

Matthew 5:38-42: Abolishing All Retaliation

Last Sunday you may have seen that there was a shooting in a Texas church. A man came in to the church in a trench coat that covered up a firearm. Shortly after the sermon began the man pulled the gun out and began opening fire. Also sitting in the congregation was a man who had owned a gun range in that area for over 20 years and who also happens to be the head of the church's security team. He pulled out his pistol and killed the perpetrator on the spot saving who knows how many lives.

Did he do the right thing? Or did he disobey Jesus's very simple command here to not retaliate? If you've watched anything on social media there are very strong opinions on both sides.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer - the German pastor and spy who lived during Hitler's regime - was part of a plot to assassinate Adolf Hitler. Is it okay for Christians to assassinate people? Even people like Hitler?

There is a quote that is often attributed to Bonhoeffer that many Christians rally around: "Silence in the face of evil is evil itself; God will not hold us guiltless. Not to speak is to speak. Not to act is to act." That's a powerful quote because it basically says not stopping evil is actually an act of evil. The quote, it turns out, is probably not from Bonhoeffer at all. But the question remains: Is it true? Is it a greater evil to not act than to act?

This leads into a whole host of ethical and moral questions:

- Is it okay for Christians to be involved in war? If you are a soldier you might be placed in a situation where the enemy is actually your brother in Christ. Christians fought on both sides of the revolutionary war, both sides of the civil war.
- Is it okay for Christians to stop or even kill people who are breaking into our houses or hurting our family?
- Should you be carrying your pistol to church?

This passage touches on issues related to Christian ethics: self-defense, just war theory, social issues related to helping the poor and lending to one another.

We can't answer every ethical question there is. I'll try to answer some of them. But let me say we need to be very careful as Christians that we don't get so caught up in our own ideology that we're not able to listen to what the Bible has to say. I see Christians all the time who dismiss things that the Bible clearly says because it doesn't match their understanding of the world. That's true with moral issues, with political issues, and with theological issues. "The Bible can't mean this because that would mean have to do something I don't want to do." Do you think? We can't ignore or dismiss Scripture because it might make us uncomfortable.

But we also need to be careful that we don't try to force Scripture to prove things it's not trying to prove. And we need to make sure we're not reading our situation back into the Scripture. I don't think Jesus had conceal carry laws in mind when he said these things. I don't think he had Spokane's homeless situation in mind when he said "give to the one who begs."

There might be some principles that we can use here to help us think through those situations, we just need to be careful to not go beyond what Scripture says. Let me walk you through what Jesus is saying and then we'll come back to some of those questions in a little bit.

First of all, we need to understand that what Jesus is talking about here are *interpersonal* conflicts. Conflicts between 2 individuals. And second, these are relatively minor offenses.

So, we've got a guy who gets slapped by another guy. A guy who gets sued for his shirt. Someone who is forced to walk a Roman mile - 1,000 steps. And how we might deal with someone begging us for money or asking us for a loan.

We're not talking about whether or not Christians can be Navy Seals. We're not talking about Christians taking part in class action lawsuits or taking legal action against hardened criminals.

These are personal situations, and they are minor situations. Most of what it means to follow Jesus is going to be how we deal with minor issues or offenses on a day to day basis.

So we'll have to look elsewhere to see if Christians can serve in the military. I think we can, by the way. We're also going to have to look elsewhere to see if Christians can sue other people or press legal charges against criminals. Again, I think there's a place for that.

But let's keep the discussion where Jesus keeps the discussion. So here's what I think this whole passage is all about: the gospel calls us to not retaliate. Christians should be known for deescalation of personal conflicts and for refusing to take revenge. We should never be accused of having a chip on our shoulder or getting even.

Let's start with the OT Law that is probably familiar to most of us. **Read 38-39a**

Okay, what does an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth mean? In the OT, an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth was basically God's way of saying the punishment should fit the crime. So in the OT if someone murdered someone else, they would lose their life. That was justice. To **not** put a murderer to death was considered unjust. At the same time, if someone stole something, it would be wrong to put them to death. That was too much punishment.

And so God implemented "eye for an eye" when it came to legal situations. Make sure the punishment fits the crime. Not too much, not too little. Punishment should be reasonable.

What's important to keep in mind is that this principle was for legal situations. It was for judges to implement when a verdict was given in a trial. This was not a prescription for how you treat your neighbor who personally wronged you. But that's exactly what the Jewish leaders had turned this into. This legal principle became means of revenge: Someone slapped me, I'll slap them back and they won't forget it. Someone did me wrong in a financial deal, I'll get them back.

That's why Jesus cites this **legal** principle but his correction is about simple **personal** attacks. He's saying the Law was not meant to teach us how to take revenge on each other in personal matters.

