

## “Retaliation & The Good Life” Matthew 5:38-42 Shane Hatfield 5/22/22

We’re studying the good life according to Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. The title of the sermon today is “Retaliation & The Good Life.” The section we’re in is typically called the antitheses, where Jesus is taking a common misinterpretation, misconception, misuse of the Old Testament, and He’s saying, “You have heard that it was said,” and He gives that teaching, and then He corrects it with His teaching. And so far we’ve seen that these topics have largely focused on personal sins that we might struggle with or we might commit against others. We’ve looked at anger, lust, divorce, and broken promises. But what do we do when people sin against us? How do we handle the sins committed against us by others? Since the good life is consistently personal, it involves personal relationships, and humans are flawed and broken people, we are consistently going to have to wrestle with this question of how do we respond when someone sins against me? Jesus is going to answer that question for us today. Let’s look at Matthew 5:38. Hear the word of the Lord:

“38 “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ 39 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. 40 And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. 41 And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. 42 Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you.”

David says that the law of God is more desirable than much fine gold and that it is sweeter than the drippings of the honeycomb, and there is great reward to those who keep it, so let’s listen to God’s word now.

Tom Skinner was a famous black evangelist who, before his conversion, was the leader of one of the toughest teenage gangs in New York in the 1950s. But his conversion was so dramatic that the very next day after he converted to Christianity, he left the gang and he committed himself to a life of preaching the gospel. Well, a few weeks after his conversion, he was playing a game of football and during the game it was his responsibility to block one of the defensive players, so he blocked his man. As he was blocking his man, his running back ran into the endzone for a touchdown! So, Skinner walked back to the huddle with his teammates and when he got to the huddle, a white boy jumped in front of him, the boy that he had blocked, jumped in front of him and slammed him in the stomach, then whacked him on the back, and began kicking him as he fell to the ground and shouted, ‘You dirty black \_\_\_\_\_, I’ll teach you a thing or two.’ Now normally, Skinner would’ve jumped up and pulverized this guy. But Skinner stood up, looked the boy in the face, and he said, “You know, because of Jesus Christ I love you anyway.” The response surprised everybody. Everybody was shocked, including Skinner, himself. It must have been the Holy Spirit at work inside of him, but he knew that on his conversion he was a new creation and the tit for tat revenge and retaliation that he had learned in the gangs had no part in his new life. After the game, the player that punched him came up to him and said, “Tom, you’ve done more to knock the prejudice out of me by telling me that you love me, than you would have if you socked me in the jaw.”

Like Skinner, we live in a world filled with violence and injustice. The question we have to ask ourselves is how will we respond when others violate, or impose, or impinge upon our

rights? How do we respond when our spouse wrongly criticizes us? How do we respond when our siblings or our friends or the school bully starts picking on us? How will we respond when our roommates borrow or steal our food? How will we respond when we try to understand the role of the police and the military and the government in matters of violence and injustice? Jesus' teaching in the sermon on the mount here does not give us exact details of how we're supposed to answer all those questions, but it does give us some principles to follow. I think what Jesus shows us is that the good life does not come from revenge and retaliation. The good life comes from surrender and sacrifice that's empowered by the gospel, by surrender and sacrifice that is modeled and motivated and given through the person and work of Jesus Christ. So, that's what we're going to look at this morning. We're going to look at the way of justice, the way of surrender, and the way of sacrifice. Kids, when we start to talk about turning the other cheek, why don't you write down what it might look like for you to turn the other cheek right now?

So first, let's look at the way of justice. Jesus said, "'You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.'" This was a common law for the Jews. It was called the law of Talion. You can find it Exodus 21, Leviticus 24, Deuteronomy 19, and it served two important functions for the Israelites. First, it restrained revenge and retaliation. So, when a crime was committed against you, the natural human instinct would be to retaliate, and to retaliate stronger and harder than what someone had done to you, right? There would be a desire for vengeance, and then there would be a retaliation, and then that retaliation would escalate into bloody feuds and violence. My last name is Hatfield and a lot of times when I introduce myself to people, I say, "Hi, my name is Shane Hatfield," and they say, "Well, have you killed any McCoys recently?" And I say, "Well is your name, McCoy?" Not that I know of. I'm not related to those Hatfields. But there's that history of violence in the Hatfield and McCoy families. Well, this law here was meant to restrain that kind of revenge. If somebody stole my cow in the Old Testament times and then I went over and I knocked their head off as a result, then guess what? Their family is going to come after me! And then my family is going to go after them! But if that initial injustice was met with equal punishment, then it was less likely to turn into revenge and retaliation. So, it restrained revenge and retaliation.

