

Immanuel Lutheran Mail Ministry



Matthew 5:38-48 *"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. ⁴³ "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' ⁴⁴ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵ so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. ⁴⁶ For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? ⁴⁷ And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? ⁴⁸ You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*

Jesus revealed His glory in many ways, one prominent and obvious way was through His miracles. Another way was through His words—not simply the commands of power by which He calmed storms, healed diseases, and raised the dead, but also His authoritative teaching. At the conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount, which is what our text this morning is taken from, we're told, ***"When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law."*** (Matthew 7:28-29)

But the glory of the Lord is revealed in yet another way, namely, our Christian lives: the choices we make, the priorities we set, the language we use, the way we respond to personal injustice and treat our enemies. Jesus called Himself ***"the light of the world."*** (John 8:12) Yet, in the verses just before our text, He said that every Christian, including us, has a similar role. ***"You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead, they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven."*** (Matthew 5:14-16)

Now, ordinarily, children want to be just like their parents. Little girls may clomp about in mommy's high heels. Little boys like to walk around in daddy's baseball cap. But children also want to imitate their parents in other, even more important ways—in character and characteristics. "When I grow up, I want to be just like my dad." And so, we often see children copying the things they see their parents do.

One way that we "let our light shine," is by imitating our heavenly Father. In Ephesians 5:1 Paul encourages us to ***"be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children."*** In Philippians 2:5 and following, Paul tells us to adopt the selfless attitude of Christ. And at the conclusion of today's text, Jesus calls upon us to be loving and merciful ***"that you may be sons of your Father in heaven."*** **Like Father, like children.** God is merciful, so His children desire to be merciful. God is generous, so His children desire to be generous. God is forgiving, so His children desire to be forgiving.

Of course, what Jesus says about retaliation, or for that matter, any other aspect of the Christian life, those things which He wants us to emulate, it all makes little sense to our human wisdom. In fact, it is contrary to human wisdom. When wronged, we are tempted to act in a human way instead of as children of God, and our old sinful nature is a willing conspirator. But, as Christians, we are not controlled by the old nature. However, it is still with us, always urging us on toward personal vengeance,

always crying out “Me first.” Each of us is well-acquainted with its voice, *“Come on, don’t let your spouse talk to you that way. She has no right.” “Come on, you did all the work. Now your coworker is stealing the credit.”* How we want to respond is one thing, how God teaches us His children to respond, is something entirely different, and frankly, the Godly response often makes little sense to us.

Now, what Jesus taught in today’s text made no sense to the scribes and Pharisees either. Six times within the Sermon on the Mount Jesus corrected the shallow religious interpretations of these religious leaders, including their advice on personal retaliation. Each of these corrections began with the phrase, ***“You have heard that it was said...”*** and then Jesus would add, ***“but I say to you.”*** In many cases, what was being heard was being said by the scribes and Pharisees, who had perverted the law of God so that they’d be able to convince themselves that they alone were keeping it.

What Jesus said in our text today about responding to personal injuries was also meant to correct the false interpretations of the scribes and Pharisees. So, in verse 38, Jesus said, ***“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’”*** These are words which are very familiar to us. Commentators and historians refer to them as the ‘law of retribution.’ These words actually occur in the Mosaic Law in four places. In one of these places, Deuteronomy 19:21, the law goes beyond an eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth to say, ***“Show no pity: life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot.”*** Taking that and the other passages out of context, we might think that God is teaching us that we should retaliate against any wrongdoing.

What many do not realize, however, is that this law was not given to individual Israelites as a guidelines for private justice. It was given to Israelite judges for civil justice, in particular, to ensure that the person wronged received justice, and that the wrongdoer would receive a proper sentence—in other words, what we often refer to as “the punishment fitting the crime.”

But by the time of Jesus, however, the religious leaders had taken a law meant only for judges and had started to apply it to individuals, giving private citizens license to seek personal revenge. This is what Jesus was objecting to in our text. How did He respond? Verses 39-42, ***“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.”***

These are challenging words, aren’t they? Over time, they’ve been the subject of much theological debate. And so, it’s important for us this morning to understand what Jesus is saying here and what He is NOT saying. Jesus is not telling us to ignore evil. However, He is telling us that, as God’s children, we are not to seek that personal retaliation which the Pharisees promoted—not to extract an eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth on our own. Instead, we are to display a generous, forgiving spirit like that of our Father in heaven. We are to leave punishment to the proper authorities and vengeance to the Lord.

It is equally clear that Jesus is not telling us to stand still while someone beats us senseless, nor to give others everything we own to the detriment of our own family. We have responsibilities to them too. In fact, as we carefully consider these words of Jesus, the three illustrations He used seem to describe more minor infractions than life-threatening ones.

For instance, notice what Jesus says about turning the other cheek: Certainly, some sort of physical altercation going on here, but it is not an all-out brawl. It’s more likely a slap. And Jesus doesn’t say, “Turn one cheek, then the other, then the other, then the other, then the other.” He merely says, ***“If***

someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.” And since we’re about 2000 years removed from this dialogue, we can probably recognize there might be some common understanding of His initial audience that we might be missing. Jesus says, ***“if someone strikes you on the RIGHT cheek.”*** Which I believe needs some additional thought.