Look over at **Rom. 12:14-21**. This is a pretty well-known passage about how we as Christians are to respond to those who persecute us. **Read**

This is basically what Jesus says isn't it? The response to reviling is blessing. When we desire to take personal vengeance we don't because we remember that God will unleash vengeance in a way we never can. Either our persecutor will end up in hell forever, in which case God's punishment is infinitely greater than what we could do anyway. Or, God in his mercy will save this person and the vengeance they deserve has been placed on Jesus. And they, like us, are God's children.

Does that mean we should never seek criminal charges? Does that mean we should never seek the protection of government from unjust actions? No, of course not. For two reasons. The first is the very next passage.

Read Romans 13:1-6

That's interesting. God has appointed governing authorities to punish evildoers. That's part of God's common grace in this age: that our governments punish evildoers. Now, are they perfect at this? No, of course not. But that's what God has designed.

So Christians can seek legal action against criminal behavior. There are times when Christians sin against each other that we should avoid all legal entanglements because it brings a bad name to Jesus. But that doesn't mean we avoid all legal action.

Here's another way we know we can use the legal system: Jesus and the apostles did it.

When Jesus was beaten during his trial he protested that he had done nothing wrong. It's okay to appeal to the legal system.

The apostle Paul appealed to the legal system many times. When 40 Jewish zealots plotted to kill him, he sought the protection of the state and the government protected him. When he was threatened with the death penalty he appealed to Caesar.

Listen, as Christians, we're not commanded to just take it on the chin for every offense. We can use the God-given legal means we have. Not every Christian has these means, but we do and we can use them. But the general thrust is that as followers of Jesus we leave ultimate vengeance to God.

So as we turn back to **Matt. 5**, let's look at 4 specific ways Jesus calls us to not retaliate. How do we turn mountains into molehills?

1) The gospel empowers us to turn *physical* mountains into molehills. **Read 38**

Now, I don't know what comes to your mind when you think of turning the other cheek. Does that mean if someone starts fighting with us we just let them beat us up? Does it mean we taunt them, "That's all you got?" Do we just not respond at all?

What we need to understand here is that this scenario is actually more about shame than it is about fighting, although they are tied together. Put your right out in front of you for a second. How would you slap someone on the right cheek with your right hand? It's a backhanded slap. It's not a closed-fisted hook. In ancient cultures a backhanded slap wasn't so much about fighting, per se, it was about shaming or challenging someone to a feud or fight. The idea is that someone has backhanded you in an effort to show that you are inferior, or you are shameful, or to challenge you to a fight. It was usually one hit and it was all over *unless* the person who got slapped started swinging and escalated the situation.

Interestingly, in ancient times, you could be fined for starting a fight with someone. The fine doubled if it was a backhanded slap because it was recognized as public shaming.

Jesus says, "You want to follow me? No retaliation."

There was no one who bore more shame than Jesus. He was publicly mocked and degraded. His own family ridiculed him. Jesus knows shame. And because Jesus knew shame for us, we are called to bear that shame with him.

Heb. 13:12-13: So Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood. Therefore let us go to him outside the camp and bear the reproach he endured.

Jesus bore our shame, we can bear some shame too. When someone strikes us, we don't retaliate. We don't seek to shame them and humiliate them. We offer to endure even more shame. I think Jesus is using hyperbole here. I don't think we should actually turn our face and get smacked again. I think he's saying that we do just the opposite of revenge. We double down on being willing to suffer physical pain and social shaming for his sake.

Now, back to a couple of questions we began with: Does this mean we can't defend ourselves or our family if someone starts a fight or breaks into our house? Does this mean we can't disarm an attacker? Should we become pacifists?

Is Jesus even talking about those things? No. At least not here.

If someone starts attacking your family or an innocent bystander, I believe we as followers of Jesus we are called to do what we can to stop them. If it's a simple altercation we break it up. If it's a serious altercation we restrain them. If it's a lethal situation we might need to use lethal force as well.

You can't honestly say to your neighbor or your wife that you love them while someone is harming them and you are standing idly by watching. Sometimes loving our neighbor means protecting them from other neighbors.

I don't want to get too political here, but because we are Americans we need to consider how our place as citizens within the government. Other Christians around the world don't need to consider this because they have no ability to carry firearms, but here we do and that right adds some complexity to this discussion.

Bill of Rights, Amendments II: A well regulated militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear arms, shall not be infringed.

The second amendment is not about hunting, or target practice. It's not even primarily about keeping your home safe. The second amendment is primarily about security of a free state. The founding fathers said it was necessary that citizens act on behalf of the government to keep the state secure.

