

The Sermon On The Mount

The Beautiful Tune We Love So Well And Play So Poorly

*“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”
(Matthew 5:3 ESV)*

*“Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock.”
(Matthew 7:24–25 ESV)*

Turn The Other Cheek

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Matthew 5:38-42

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Introduction:

Good morning everyone! If you have your Bible with you I would love for you to open it now to Matthew 5:38-42. We are reaching the PEAK, as it were, of the Sermon on the Mount. We’ve been talking about how Jesus, in this sermon, is RAISING THE BAR – well nowhere is that BAR any higher than it is here. This paragraph and the one that follows it are generally considered the HIGH WATER MARK of the ethical portion of the Sermon on the Mount. I’ve heard this section described as simultaneously the most REVERED and the most RESENTED portion of Holy Scripture. On the one hand you have to revere it – this is HIGH and HEADY stuff, but you may also resent it – you may even revile it. When I read this passage, some of you are going to tap out. I’m going to see it in your faces, I’m going to hear what you are thinking. “Ok Jesus Boy! Time to put the crazy back in the box. You’ve crossed the line. I was with you last week on telling the truth, I was with you the week before on marriage, but here now, you have officially lost your mind. This will never work, this is unrealistic – this is AIRY FAIRY, undoable nonsense.”

I hear that.

But I want you to stay with me.

Don't tap out here. Track with me through to the end and I'm hoping and believing that once you understand the context, and what Jesus is saying and NOT saying and WHY he is saying what he is saying – I'm hoping and praying, that we can leave here TOGETHER on the same page – the same page as Jesus; that's the goal. So we better pray, because this is a big passage, these are steep demands, this is a high bar, so we're going to need the grace of God today, so let's take a minute and pray.

“Heavenly Father we ask that you would send your Spirit today to help us in the reading and hearing of your Word. Help us to tune out the noise of our own cultural assumptions so that we can sit at the feet of Jesus and receive instruction. Give us also the grace to put into practice that which we are helped to hear. We ask these things now in Jesus' name, amen.”

Hear now the inspired, inerrant and infallible Word of the Lord:

“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.” (Matthew 5:38–42 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord – thanks be to God!

Well, as I said, nowhere is the BAR being raised any higher than right here. This is the SUMMIT of the Sermon on the Mount, ethically speaking. The air gets pretty thin up here and lots of people will be tapping out significantly further down the mountain. But if Jesus said this then we need to work hard to understand this so we're going to work our way through 3 questions this morning. First of all we're going to ask: What was wrong with the old bar? Secondly we're going to ask: Where does Jesus put the new bar? And then thirdly we're going to ask: How in the world are we going to ACHIEVE or even APPROACH this lofty standard?

Alright, first of all then, what was wrong with the old bar?

What Was Wrong With The Old Bar?

Remember, this is antithetical teaching. Jesus is contrasting the way of the Kingdom – his way – with the accepted wisdom of the day that was operative within the culture. So he says: “You have heard it said... but I say to you.” Now when he talks about “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth” he is actually quoting from the Old Testament law. You can find that phrase in Exodus 21, Leviticus 24 and Deuteronomy 19. The problem was that in Jesus’ day the people had turned that LEGAL principle into a guide for personal behaviour and it was never intended to function that way. So that’s the first problem Jesus had with the old bar.

1. They had transformed a judicial principle into a personal principle

If you go back and read those Old Testament passages it is very clear that God, through Moses, is giving instructions to the judges of Israel. He is saying: “Make sure the punishment fits the crime.” That’s the legal principle known today as *lex talionis*. *Lex talionis* literally means “the law of the tooth” and it is still taught in law schools all over the western world. It sets forth the principle of proportionate justice which is a foundation stone of any advanced human civilization. What do we say about a country that chops off a man’s hand for stealing a loaf of bread? We say that country is uncivilized – because they don’t know about the law of the tooth – they don’t know about the principle of proportionate justice.

So that’s what the Old Testament law was about – but in Jesus’ day people had taken that, not as a principle for the courts but rather as a principle for private behaviour. “You slapped me in the face so I GET TO SLAP YOU in the face.” They had turned a principle of JUSTICE into permission for REVENGE.

Which leads us to the second thing they got wrong in terms of where they had placed the old bar. They were treating an outer limit as if it were an ASPIRATIONAL TARGET.