But a second thing it did was it established a principle of equity in the Jewish courts. What an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth means is that the punishment should fit the crime, right? If someone killed my wife in the Old Testament, it was not sufficient just to pay a \$100 fine. The punishment must fit the crime. But the punishment can exceed that of the crime, so restitution for the offense should exceed the damages. So, this law created a way for justice in the Jewish courts! Now, probably what had happened was the scribes and the Pharisees had misused this teaching and they had taken it out of the realm of courts and judges and laws and they had extended it into personal conflict. They used it to justify revenge and retaliation. So, a law that was meant to restrain evil was actually being used to justify evil against other people. So, what Jesus does is He's correcting their misuse of this law. He starts out by saying, "But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil."

Now this phrase here, 'do not resist the one who is evil,' has led to lots of discussion and lots of debate about the role of governments and violence and all those things. I don't have time to go into that but what I will say is He is not saying that we should eliminate all governments, all laws, all rules, and all authority. That's not what He's saying. In fact, God created this world with

both a structure and a direction, and in God's structure, God was to rule over creation as its King, and man was to rule over creation as His image-bearer. Under God's authority, man was supposed to rule in a way that brought God glory, that fulfilled God's will, that extended God's kingdom and that helped people experience God's goodness! Well, sin came into the world and it broke that authority structure, so that now man rebels against God and man does not glorify God the way he is supposed to. So, God's plan of redemption involved redeeming both the structure and the direction of creation.

As part of that redemption, Jesus rules over all things and there are two kingdoms over which He rules: there is the kingdom of man, and the kingdom of God. To the kingdom of God He gave the keys of the kingdom, He gave the ministry that is declarative and ministerial. He gave us the ministry of the word and the sacraments. And to the kingdom of this world He gave the sword. Romans 13:1-7 describes how the government can be a servant of God, and that it is a tool to restrain evil and to promote good! You have these two kingdoms, the kingdom of man and the kingdom of God, and those two overlap in some areas, but the church is never to take the sword, and the government is never to take the keys. Those are to remain distinct and different. But, it is good for the government to use the moral law and to use Biblical principles to redeem the structure of this world and to hopefully move it in a way that glorifies God. If the government does not do that, then it is legitimate for us to try to vote or to persuade the government to move its laws and its principles in a way that is more God-honoring within the structure that God has given. It gives a limited Biblical justice, but not an ultimate justice. We know that ultimate justice will only come when God's kingdom comes back and reigns here on earth. So, that's not what Jesus is talking about. Jesus is not talking about doing away with all of those structures. That would lead to anarchy and more injustice, so what is Jesus talking about?

Jesus is saying that when it comes to our personal conflict, Christians practice surrender and sacrifice, not revenge and retaliation. We leave the justice up to God. "'Vengeance is mine,' says the Lord." He will take care of that. He calls us to live the way of surrender and sacrifice and He gives four examples here that sort of flesh this out. The first one is in verse 39, "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." So, in the ancient near east culture, in Jesus' culture, it would have been common not to injure somebody by slapping them, but to insult them, and it is still common to this day. To slap someone across the face was the highest insult that you could pay them, and then, if you were taken to court and you were sued over it, it could cost you up to a year's wages. So, what Jesus is saying here is that when we're insulted, when we are persecuted for our beliefs, when we're wrongly criticized, what He's saying is, 'Don't respond in retaliation. Don't respond with vengeance, turn the other cheek. Don't retaliate. Surrender. Choose a nonviolent, non-retaliatory response.' When it comes to insults, don't pay insult for insult.

Now, this doesn't mean that we go put ourselves in harm's way. This doesn't mean that if someone is attacking our home and our family that we can't defend ourselves, but what it does mean is that when someone insults us, especially for our beliefs, persecutes us for our Christian values and principles, that we don't respond with violence and retaliation. The good life comes through surrender, not through revenge. The story of Skinner was a great example of this. Culture and circumstances would have totally justified him jumping up and punching that guy in the face. But he knew that he was a new creation. He was a part of God's kingdom. He knew that the way to peace was not through violence, but through peace-making. I remember

what Jesus said in the beatitudes, “Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called sons of God.” Peacemaking, not violence, describes Jesus’ disciples. So, what does that look like for us today? When your spouse criticizes you, fairly or unfairly, how do you respond? What is the natural direction of your heart? Is it to retaliate? Is it to criticize them? Is it to bring up that thing from years ago that you never talked to them about? Jesus is saying, ‘Don’t retaliate.’ He’s saying that you have a bazooka in your mouth, not a water gun. How do you respond when your siblings are picking on you, or a bully is picking on you, or if your friends are roasting you, kids? He’s saying, don’t return insult for insult. Surrender your desire to insult, your desire to criticize, your desire to fight back, surrender that to the Lord and trust Him with justice.