What that means for us as Christians in America is that we have the ability to act as agents of security on behalf of the government. We become government actors. We don't have to do this, but we can. And when we do we act as agents.

So back to Jack Wilson in the Texas church. If it had been a uniformed officer in the church rather than him, would the uniformed officer have done the same thing? Yes. Because he would be acting in the interest of the security of the state. Our government gives its citizens that same ability. The issue there was not retaliation. It was de-escalation of a mass-murderer.

Now, I will say if you carry you need to make sure you know what you're doing. In order to have this ability you need to be well-regulated - which means good and trained. You need to practice, know the laws, you need to know when and when not to do anything.

But what Jesus is getting at here is don't retaliate to physical shaming.

2) The Gospel empowers us to turn *legal* mountain's into molehills. Read 39

So this is a weird scenario. Someone is suing you for your tunic. What's that all about? We don't even have tunics anymore. What was a tunic? It was basically a long undershirt for your robe. Ancient people would wear a loin cloth - kind of like underwear. Then they had a tunic, a long shirt/robe thing; almost like long underwear. Then you had your outer garments. Then you could wear a cloak - like a coat.

So what kind of crazy world was Jesus living in where people would sue one another for long underwear? Well, here's what would happen: In Jesus's day people were often very poor. And literally all they had to their name were the clothes they were wearing. So they might need to borrow some money for some food or something small. So they'd go to someone who had money and ask for a loan. And the lender would ask for collateral. What thing can you give me to ensure you'll pay me back? Well, they only had one thing: their clothes.

So they would give the lender their tunic as collateral. Hold on to my tunic and if I don't pay you back you can keep it. This sounds weird to us who live in the age of Walmart and Amazon where no one wants to even touch someone else's long underwear, let alone keep it. We're all a bunch of germaphobes. But in ancient times tunics were actually fairly expensive so they worked as collateral for small loans.

Now, sometimes there was a disagreement. Sometimes the poor person didn't pay. Or sometimes the lender would exerted power over the poor person simply because they were poor and couldn't fight back.

That seems to be the situation Jesus has in mind: the poor person is being wronged by the rich person. Jesus doesn't say "Pay them back what you borrowed or what you owe." No the situation is that they are being unjustly taken to court. And Jesus says, "Look, if they're going to take your tunic, give them your cloak as well." Don't fight them, don't try to get them back, don't escalate the situation. In fact, if they really feel wronged let them have your coat as well. The cloak was actually more expensive. And, the OT Law protected a poor person's cloak. Since poor people in ancient times often lived in the open fields, a cloak was their sleeping bag.

But here Jesus says that his followers will do even more than that. They could claim rights under the OT Law and keep their cloak. But Jesus says if offering your cloak will make the situation right, offer them your cloak as

well. This is the exact opposite of retaliation. This is lending an olive branch to an enemy who is trying to take advantage of us.

This is huge. We talk a lot about rights in our country. Constitutional rights, God-given rights, how we have rights for this or rights for that. The Bible continually calls Christians to realize that in an ultimate sense we have no rights. We are blood-bought slaves of Christ, whose lives are not our own but God's. And whose stuff is not our own, but God's. And if we have the opportunity to use our stuff to advance the gospel and show charity, then so be it.

Why would followers of Jesus do this? Because Jesus did this. He left his glorious throne in heaven to take on human flesh, being born in a barn or cave and laid in a feeding trough. He gave up all his rights. And during his ministry Jesus was basically a homeless man.

Matt. 8:20: "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." The Lord Jesus was basically homeless for his 3 year ministry.

"Well, maybe Jesus was homeless, but he never gave up his cloak. What does he know?" Remember what the soldiers were casting lots for as they crucified him? His garments - his tunic, his cloak, everything. (**Matt. 27:35**) He gave up all these things, even as he gave up his own life. And he did it trusting the same promises we can trust.

Jesus will say a little later in the sermon that God gives us all the food we need and all the clothes we need, so we don't need to be anxious about anything. We can use God's things for God's Kingdom for God's glory.

Now, does this mean we can never be involved in lawsuits or in criminal prosecutions or taking people to court? No - I think there is a time and place for those things. The Alliance for Defending Freedom is a Christian legal organization that has played a part in over 50 legal victories at the US Supreme Court. Is that okay to do? Of course it is. We can use the legal system if need be to protect the integrity of the gospel.

The apostle Paul took up legal action when he was wrongly beaten in Philippi. The city magistrates beat him without a trial not realizing he was a Roman citizen. Then they just wanted to let him go quietly. He said: you come let me out and apologize for what you've done. He was using his rights as a Roman citizen to protect the gospel from being slandered. He also used his rights as a Roman citizens to escape unfair trial and get a free ride to Rome where he could stand trial before Caesar.

