly kingdom but according to the Kingdom of Heaven
  - ii. That Kingdom is more concerned with declaring the fame and glory of God than advancing personal ambition or protecting personal possessions.
  - iii. That Kingdom was ushered in by our example Jesus Christ who did not demand that he be treated as King of Kings but lived in near poverty, taking on humanity and served others who should have been serving Him
  - iv. It is a Kingdom that acknowledges the unsurpassed value of righteousness as far greater than worldly wealth and possessions.
    - 1. ESV | [1 Jn 2:15](#) Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. [16](#) For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life—is not from the Father but is from the world. [17](#) And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever.
    - 2. ESV | [Php 3:7](#) But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. [8](#) Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ [9](#) and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith— [10](#) that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, [11](#) that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.
- d. Again, we have as our example Christ
  - i. John 13

Conclusion: “I have seen Christians in communist prisons with 50 pounds of chains on their feet, tortured with red-hot iron pokers, in whose throats spoonfuls of salt had been forced, being kept afterward without water, starving, whipped, suffering from cold, and praying with fervor for the communists. ... Afterward, the communists came to prison too. “Now the tortured and the torturers were in the same cell. And while the non-Christians beat them (torturers), Christians took their defense. I have seen

Christians giving away their last slice of bread (we had at that time one slice a week) and the medicine which could save their lives to a sick communist torturer who was now a fellow-prisoner.”—Wurmbrand<sup>1</sup>  
ii.

Can you trust God enough and love people enough to serve those who mistreat you?

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<sup>1</sup> Tan, P. L. (1996). *Encyclopedia of 7700 Illustrations: Signs of the Times*. Garland, TX: Bible Communications, Inc.