

# Giving Up Your Rights

## Matthew 4:38-42

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*King of Kings! (Gospel of Matthew Series)*

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*Suffering is God's surgery that leads to health when we respond by faith.*

ED WELCH<sup>1</sup>

 Open your Bible to **Matthew 5:38-42** We are continuing in a series entitled: “King of kings.” This morning we are talking about “Giving Up Your Rights.” We continue in our study of the Sermon on the Mount.

Jesus has already said some pretty shocking things. He says you are the “salt” and “light” for the world. What’s shocking is that the grammar here suggests that Christians are the *only* salt and light for the world. Christians are the **ONLY** hope for a rotting world. Anyone can make the world better through the study of biology, engineering, or a number of other disciplines. But Jesus says, even after a time when the bright light of Plato, Socrates, and Aristotle had given such light of wisdom to the world that Christians, and Christians alone are the only salt and light.

Jesus gives us insight as to why that is: in the Beatitudes He describes a radical transformation of the inner person. This is a human being who is utterly broken, meek, and dependent on God. There is this transformation of character.

Then Jesus gives six examples of that transformation. It is a deep, penetrating heart transformation that “exceeds the superficial righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees.”

1. Kingdom citizens take **anger** seriously. We see even sinful anger and insults as murder.
2. We take **lust** seriously. They don’t even want to look with lust, as they, like our Lord, consider it adultery.
3. We take **marriage** and divorce seriously. We believe there is no reason for divorce.
4. We take our **word** seriously. Everything we say is like an oath.
5. Today, we are going to see that we take **mercy** seriously. We don’t retaliate.
6. And next week we’ll consider how we ought to take **love** seriously, specifically loving those who hate us.

### Personal Offenses

At this point in Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, we want to look at this fifth example of how the righteousness that Jesus demands supersedes and surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees. This example has to do with the proper response when one is personally wronged. How is a person who has the surpassing righteousness of Christ supposed to react to personal offenses?<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ed Welch. *Depression: A Stubborn Darkness*, Punch Press, 2004, 89.

<sup>2</sup> Hughes, R. K. (2001). *The sermon on the mount: The message of the kingdom*. Preaching the Word (131). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books.

## We are Going to Suffer

Scriptures says in many places that we are going to suffer. Yet despite the obvious emphasis of Scripture in regard to suffering and injustice, we are bombarded by preachers that the “successful” Christian living takes place in the realm of constant victory, health, wholeness, and financial prosperity. Some even intimate that if you suffer, you lack faith. Such a philosophy is not from God, but from proud hearts and closed Bibles.

Yes, we will certainly suffer much in this life, even with *injustice*, but it will not be forever. God calls us to suffer well during our time on earth. The greatest suffering most Christians will ever experience will be the disappointment of another Christian. Why is that? Because we expect the world to fail us. We expect Christians to be faithful. Try as we might to be consistent, each one of us is going to often disappoint one another. And there are times when you are going to be wronged by another brother or sister. What are you going to do? Jesus shows us how to suffer well when we’ve been wronged. I need to know about this. Let’s listen as Jesus tells us about suffering well when you’ve been wronged in Matthew 5:38-42. Let’s read God’s Holy Word.

## Reading of Holy Scripture

**Matthew 5:38–42**, “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.”

This morning three things in this text that grab our attention. We’re going to see:

- Understanding our **Rights** (Lex Talionis – equal retribution)
- Giving Up our Rights when We are **Wronged**
- Going Beyond Fairness to **Mercy**

Suffering is temporary. Tradition tells us Isaiah was sawn in two. Much is recorded about the unjust suffering of Jeremiah – being thrown into a mud pit inside a broken cistern.

Jesus tells us we are going to suffer injustice as Christians. We are going to suffer from the world. He says “Don’t be surprised if you suffer.” “The servant is not greater than his Lord. If they hated me, they will also hate you.”

Have you ever been treated unjustly? What should you do? Sue them for all they’re worth? Jesus has a different answer.

