

## How to Stand against Evil Even If We Are Not to Resist Evil

Matthew 5:38-42; Romans 12:17-21

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There is not a sinful passion that can bring about such great destruction in such a short period of time as the desire to get even with someone who has offended you. Revenge may be manifested in inwardly or outwardly. It may silently be cherished within your heart or spoken under your breath or it may take a more violent outlet as we see all of the time in riots, murders, burning of businesses. Personal vengeance is always sinful because it is motivated by selfish pride and hatred to repay the wrong committed against you.

Whenever we are personally offended and there wells up within us a fire to get even with someone for an offense committed against us, we have fallen into the grievous sin of personal vengeance (by way of an angry response, by striking the offender, by honking your horn, by refusing to do a duty or doing it poorly, or by just nursing a grudge in our heart).

Jesus has something to say about vengeance in our text today. His words revealed the pride in the Pharisees, and they reveal our pride as well. The main points from our text today are: (1) The Pharisees' Perverted Interpretation of God's Law in the Matter of Vengeance (Matthew 5:38); (2) Christ's Faithful Interpretation of God's Law in the Matter of Vengeance (Matthew 5:39-42).

### I. The Pharisees' Perverted Interpretation of God's Law in the Matter of Vengeance (Matthew 5:38).

A. Jesus continues to reveal the hypocrisy of the Pharisees and their pretended claim to uphold the righteousness of God's Law. In truth, they were not actually judging themselves by the standard of God's Law (which would have revealed them to be sinners in need of Christ's perfect righteousness), but rather were judging themselves by their own standard (while claiming they were following God's Law). Any of us can be righteous before God when we make up our own standards. That's not difficult to do. It's what the Pharisees did. Jesus shows that they actually condemned themselves by moving the goal posts; for they were tongue-murderers, eye-adulterers, covenant-breakers, and vengeful. That is why so many think they are going to heaven. They think their good by their own standards. But we are not judged by our standards, but by God's holy standard—His Law. Without Jesus there is no hope.

B. Jesus begins with that familiar wording that expresses the oral tradition of the elders: "Ye have heard that it hath been said." It is not what is stated that is wrong in itself, but what is omitted. What did the Pharisees omit from what Jesus states in Matthew 5:38? They omitted the context of this law: "an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth."

1. It was not ordained by God to be administered personally, but rather by the judges of Israel in a civil court (Exodus 21:22-25; Leviticus 24:19-20; Deuteronomy 19:16-21). It was a law that said that a punishment must be equal to the crime. This was God's good law to guard against either excessive or lenient civil punishment. However, the Pharisees granted a "right" for individuals to return evil for evil, to repay those who injured or slandered you.

2. They sinfully ignored the fact that God always forbade personal revenge (Leviticus 19:18 ("thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife"; the good Samaritan); Proverbs 20:22; Proverbs 24:29; Romans 12:17-21; 1 Thessalonians 5:15; 1 Peter 3:8-9). Rather than forbidding personal vengeance, the Pharisees used God's Law to promote it. How this reveals our own sinful hearts. How we justify our vengeful wrath against our children because they disobeyed or rebelled. How many times does our anger only express that want to get even with our children rather than we want to lovingly teach and correct them?

C. This law of just retribution was given by God not to promote personal vengeance in our hearts,

words, and actions, but rather to limit lawful retribution to the civil courts that a punishment appropriate to the crime be administered (e.g. no death penalty or imprisonment for stealing, but rather restitution). It is important to note here that neither the institution of the family nor of the church is called to administer retributive justice (an eye for an eye), but are called to administer corrective discipline to promote reconciliation and growth. Parents and the eldership are not to get even with children or members. God as our Father does not punish His children, but rather chastens them out of love for their good (Hebrews 12). However, it is yet wise in our discipline not to make the discipline too excessive or too lenient—but loving, fair, and proportionate to the sin committed.

## II. **Christ’s Faithful Interpretation of God’s Law in the Matter of Vengeance (Matthew 5:39-42).**

A. To counter the false interpretation of the Pharisees, Jesus declares, “But I say unto you.” This is Christ’s inspired interpretation against personal retaliation to one who does you wrong, abuses you, hates you, or persecutes you. In all that follows, Jesus intends to paint such a stark contrast between the righteousness of God’s Law and the unrighteousness of the Pharisees that He uses graphic language that shakes us to the core of our being. Jesus is not a stranger to hyperbole to make a point as we see shall see (Matthew 5:29; Matthew 19:24).

1. The general principle against personal retaliation is first given by the Lord, “That ye resist not evil” (or better, “the evil man”). We are to resist Satan and all evil (James 4:7) not with carnal weapons but with spiritual weapons (Ephesians 6:10-18). But what Jesus is saying here is that we are not to resist the evil man who comes against us by way of rendering to him evil for evil. We can defend ourselves (verbally and physically) until the threat is subdued, but we cannot go beyond that to pay him back. Actually, Jesus teaches we are to do the evil man good.

a. God does not forbid the use of all violent force. A just war to defend a nation against attack (as Israel waged against the Canaanites who attacked them); (2) Capital punishment against those guilty of crimes God says deserve death (Romans 13:4); (3) Necessary defense of self or others (Exodus 22:2-3).

b. Our faithful forefathers did take up arms against the king when the king took up arms against them for preaching the truth.