2. They were treating an outer limit like an aspirational target

The fundamental problem with the cultural leaders of Jesus' day is that they didn't understand the function of the law. The law was given by God to RESTRAIN SIN. It was an outer limit. It was a minimum standard. You've seen this a few times by now. Not having sex with your neighbour's wife should not be your marriage goal - we talked about that a few weeks ago - that's a minimum standard. You know that book at wedding receptions where you give advice to the bride and groom? No one writes in that: "Don't have sex with your neighbour". Why? Because that's too low a bar. No one is impressed by that. That's not an aspirational target, that's a minimum standard – but the scribes and Pharisees were always mixing those things up, so Jesus is saying here, "we are not using a law intended to set limits on the punishment assigned to criminals as our life standard for how we treat other people. That's not a good bar. The people of God are required to do better than that."

Now again, to be clear, this is not Jesus being an innovator, this is Jesus being a BIBLICAL REFORMER. Taking your own revenge – taking the law into your own hands – was always forbidden for the people of God – even in the Old Testament. In Leviticus 19:18 the Bible says:

“You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD.” (Leviticus 19:18 ESV)

God always expected MORE from his people than the minimum standards suggested by the law. The cultural leaders in Jesus' day had missed the mark because they had ignored the original context for the Old Testament command and they had misunderstood its intended purpose and function.

So that's what was wrong with the old bar; now where did Jesus put the new bar? That's the second question we need to take a look at today.

Where Does Jesus Put The New Bar?

The first thing we see is that Jesus forbids his disciples from resisting or retaliating in the face of personal insult or perceived injustice.

1. He forbids his disciples from resisting or retaliating in the face of personal insult or perceived injustice

Now, that's a bit of a mouthful but I think we need to be specific here because part of the reason that people reject this passage as unrealistic is because they aren't actually being careful to notice what Jesus DID and DIDN'T say. So let's slow down and make sure we've got our facts straight. In contrast to the standards of the day, Jesus said:

“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.” (Matthew 5:39-41 ESV)

Let's walk through that. Jesus says first of all that if someone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. Notice that he doesn't say, “if someone comes at you with a knife, stand there and let him stab you.” He doesn't say that. And he doesn't say: “If someone is trying to murder your wife and your children, step aside and let him go ahead and do that.”

Those are the sorts of scenarios that are raised when people want to try and make this passage look absurd – but Jesus isn't talking about any of those things. He says – if anyone SLAPS you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. He is talking about personal insult here – not physical assault. That's what a SLAP on the right cheek represented in that culture: It was a very clear and public insult. So Jesus is talking about that – an insult directed at you - not an assault made against your wife, your child, or some dear old lady trying to cross the street, ok? So don't get distracted by those logical non-sequiturs. Jesus isn't talking about those things here – he is saying: when someone INSULTS you, don't insult them back.

And if someone is trying to take your property, don't resist them. And if someone is treating you unfairly, don't make a big fuss about it.

What Jesus is saying here is: don't use force or expend emotional energy protecting your personal dignity, your personal property or your personal rights.

So – this text may not mean what you thought it meant coming in here this morning, but what it does mean should definitely blow your mind. D.A. Carson pulls no punches here, he says:

“The legalistic mentality, which dwells on retaliation and so-called fairness makes much of one's rights. What Jesus is saying in these verses, more than anything else, is that his followers have no rights.”¹

“You want to be my follower?”, Jesus says. “Well, to be my follower you have to admit that you are a rebel. That you have betrayed God. That you are a sinner. That you stand condemned. That you deserve the death penalty – so exactly what rights do you think you have? You have none! You have only the obligation to serve and obey the One who has redeemed you.”

That's the frame of reference from which Jesus offers these seemingly impossible standards.

Now, we need to be clear once again that these are things that Jesus is demanding FROM HIS FOLLOWERS. That is to say, he does not intend for this teaching to be applied to the state – and nor did the Apostles understand him as saying that, which is why in Romans 13 the Apostle Paul could say about the King or the Magistrate that:

“he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, **an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer.**” (Romans 13:4 ESV)

So according to the Apostles, it's GOOD for the King to execute justice on the evil doer. It's good for the Magistrate to act as an AVENGER on behalf of those who have been wronged. It is

¹ D.A. Carson, *The Sermon On The Mount: An Evangelical Exposition Of Matthew 5-7* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1978), 52.

GOOD for the STATE to do that – that’s THEIR responsibility. It’s THEIR responsibility to retrieve your stolen item. It’s THEIR responsibility to review and safeguard your rights and privileges. It’s THEIR responsibility to protect the LIVES and DIGNITY of all their citizens – and they will be JUDGED BY GOD in terms of how they have fulfilled those responsibilities – but YOUR responsibility, as a disciple, is to represent JESUS.

The one who was silent before his accusers.

The one who was reviled and did not revile in return.