## I. Understanding Our **Rights** (5:38).

**Matthew 5:38**, “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’”

### The Lex Talionis: The Law of Equal Retribution

This quotation is taken directly from the Old Testament (Ex. 21:24; Lev. 24:20; Deut. 19:21) and reflects the principle of *lex talionis*, one of the most ancient law codes.<sup>3</sup> It is the “Law of Equal Retribution.” It in essence expresses what we call in civilized society “the Rule of Law.” It existed even before Moses codified the Law of the Old Testament even to the time of

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<sup>3</sup> MacArthur, J. F., Jr. (1985). *Matthew*. MacArthur New Testament Commentary (329). Chicago: Moody Press.

Hammurabi. The Lex Talionis is the law of **equal retribution**: “an eye for an eye.” Fairness for everyone. Sounds reasonable.

Listen to Jesus in **Matthew 5:38**, “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’” Ah, here it is. The *lex talionis*. The Old Testament established that we all have rights. We believe this in our country. We say, in our Declaration of Independence: “*We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.*” Essentially, we believe we have certain rights that no one can take away from us, because they are given by our Creator, God.

We believe in the rule of law. We believe that you reap what you sow. Yet what God gave as a restriction on civil courts, Jewish tradition had turned into personal license for revenge. In still another way, the self-centered and self-asserted “righteousness” of the scribes and Pharisees had made a shambles of God’s holy law.<sup>4</sup>

## II. Giving Up Our Rights when we are **Wronged** (5:39-41).

### Do Not Retaliate

We all suffer wrongs. How should we react to the wrongs we suffer? Listen to Jesus in **Matthew 5:39a**, “I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil [or, a wrong doer].” The idea here is: “*do not retaliate when you’ve been wronged.*” It involves acceptance of ill-treatment, even, as we are going to see from several examples, submission and compliance to ill-treatment.

What is Jesus saying? He’s setting up the attitude of heart that a true member of His Kingdom family has toward wrongs and wrong doers. If we are to be conformed to His image, we must be merciful as He is merciful.

Don’t retaliate against a wrong doer. Trust God to take action. We want to respond in love when we are done wrong. Jesus gives three examples.

**Three (3) Examples of Injustice:** Jesus gives three (3) examples of common wrongs suffered in His day and how we should respond in love.

**(1) Personal Wrongs: A Slap** **Matthew 5:39b**, “But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.” To *strike on the right cheek* was ‘a blow with the back of the hand, which even today in the East expresses the greatest possible contempt and extreme abuse.’<sup>5</sup>

Notice that Jesus specifically mentions “the right cheek,” which tells us he is describing a backhanded slap (since most people are right-handed, this is surely what Jesus had in mind). According to rabbinic law, to hit someone with the back of the hand was twice as insulting as hitting him with the flat of the hand. The back of the hand meant calculated contempt, withering disdain. It meant that you were scorned as inconsequential—a nothing. Imagine how you would respond.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 330.

<sup>5</sup> France, R. T. (1985). *Vol. 1: Matthew: An introduction and commentary*. Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (131). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press. France is quoting Jeremias, *NTT*, p. 239.

<sup>6</sup> Hughes, 133.

## Give up Your Right to Retaliate

**Matthew 5:39b**, “But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.” What is Jesus saying? Simply this: **Give up your right to retaliate** against the one who wrongs you. Do not return evil for evil.

## Be Like Christ

We see Jesus Himself following this example in **Matthew 26:67** when “they spit in his face and struck him. And some slapped him.” **Isaiah 50:6** echoes the trial of Jesus, where He says, “I gave my back to the smiters, and my cheeks to those who pull out the beard.”

God is merciful and He does not give us what we deserve. **1 Peter 3:9**, “Do not repay evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary, bless, for to this you were called, that you may obtain a blessing.”

## Paul’s Rights as a Roman Citizen

This is not saying we cannot appeal to the law. Paul on several occasions used his Roman citizenship to appeal to fair treatment.

What Jesus and Paul teach is that we ought to trust God with the injustices in our lives. It is not spiritual merely to suffer injustice. But if there is no way out and we have to suffer injustice, and there are times when this will be true of each one of us – we need to **trust God**.