2. **Turn the other cheek (Matthew 5:39).** This is hyperbole. We are not to invite someone to strike us on the other cheek. Jesus did not rise up in rage when He was unjustly smitten on the cheek (Micah 5:1). He endured even an unjust scourging, a crown of thorns that was beaten into His skull, mocking, and a cruel crucifixion for His beloved elect. He is our example. We are not to cast His example off by saying, “He was suffering as our substitute. He was bearing God’s wrath.” That’s true, but He has given us an example to follow (1 Peter 2:21,23). This smiting on the cheek is a slap of insult rather than a blow with the fist. It will not do to say that he/she started the insult. This begins in the home. Will you retaliate when you are insulted or will you willingly take another insult and leave a testimony for Jesus Christ? This is the way of the cross—death to self.

3. **Let him have thy cloak (Matthew 5:40).** When you are unjustly sued for something you can well part with that will not injure yourself or your family, will you retaliate and counter sue to get even, or will you not only give him your inner garment (coat) and your outer garment (cloak)? Will you cling to your rights or give them away for the sake of the kingdom of Christ (1 Corinthians 9:4-6,15). Can you part with some worldly goods that are unjustly taken from you without blowing up with rage and revenge? This is the way of the cross—death to self.

4. **Go a second mile (Matthew 5:41).** When the Roman soldier that has invaded and occupies your land compels you (according to Roman law) to carry certain goods a maximum of one mile, rather than boiling within with personal hatred toward him, tell him you will carry those goods for a second

mile. He had no right to the first mile, and he doesn't have a right to a second mile, but freely give it to him—don't simply bite your tongue, but do him good rather than evil. This is the way of the cross—death to self.

5. **Turn not away from the needy (Matthew 5:42).** When those who are truly poor and needy seek your help, don't turn them away, but give and lend to them as you are able, considering what you have as loaned to you by God. This is not a blank check upon whatever someone wants that belongs to you (to fulfill their covetousness). This is a real, legitimate, and immediate need that you can help to meet from someone who is not unwilling to work (2 Thessalonians 3:10). This truly tests whether you believe God owns what you have and you are His steward to use it mercifully and wisely for His kingdom. This is the way of the cross—death to self.

#### B. Objections

1. "What Jesus teaches seems so weak in allowing people to walk all over us. It's our sinful nature that wants to do to others what others have done to us. That's not the American way. It's a sissy or a coward that doesn't stick it to someone that offends us (whether with words or with force)." Was Joseph a sissy or a coward when he repaid his brothers with kindness? What about David when he didn't personally avenge himself against King Saul when he had the chance? Or what about Jesus Himself—was He a sissy or a coward because He did not strike back with personal revenge?

2. "That only teaches the wicked that they can continue to trample upon the righteous without any consequences. But that's not fair. The wicked get away with all kind of slander, persecution, and evil treatment." The duty is ours and the consequences/results are God's. This goes so contrary to our nature. Most importantly we are to pray (pray that the bully is humbled by God and brought to repentance; walk away from personal confrontation; do good; if it is unlawful then take it to the authority). This is the way of the cross, not the way of giving the bully what he deserves. Has Jesus given you what you deserve? Or has He given you mercy upon mercy? Go do likewise, Jesus says.

#### C. How do you overcome the spirit of personal vengeance?

1. Look for the venomous viper of personal vengeance under the rock of pride and self-righteousness. For where these twin sins exist, personal attacks against you will always become occasions for personal vengeance. You must see your pride and self-righteousness as enemies to be destroyed rather than lovers to be cherished. What have we to be proud or self-righteous about any way? Absolutely nothing! We are what we are by the grace of God, not because we are deserving of the least mercy shown to us. We deserve hell. He freely gives us heaven.

2. Where there exist resentment and hatred in our life, personal vengeance will not be far behind (if only in our thoughts and desires). Replace these sinful passions with the Christian graces of pity and mercy. If God were not merciful in restraining your sin and mine, we would do even worse to others than others have done to us. Repent of the sins of resentment and hatred. Seek God's forgiveness for these sins.

3. Don't be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good (Romans 12:21). Commit yourself to Christ to do that which is for the good of those who attack you—do not return evil for evil. This does not mean that you cannot defend yourself against verbal or bodily attacks. It simply means that in so doing, you must ever keep in mind that you do not personally retaliate and attack him as he has done you. Lawful self-defense is not taking personal vengeance.

4. Look to the suffering of Jesus Christ. For in Christ's suffering can be seen a Savior who did not burn in personal vengeance toward sinners who attacked him, but a Savior who burned in redeeming love toward those who deserved divine vengeance forever in hell. It is the cross of Christ that breaks the vindictive heart. It is the death and resurrection of Christ that supplies all of the grace you need to remove the vindictive heart. It is dying to self and living to Christ that we need.