When I was a kid, I know this is going to shock you, but I was skinny and I didn’t have a short man’s complex but I did have a skinny man’s complex and any time anyone insulted me or any time anyone would make fun of me or they questioned my size or my strength or my intelligence, I would try to fight back. I’d try to show them. If you insulted me, I was going to insult you back. If you punched me, I was going to punch you back. I will tell you kids that I regret every punch and every insult I ever threw. None of it led to peace. It’s not the way. Those habits that you’re taking on now, if you’re fighting back, if you’re insulting, if you’re punching, they are going to carry with you into adulthood. Because the reality is we still fight back too, adults, don’t we? It just looks more subtle. We fight back with our words on Facebook. We fight back by turning a cold shoulder to someone who has insulted us. We fight back by ghosting people or blocking people or gossiping about people or slandering people. We may not use our fists but we use our words and our keyboards.

Jesus is saying that that type of response is not the response of a citizen in His kingdom. It’s not the response that is going to bring the good life. The good life comes through surrendering to God and His justice. Surrendering your desire to punch or kick or insult, surrendering it to God, giving it to Him, and absorbing the cost of that pain. When we do that, that’s what is going to change this world. A friend of mine was a college softball player and she said that when she was in college she would routinely make fun of her Christian teammates that wouldn’t go out and party and act the way that she did, but they never insulted her. They never criticized her. And years later when she came back to the faith and she began living a godly life, it dawned on her that with every insult she was hurling, her teammates were probably praying for her, and it was their prayers that helped lead her to Christ.

Jesus is our example and our motivation for this. What did He do when He was personally attacked? He didn’t retaliate. He was beaten. He was mocked. He was scorned. He could have called down a legion of angels to come and defend Him, but He didn’t do it. And when Peter pulled out his sword to cut off the guy’s ear, he did, he cut it off, Jesus said, ‘Peter, put that sword away.’ And He healed the man’s ear! In doing that, Jesus laid down a model for us of surrender, and He laid down the motivation for it. Peter says this, “For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly.” (1 Peter 2:21-23). Until you see that Jesus absorbed the pain and suffering of your sin for you, you’ll never be able to absorb the insults that people hurl at you. Because here’s the thing, you’re always going to be trying to defend yourself, you’re always going to be trying to prove yourself, you’re always going to be trying to

validate yourself. Until Jesus saves you, validates you, protects you, and proves you, you'll never be able to absorb the cost and the pain of somebody insulting you. But if you see on the cross that Jesus absorbed the punishment for your pain, for your sin, for your insults, for your retaliation, if you see Him absorbing that, then you'll be able to absorb the insults and surrender justice to God. The first thing that Jesus shows us is the way of surrender.

The second thing that Jesus shows us is the way of sacrifice. These next three examples, we see people sacrificing for others in situations where they go above and beyond what's expected of them. Jesus says, "And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well." So, a tunic was an undergarment, right? And then the cloak was a robe that went over that. Legally, someone could sue you for your tunic, but they could not sue you for your cloak or your robe, because your robe was basically your home, it's what protected you. You could lay on it. You could sleep in it. You could store food in it. It was your livelihood! Jesus is saying that if someone takes your tunic, be so sacrificial, be so willing that you would give them your robe also. He's calling us to a life of sacrifice, to give up our security for the good of someone else.

He goes on to say, "And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles." Now, during this time the Jewish people lived under Roman occupation, and so you had Roman soldiers that were all over the place. At any point a Roman soldier could command a Jewish person to carry his stuff for one mile. So, Jesus is saying that if you are commandeered to carry a Roman soldier's stuff, don't just carry it one mile, go another mile. Be willing to go two miles. Sacrifice your time for someone else who is infringing upon your rights. He says, sacrifice your personal property, sacrifice your time, and then He says, sacrifice your money.

"Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you." Jesus is calling his disciples to be generous, to the point of self-sacrifice. These three examples show us that when someone infringes upon our rights, we are to do the radical, counter-cultural, crazy act of self-sacrifice. We practice the way of sacrifice, instead of retaliation and revenge. This means that when our spouses, our siblings, our friends, our coworkers, etc, when they wrong us, we look for creative ways to love and sacrifice for them in a way that glorifies God. It doesn't mean that we don't acknowledge their sin. We can acknowledge their sin. We can say that it was wrong. We can acknowledge the damage that it's done. But in our response, we try to respond in forgiveness, and grace, and mercy that goes beyond what's normally required of us.