**(2) Wrongs Regarding Property: A Lawsuit - Matthew 5:40**, “And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well.” The Lex Talionis not only covered personal wrongs, it also safeguarded against damage to personal property and possessions.<sup>7</sup> A modern day way of saying it is: “If someone sues you for the shirt off your back in the middle of winter, give them your only winter coat as well.”

**The Shirt on Your Back** - It was possible in that day to sue others for the very shirt on their backs. However, no one could take another’s cloak for a permanent, twenty-four-hour-a-day possession. A cloak or outer robe was indispensable for living in Palestine. So even if you lost your shirt (or tunic) in court, and your opponent asked for your cloak and won it, he had to return it every evening for you to sleep in. That was the law.<sup>8</sup>

What do you do if you are taken advantage of and you lose possessions?

**What about your reputation?** What if you are slandered?

Listen to the words of John Bunyan:

*“I bind these lies and slanderous accusations to my person as an ornament; it belongs to my Christian profession to be vilified, slandered, reproached and reviled, and since all this is nothing but that, as God and my conscience testify, I rejoice in being reproached for Christ’s sake.”* – **John Bunyan**<sup>9</sup>

The point is: our attitude ought to be one of sacrifice and generosity and love even to those who hate us and do us harm!

Jesus says in the parallel passage in **Luke 6:28–31**, “do good to those who hate you, 28 bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. 29 To one who strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also, and from one who takes away your cloak do not withhold your tunic either.”

<sup>7</sup> Campbell, I. D. (2008). *Opening up Matthew*. Opening Up Commentary (46). Leominster: Day One Publications.

<sup>8</sup> Hughes, 134.

<sup>9</sup> Grace Abounding, Evangelical Press, 2000, p. 143.

30 Give to everyone who begs from you, and from one who takes away your goods do not demand them back. 31 And as you wish that others would do to you, do so to them. 32 “If you love those who love you, what benefit is that to you? For **even sinners love those who love them.**” This is a righteousness that exceeds the righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees!

### **(3) Political Wrongs: Army Commandeering**

**Matthew 5:41**, “And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles.” This is a specific term for the Roman soldier’s practice of ‘commandeering’ civilian labor in an occupied country.<sup>10</sup>

#### **The Persian Mail Carriers**

The indignity that Jesus described here had its origin with the Persians. In fact, the Greek word translated “forces” is of Persian origin. The Persians initiated a kind of Pony Express in which the mail-carrying rider simply “borrowed” horses. He started off with his letter riding one pony, and when that pony got tired he borrowed another, and when that one got tired he borrowed another, and when ... He sort of rustled his way across the land. During Roman times this custom was common. Also, whenever a Roman official or soldier asked anyone within the Empire to carry a burden a mile, that person had to do it regardless of who he was or what the circumstances were. Almost all Jews had been subject to this, and they hated the very mention of it.<sup>11</sup>

The Jews deeply resented such impositions, and Jesus’ choice of this example deliberately dissociates him from militant nationalists. Rather than resisting, or even resenting, the disciple should volunteer for a further *mile* (the Roman term for 1,000 paces, rather less than our mile).

It is used similarly in **Matthew 27:32** when the Romans commandeered Simon of Cyrene and “compelled him to carry Jesus’ Cross.” Jesus says those who are part of His kingdom family ought to be generous in the face of injustice!

### **III. Going Beyond Fairness to Mercy (5:42).**

**Matthew 5:42**, “Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you.”

This free and unselfish attitude to rights extends also to property.<sup>12</sup> I know we work for our money. We seem to work doubly hard today because the government and the state take so much in taxes, and yet, we are never to say, “Well, what is mine is mine. Let the other fellow work. I did it.” We are to respond to his need. And we are to do so cheerfully (2 Cor. 9:7).