The one who – as he was being nailed unjustly to a Roman cross – prayed, “Father forgive them for they know not what they do.”

That’s the new bar – Jesus forbids his disciples from resisting or retaliating against those who would insult them, steal from them or treat them unfairly.

But there’s more. In verse 42 we discover that Jesus REQUIRES his disciples to be open handed, generous and loving in their personal relationships.

2. He requires his disciples to be open handed, generous and loving in their personal relationships

He says:

Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you. (Matthew 5:42 ESV)

Now at first glance that doesn’t seem like it belongs with the other three, but it does. What Jesus is saying here is that in the same way that he will not tolerate a sort of legalistic, tit for tat, measured out attitude toward personal recompense, neither will he accept that attitude when it comes to the positive duties and obligations that we owe to our fellow man. “I don’t want you to give people WHAT THEY ARE OWED, NEGATIVELY or POSITIVELY - rather, I want you to

give people more than they would ever think to ask for, hope for or imagine. Because, again, you are out there in the world representing me.”

Listen, the bottom line is this, the contrast here is between the way of legalism and the way of love. The way of legalism asks: what is the minimum I am required to do? Or what is the MINIMUM that I am required to give?

As a pastor I always get nervous when people send me the email asking: Pastor, am I required to TITHE as a New Testament believer?

There really is no good way to answer that question because the answer is: I am worried about you for asking that question in the first place.

Literally the whole point of the Sermon on the Mount is that UNSAVED, NON-CHRIST FOLLOWING PEOPLE are always looking for THE LIMITS and THE LOOPHOLES – whereas SAVED PEOPLE are living by the law of love.

That’s the Sermon on the Mount in a nutshell.

So FOLLOWERS OF JESUS, typically, are not asking: DO I HAVE TO GIVE such and such an amount? Rather, followers of Jesus are supposed to be asking: “How much can I give before I am actually not being very loving to my spouse and to my children?” Right? “How much can I give, in love, before I’m being unloving to somebody else?”

That’s a legitimately Christian question because LOVE is the only LIMIT that a follower of Jesus Christ is supposed to acknowledge. And once you understand that it helps you out with some of those “gotcha” questions that people ask, again, when they are trying to make this passage look absurd.

“Are you saying that I should give money to every homeless person on the street? What if he is going to use that money for drugs?”

But again – what we’re after here is not INSENSITIVE ABSOLUTENESS in our application – what we’re after here is an understanding of the principle. And the principle is that Christians are not to be guided by LEGALISM in their personal relationships, rather they are to be guided by LOVE. So the real Christian is going to be asking: “Would it be LOVING for me to give this money to this person directly, or would it be loving for me to give this money to a rehab centre or to a food bank?” Those are love questions as opposed to legalism questions – but the point remains, the followers of Jesus are required to be open handed, generous and LOVING in their personal relationships. That is the core and essence of this passage and nobody sums it up better than Charles Spurgeon who says delightfully:

“Our loving King would have private dealings ruled by the spirit of love, and not by the rule of law.”²

That’s the point of this passage in a nutshell.

Now, here’s the million-dollar question:

How Are We Going To Achieve (Or At Least Approach) This Standard?

The first thing and most important thing we need to say is:

1. By believing in the Gospel of Jesus Christ

This is something you can ONLY do – this is something you can only ASPIRE to do by the grace of God through Jesus Christ. Remember this is a sermon about how saved people live – how

² Charles Haddon Spurgeon, *Commentary On Matthew: The Gospel of the Kingdom* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2013), 50.

saved people CAN LIVE – because the Gospel is more than an IDEA, the Gospel is POWER for life and salvation.

In the Bible, beliefs are treated as powerful – because they are powerful. What you believe IS eventually how you will behave. So achieving this standard, begins in your heart and mind. It begins with believing who you are and what God has done in Christ to secure your salvation.

Let me walk you through that. Let's start with the first one: who are you?

Well according to the Gospel you are a condemned and convicted rebel against the King of the Universe. You are a betrayer. You were made to serve as God's Vice Regent over all creation. You were supposed to be UNDER GOD and OVER EVERYTHING ELSE. But that wasn't good enough for you. So you rebelled against God. You disobeyed his commands, you doubted his goodness and you dishonoured his authority. That's what it means to be a sinner – and according to the Gospel, that's who you are. You started up here, and you fell down here and you stand under a JUST sentence of condemnation.

That's what the Bible says. We all love John 3:16-17 – but we almost never quote John 3:18 – do you remember that? John 3:18 says:

Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already (John 3:18 ESV)

Are you seeing that?