A friend of mine told me a story of when he did this and I was shocked, actually. His name is Rod. Rod was in downtown Atlanta late at night. He went to a gas station to get gas and while he's at the pump putting gas in his car, a man comes up to him and demands all of his money. Rod is scared to death, he's frightened, he doesn't know what to do. He says a quick prayer, 'Help me, Jesus.' Whenever he says that prayer, fear begins to leave him and he puts a hand on the man's shoulder - the person who's mugging him - he put a hand on his shoulder and said, 'What's your name?' The guy says, 'My name is Charles.' Rod said, 'Charles, is this really the life that you want for yourself? Mugging people at the gas station?' He said Charles put his head down and said, 'No.' Rod began to share the gospel with Charles. He began to tell him that giving his life to Jesus would give him the life that he wanted and desired, would give him much more life, eternal life, than robbing people at the pump. He said, 'Charles, do you want that life?' Charles looked him in the eye and said, 'Yes.' And he led him in a prayer of

salvation there at the pump where Charles was trying to mug him. And after he led him in that prayer, he gave him a card to a downtown mission in Atlanta and he sent him on his way and Rod got back in his car and drove off. Rod found a creative, loving and courageous way to sacrifice for this man, to not return evil for evil.

Now, it may be totally good and necessary for you to defend yourself at the pump, or to run away. I'm not saying that everyone has to respond the way that Rod did. But what I'm trying to do is get us to think, 'How can I think differently about the way we respond to people? How can we think about responding in a way that is loving and sacrificial?' You probably already had this question come up, 'What about someone who is abusive, manipulative, or someone who is abusing your gifts?' I thought one author, John Stott, said it best. He kind of describes how to live in this tension. He says, "The principle is love. The selfless love of a person who, when injured, refuses to satisfy himself by taking revenge, but studies instead the highest welfare of the other person and of society, and determines his reactions accordingly. Thus, the only limit to the Christian's generosity, will be a limit which love itself imposes." So, you look at this person, you look at this situation, you look at all the factors and you say, 'What is most loving for this person?' and 'What is most loving for the people around this person?' Right? See, it is unloving to allow people to abuse and manipulate other people than it is loving to impose boundaries. It is loving to have hard conversations with people. It is loving to sometimes say no to people because it's for their good. The law is love, and again, Jesus provides both the example and the motivation for this.

In Philippians 2, Paul has described Jesus' works this way. He says, "Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." So, it was Jesus' humiliation, it was His sacrifice, that led to His exaltation. It is our sacrifice and humiliation that will lead us to the good life. As Jesus said in the beatitudes, 'Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when others revile and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.'" The good life does not come through revenge and retaliation. It comes through entrusting God in His justice and living a life of surrender and sacrifice for the good of others.

We will never do it until we see just how much Jesus surrendered and sacrificed for us. Jesus says to turn the other cheek, and when He was beaten, mocked, and scorned, what did he do? He turned the other cheek. He endured the insults. When He was on the cross and the soldiers and the criminals were mocking Him, did He return insult for insult? No, He said, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." He was forced to carry a Roman cross all the way to the hill where He died for us. He was so exhausted He couldn't even carry it. Simon of Cyrene had to help Him. He was stripped naked for us. He didn't have a tunic. He didn't have a robe. He was left hanging naked, humiliated, on the cross for our sins. He gave Himself. We

are the beggars. We are the broken, the empty, the poor, the penniless, spiritually. Jesus gave Himself to us. He poured out Himself to the point of death, He gave up His entire life so that we could have His righteousness. Until we see that Jesus did all that for us, we will never be able to sacrifice and surrender ourselves to God, we will never be able to love others the way that Jesus has loved us. So, let's pray now that the Holy Spirit would work in our hearts and minds to believe this good news and to live this way.

Let's pray together. Father in heaven, we thank you for this good news that through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus we don't have to be stuck in endless cycles of revenge and retaliation that hurt others and hurt ourselves. We can experience the love and grace of Jesus Christ. We can entrust ourselves to your justice and your judgement, and instead we can live a life of surrender and sacrifice. God, we confess that we cannot do this on our own. We have retaliated in anger toward our spouse, toward our friends, toward our siblings, toward our enemies. We have sought revenge. We have sought our own rights and our own needs over and against others. We confess those sins and we ask that you would forgive us in the name of Jesus. We ask that you would show us the beauty of His surrender and His sacrifice. We pray that you would renovate our hearts so that we might experience the good life here on earth and that we might express your good life to a lost and dying world. We pray ultimately that our ultimate hope would not be justice on this earth, but peace in heaven with you. We pray this in Jesus' name, Amen.