This is **not** speaking of the professional beggar, of course, the kind who will spend all you give him to drink. It is speaking of genuine need.<sup>13</sup>

#### **Speaking of Persecution**

What then does Jesus mean? He means that the righteous are to give to those who are attempting to hurt them through borrowing. Luke refers to this kind of **persecution** when he

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<sup>10</sup> France, 132.

<sup>11</sup> Hughes, 135.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Boice, J. M. (2002). *The Sermon on the Mount: An expository commentary* (138). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.

says, “But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back” (6:35).<sup>14</sup>

We should not be surprised if the world hates us. We should give. We should love. We should be like Jesus.

## **Applications**

### ***1. Looking to the Cross, the Greatest Injustice***

Being a member of the King’s family as we are, we need to stop looking at the law and start looking at the Cross. We may have rights, but we must be willing to lose them!

Jesus calls on us to trust Him when we are personally wronged. The greatest injustice ever was the crucifixion of Jesus Christ of Nazareth. If you feel the pain of injustice, look to the Cross of Calvary where the Innocent One suffered for the guilty ones He loved. What *injustice* and what *mercy* at the same time!!

All experiences of suffering in the path of Christian obedience, whether from persecution or sickness or accident, have this in common: They all threaten our faith in the goodness of God and tempt us to leave the path of obedience. Therefore, every triumph of faith and all perseverance in obedience are testimonies to the goodness of God and the preciousness of Christ – whether the enemy is sickness, Satan, sin or sabotage. Therefore, all suffering, of every kind, that we endure in the path of our Christian calling is a suffering "with Christ" and "for Christ." With Him in the sense that the suffering comes to us as we are walking with Him by faith, and in the sense that it is endured in the strength that He supplies through His sympathizing high-priestly ministry (Hebrews 4:15). For Him in the sense that the suffering tests and proves our allegiance to His goodness and power, and in the sense that it reveals His worth as an all-sufficient compensation and prize.<sup>15</sup>

### ***2. Giving Up Rights for Joy in Christ***

Why do we give up our rights? We give up one thing for a far better one. We give up our expectations, our comfort zone for the sake of others. Why? Because our greatest joy is not to fulfill the selfish desires of our flesh. Our greatest joy is to give up our rights and our life and our all to Jesus!

### ***3. We are Going to Suffer***

*Suffering is God’s surgery that leads to health when we respond by faith*, Ed Welch<sup>16</sup> The question is not if we are going to suffer. We will all suffer. How we respond to suffering, and specifically injustice and personal injury will demonstrate whether or not we are truly the salt and light of the earth.

## **Consider Joseph**

What shall we say to all this? Consider Joseph. He suffered because of his brothers – his own brothers. They thought he would return vengeance. Instead he had a God-centered perspective in **Genesis 50:20**, “As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today.” Or consider **Romans 12:18–21**, “If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. 19 Beloved, never avenge

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<sup>14</sup> Hughes, 136

<sup>15</sup> John Piper, *Suffering for the Sake of the Body – The Pursuit of People Through Pain*, A Seminar for The Bethlehem Institute.

<sup>16</sup> Ed Welch. *Depression: A Stubborn Darkness*, Punch Press, 2004, 89.

yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." 20 To the contrary, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head." 21 Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." What does this look like?

### **My Mother's Death**

Some have said my mother's death was under questionable circumstances. There were some who stood to profit from her death and they did. What do I want for those who may have harmed my mother, or at least taken advantage of my sister and I after this great tragedy? I want them to be saved. I want mercy for them!

So should be our attitude with all injustice toward us both great and small. This is especially in the context of Christian persecution. That we would as **Matthew 5:11-12**, "Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. 12 Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

When injured we ought to bless, returning good for evil. When injured for Christ we ought to rejoice and be glad!

### **Conclusion**

Paul called himself a slave and a prisoner of Christ. A slave or prisoner has no rights. Christ had no rights. When we are injured, we have only to rejoice and bless Christ. We do not give our rights up for nothing. In return we have all of Christ and eternal life. Let us "turn the other cheek," "give our shirt and even our jacket," and "go the extra mile" for the Gospel's sake. So shall we be called children of our Father's kingdom!