Remember what is at issue here is a small personal conflict. We might call this small claims court. Where we can give up something relatively small for the sake of the gospel.

3) The gospel empowers us to turn political mountains into molehills. Read 41

This touches on a particularly frustrating aspect of Jewish life in Jesus's day. We have to understand that in Jesus's time, Israel was not a sovereign country. Israel, like most of the countries around the Mediterranean, were under Roman occupation. They had some freedoms and some individual identity but ultimately they did what Rome said. In AD 70 the Jews tried to revolt against Rome and Rome leveled Jerusalem to the ground just as Jesus said they would.

Well, one of the more frustrating aspects of Roman control was that if a soldier or dignitary was walking through town and saw someone nearby, they could force the person to carry their baggage for a Roman mile. A Roman mile was a 1,000 paces. It'd be like forcing someone to carry their bags from McDonald's to the Picket Fence. And there was no choice - they had to.

And it wasn't just luggage. You remember Simon of Cyrene? He was the man that was forced to carry Jesus's cross when he could no longer carry it. He was forced to carry a huge bloody wooden cross by Roman soldiers so they could kill the Lord. He had to do that by Law. Some ancient laws even required that if you had a donkey, they could load up you and your donkey for a Roman mile.

Just imagine if Russia invaded the US and occupied us. And Russian soldiers forced us to carry their bags. Or they forced us to carry their machine guns so they could go execute American citizens. That's what was happening. It was cruel and frustrating.

And then Jesus says: If someone forces you to carry their whatever from McDonald's to the Pickett Fence in the heat of the summer or the dead of winter go with them to the Deer Park library as well. If they force you 1 Roman mile, go with them 2.

This was inconvenient, humiliating, labor intensive, and often carrying stuff you didn't want to carry. Maybe you could revolt, maybe you could run away, maybe you could complain the whole time. Jesus says you go twice as far.

As disgusting as Roman soldiers often were, Jesus says that his followers won't retaliate or despise the very people who can take their freedom. Rather, they will serve them.

God has given us the authorities we have - sinful, imperfect authorities - for our good. And if we are required to serve them, then so be it. And we do it as hard as we can for the glory of God.

Imagine Roman soldiers who have forced 50 people to carry their stuff 3/4 of a mile and out of the 50 only 1 doesn't complain and they actually go the literal extra mile. What's up with that guy? That guy knows there's a God in heaven who has given him this Roman soldier for his good. And he can serve the guy above and beyond for God's glory.

The closest thing we have to forced service is jury duty. And I don't think I've ever heard someone not complain about jury duty. What if instead of complaining we were thankful for a political system that, while imperfect, seeks true justice from its peers.

Political tension has always been high in every society in every age. The gospel empowers us to turn personal political mountains into molehills.

4) The gospel empowers us to turn **financial** mountains into molehills. Read 42

There's nothing that can cause tension among people more than money. Here, in both situations Jesus is talking about giving to someone without expecting any repayment. Christians are to be the most generous of all people because we know the money that we have is not ours. Whose money is it? It's God's. We just manage it for a time.

Beggars in Jesus's day were those who physically could not work: they were lame or blind. They weren't the guy standing on the side of a road with signs for 6 hours a day making \$25/hour tax free. But at the same time, there were a lot of lame people in Israel. Just think of all the people Jesus healed. Thousands and thousands of people. Even if they were legit, a person could get beggar fatigue. Jesus says, don't get beggar fatigue. Do what you can to help.

Maybe if someone just wanted to borrow money you'd be more inclined to do give it - he brings up lending here. Don't refuse to lend money. Why you refuse to lend money? Because they might not pay you back. Jesus says lend anyway. The insinuation is: and don't expect them to repay. I'm actually not all that excited to lend people money. If you have the means, just give them the money. If they want to pay back at a later time, that's on them.

Now listen, there's only 4 million reasons not to lend to people. Or not to give money to people.

Even the apostle Paul says that if any man is not willing to work, let him not what? Eat.

Maybe this guy is guy irresponsible and should just get a job. Maybe your friend is making all the wrong choices and giving money is enabling her to do stuff she shouldn't. Drugged homeless guys don't need money, they need a job. You gave money to someone once and they abused your generosity. I get all that. We often abuse the generosity of Jesus in our life. Especially with money.

But the point of this passage isn't to worm our way out of doing these things. Or even find legitimate reasons to not do them. It's to find ways to do them.

What he wants are followers who look for opportunities to show grace rather than retaliate. To de-escalate and bring peace rather than to escalate and bring war. To love our neighbor as God has loved us.

Pray