According to the Gospel, apart from Jesus Christ you stand under a sentence of condemnation.

So hear that.

Every human being you know who is not a follower of Christ is already CONDEMNED for a capital crime – so why in the world would you need to spend any energy trying to add to their list

of offenses? They're already facing the maximum sentence! Trying to add a \$500 fine to a person who is already going to be executed is the definition of "waste of time". They are already under the wrath of God – so whatever it is you think they owe you is less than a drop in the bucket.

Let it go.

The Gospel says that everyone apart from Christ is already under a sentence of death and the Gospel also says that because of the life, death and resurrection of Christ, everyone CAN be forgiven, justified and completely and gloriously restored. Because Jesus paid it all. He paid for the sins done by you and for the sins done to you. His blood is infinitely meritorious – so when you fail to forgive others for their offenses against you, Jesus says that only reveals that you haven't understood the cross, which is why right after the Lord's Prayer he says:

“if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.” (Matthew 6:15 ESV)

If you don't forgive people for their trespasses against you – it means that you don't understand who you are and you don't understand what God has done for you through the life and death of Jesus. You haven't understood and believed the Gospel!

The Gospel says you are a sinner. The Gospel says that Jesus paid for our sins in his body on the cross. And the Gospel says that if you are IN CHRIST as his disciple then you will be restored to your original calling and dignity. Which means that you will inherit the universe - so remind me again why the disciples of Jesus would be fighting over petty offense and property loss down here on planet earth?

They wouldn't be. Not if they had properly understood and actually believed in the Gospel.

So achieving this standard of behaviour begins with understanding who we are and what God has done for us through the person and work of Christ. That's 90% of the answer, but let me give you

10% more. We achieve this standard, or at least we approach this standard by believing in the Gospel AND by remembering how this story eventually ends.

2. By remembering how this story ends

I suppose this is technically an add on point – the Gospel is a really big story, but the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians says that living out this principle is easier if we focus on how this really big story eventually ends. In 1 Corinthians 6 he is exasperated because the Christians in that city are suing each other in civil court over petty offenses. Meaning they are doing the exact opposite of what they were told to do in the Sermon on the Mount, so Paul says:

“do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if the world is to be judged by you, are you incompetent to try trivial cases? ³Do you not know that we are to judge angels? How much more, then, matters pertaining to this life!” (1 Corinthians 6:2–3 ESV)

Paul is reminding them of how this story ends. At the end of this story SAINTS will judge the world! I’m not talking about Mother Theresa here – that’s how Catholics talk about saints, in the Bible ALL true Christians are called saints and Paul is saying that all true Christians – at the end of this story – are going to be found sitting on THRONES judging the world.

So what in the world are you doing getting so upset now about these petty offenses?

Do you not know that at the end of this story, you are going to be judging the world! You are going to be judging the angels!!

Get some perspective, friends! That’s what Paul says. In verse 7 he says:

“Why not rather suffer wrong? Why not rather be defrauded?” (1 Corinthians 6:7 ESV)

You understand that when all the accounts are reviewed at the end of the age, you will be the ones conducting the final audit. So chill. Out. You won't be out a penny in the end.

Seeing that big picture – focusing on the end of the story – can help us live better, wiser and more faithfully in the here and now.

And then lastly, we achieve or at least we approach this standard by focusing on the job we were commissioned to do.

3. By focusing on the job we were commissioned to do

The Great Commission is very clear. Jesus said:

“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,²⁰ teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”
(Matthew 28:19–20 ESV)

Do you see that? You've got a job to do between now and the end of the age. At the end of the age, you are the final auditors, under the supervision of Jesus – so chill out! Leave that job for when that job is supposed to be done. And in the meantime – go into all the world and make disciples. Just worry about that! Tell people about Jesus! Tell people how they can have their accounts squared. Make enemies into friends through the cross of Jesus Christ.

That's your job now, as a follower of Jesus. You're not in the JUSTICE business – listen friends, justice is a LOW BAR. Justice is a COLD STANDARD. You've been assigned to something bigger and better. You're in the MERCY business. You're in the REDEMPTION business. You're in the RESTORATION business and your law is the law of LOVE.

Oh God, help!

Let's pray together.

“Lord, we come to you now seeking grace for the task you have given us. Lord we repent for so often substituting our culture’s ambitions for the Great Commission that was given to us by Christ. Lord we want MORE than justice, we want MORE than equity and more than FAIRNESS – Lord we want to see people healed and forgiven and saved and restored and returned to their original purpose and dignity. We want big things. We want God sized things, so we ask for your help in pursuing those things for the glory and honour of Christ, in whose name we pray, amen.”