If I’m right-handed and I strike you on your right cheek, in all likelihood I slapped you with the back of my right hand. There’s an ancient collection of Jewish laws called the Mishna, well known at Jesus’ time, which stated that if you struck someone with an open palm, you had to pay a certain amount to the individual. But if you struck someone with the back of the palm, you had to pay twice the amount. So according to the law of the day, if you were struck, you were able to get immediate retribution. Notice then, how Jesus’ words turns this policy on its head. Instead, ***“Turn the other cheek,”*** He says. Rather than avenge yourself, we ought to be ready to suffer a new indignity than avenge an old one. And boy, is that tough to do. But the ultimate question is this: As Christians, are we willing to tarnish God’s reputation by striking back when we suffer a blow to our own pride? The answer ought to be no.

Or let’s consider the next example, ***“If anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well.”*** The Greek word translated here as tunic was the undergarment worn next to the skin. The word translated as cloak, referred to the long outer-garment that served as a coat. The Mosaic Law actually prohibited the taking of the outer-garment because many poor people used it for bedding and warmth at night. This being the case, the defendant would have been perfectly within his legal rights to say, “I object, your honor, the plaintiff is not entitled to my outer-garment.”

So, what’s the point? What is Jesus teaching in this example? Is He telling us to give away everything we own, the very clothes on our backs, all of our financial resources—which would then be the thrust of verse 42, ***“Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you.”*** No, not really. He’s not telling you to go around giving away everything you own. Rather, the lesson is very much the same as in the first example—be generous, give more than demanded. Doesn’t our heavenly Father do the same? Isn’t this then the type of life he desires for us to emulate?

And this is clearly the thought of the next example Jesus used in verse 41, ***“If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles.”*** Now, I don’t know that I can think of a time when someone forced me to go a mile with them, maybe when I ran cross country, and the coach told me to run however many miles, but every time after that, it’s always been a request, which I could freely accept or turn down. So again, we have to understand the context: at the time of Jesus, the powerful Roman army occupied Israel. By law, Roman soldiers had the right to press any able-bodied Israelite into limited service; that is, to provide the soldier with nourishment or carry his pack for exactly one Roman mile. Remember how Simon of Cyrene was forced to carry Christ’s cross by the Roman soldiers, and He didn’t really have any say in the matter? By law, you could be forced to walk a mile.

It was in this historical context during which Jesus was teaching. It doesn’t take too much imagination to understand how any self-respecting Israelite, who detested the idolatrous, occupying Romans, would have been muttering under their breath every step of that Roman mile. ***“Rotten Romans. Think they can do whatever they want. Think I have nothing better to do than carry this pack under a hot sun. Well, they’ll get theirs. Oh yeah. One day they’ll get what they’ve got coming.”***

As I said earlier, it’s important in these verses to note not only what Jesus did say but also what Jesus did NOT say. He did not say walk twenty miles or fifty miles or halfway across the Judean desert and desert your family in the process. He said walk the extra mile; a phrase which still means today what Jesus meant when He spoke it: do more than required; display generosity.

Finally, this is really the thrust of the remaining verses of our text as well. Verses 43-48, which I'll read again, ***"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' ⁴⁴ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵ so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. ⁴⁶ For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? ⁴⁷ And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? ⁴⁸ You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect."***

Dear friends in Christ, it is impossible to study a text like this one without being being humbled when we see how *daily* we fail in all of these ways. It's impossible to read this without realizing how desperate we really are for daily forgiveness. And yet, remember what I said about the Pharisees and how they took the law and then twisted it in such a way so that they could be the ones who fulfilled it? Let's avoid doing the same. If we were to read this text, and then use it as an outline for daily legalism, and start handing our coats to people, and walking two miles-and not a step further-well, then we might easily be stumbling into the same conclusion as the Pharisees. That so long as I do these things, that will be enough.

It would never be enough. As we see our failures to truly forgive, our failures to be generous, our failures to let go of bitterness, the best thing we can do is not to simply try harder next time. Rather, let's take these failings to the cross of the One who has followed through on all of it. In this matter of **"Like Father, Like Children,"** the greatest example we have is the Son of God Himself.

The Apostle Peter wrote in his First Epistle: ***"But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. 'He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.' When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly."*** (1 Peter 2:20-23)

Jesus Christ is the Savior who loved us, though by nature we were His enemies. Though we might conceive in our minds an idea that God might one day seek retribution from us, especially when we see all the ways we've sinned against Him, He is the one who endured the punishment required. There is no more retribution to be required, there is no more that must be paid. For Jesus is the Savior who prayed "Father, forgive them" for a world that crucified Him. And He is the Savior who not only walked the extra mile, but walked the road all the way to the cross, understanding what the Cross would bring. Seeing our loving God who has done all of this and more for sinful creatures like us, that is where we find the strength and the desire to love our enemies, to turn the other cheek, and walk the extra mile.

To the same heavenly Father, we can entrust not only all of our sinful failings, but we can entrust even all of our hurts and our injustices, and trust God will take care of it. Eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth, that's not up to us. What we have been given is the status as the Children of God and lights of the world. So may God give each of us the strength and the faith to be His lights shining in this dark place, until that day when He calls each of us His children to His side in heaven. In His name, Amen.