

The Sermon on the Mount

Seeking Revenge (Matthew 5:38-42)

INTRODUCTION:

- I. As we continue our series of studies of "The Sermon On The Mount," we need to keep in mind that Jesus is still discussing the "The Righteousness Of The Kingdom."
 - A. This sermon is not the first time Jesus had preached the gospel of the Kingdom.
 1. In fact, **Matthew 4:23** tells us that Jesus *"went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the gospel of the kingdom..."*
 2. And the central theme of the gospel of the kingdom pertained to the standard of "righteousness" that Jesus would demand of those who would be His disciples.
 - B. Therefore, in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus reveals the empty and hypocritical "righteousness" of the scribes and Pharisees, and how they interpreted and applied the Law to such matters as:
 1. Hatred, or committing murder in the heart (**Matthew 5:21-26**)

2. Uncontrolled lust, or committing adultery in the heart (**Matthew 5:27-30**)
 3. Casting aside the sanctity of marriage and seeking a divorce for any cause (**Matthew 5:31-32**)
 4. Being deceptive and dishonest in not keeping our word when we make promises or give our solemn oath in a matter (**Matthew 5:33-37**)
- C. But now, as we move even further into the teachings of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, we come face-to-face with one of the most difficult desires of all to control – the desire to retaliate or to seek revenge.
1. These teachings of Jesus will be some of the most challenging things Jesus ever said.
 - a. The principles the Lord will reveal here are completely contrary to what we call "human nature" – which is our INSTINCTIVE desire to UNJUSTLY seek an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.

BODY:

- I. Let's begin by first looking at what the Law of Moses TAUGHT, and then attempt to understand how those laws were INTERPRETED when it came to seeking revenge.
 - A. Jesus said, *"You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.'"* **(Matthew 5:38)**
 1. In fact this is EXACTLY what the Law of Moses taught.
 - a. **Exodus 21:22-25** – *"If men fight, and hurt a woman with child, so that she gives birth prematurely, yet no harm follows, he shall surely be punished accordingly as the woman's husband imposes on him; and he shall pay as the judges determine. 23 But if any harm follows, then you shall give life for life, 24 eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, 25 burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe."*
 - b. **Leviticus 24:19-20** – *"If a man causes disfigurement of his neighbor, as he has done, so shall it be done to him — 20 fracture for fracture, eye for eye , tooth for tooth; as he has caused disfigurement of a man, so shall it be done to him."*
 - c. **Deuteronomy 19:15-21** – *"One witness shall not rise against a man concerning any iniquity or any sin that he commits; by*

the mouth of two or three witnesses the matter shall be established. 16 If a false witness rises against any man to testify against him of wrongdoing, 17 then both men in the controversy shall stand before the Lord, before the priests and the judges who serve in those days. 18 And the judges shall make careful inquiry, and indeed, if the witness is a false witness, who has testified falsely against his brother, 19 then you shall do to him as he thought to have done to his brother; so you shall put away the evil from among you. 20 And those who remain shall hear and fear, and hereafter they shall not again commit such evil among you. 21 Your eye shall not pity: life shall be for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot."

2. From the context of these verses Moses is revealing how judgments may be carried out in the CIVIL COURTS among the Jewish people of that day.
 - a. For example, in **Exodus 21:22**, when God instructed Moses about the punishment due to a man who injured a pregnant woman who then miscarries, the LORD said, *"he shall surely be punished accordingly as the woman's HUSBAND*

IMPOSES on him; and he shall pay as the JUDGES DETERMINE."

- b. In **Leviticus 24:22**, when God revealed to Moses the punishment that would be due the person who disfigures another, the LORD said, *"You shall have the same LAW for the STRANGER and for one from your OWN COUNTRY... "*
- c. And finally, in **Deuteronomy 19:18-19**, when God spoke of the punishment due to the person who testifies falsely in a court of law, God said, *"the judges shall make careful inquiry, and indeed, if the witness is a false witness, who has testified falsely against his brother, 19 then you shall do to him as he thought to have done to his brother..."*

3. Therefore, these laws were given to guide the PRIESTS and the ELDERS of the twelve tribes concerning the punishment that should be handed down for certain crimes.

B. However, by the time of Jesus, more than fourteen hundred years later, it seems the scribes and the Pharisees – the religious leaders among the Jewish people – had interpreted these laws in such a way as to justify PERSONAL retribution.

- 1. They felt people were JUSTIFIED in certain circumstances in taking matters of revenge into their OWN hands.

2. However, God has repeatedly FORBADE PERSONAL VENGEANCE.
 - a. **Leviticus 19:17-18** – God commanded, *"You shall not hate your brother in your heart. You shall surely rebuke your neighbor, and not bear sin because of him. 18 You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the children of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord."*
 - b. **Proverbs 20:22** – *Do not say, "I will recompense evil"; wait for the Lord, and He will save you.*
 - c. **Proverbs 24:29** – *Do not say, "I will do to him just as he has done to me; I will render to the man according to his work."*
3. Under the Law of Moses retribution, or recompensing for evil, was ALWAYS to be meted out by official judges among the people.
 - a. The Lord NEVER authorized people to seek their OWN revenge, to retaliate on their OWN, to hand out their OWN retribution, or SINGLE-HANDEDLY recompense for evil.
 - b. These matters were to be handled in the context of the legal system God had set up among the people of Israel.
4. In fact, the New Testament writings of the apostle Paul make it clear that civil government – regardless of how ungodly that

government may be – has the sole right to punish evil-doers and law-breakers.

- a. **Romans 13:1-7** – *Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God. 2 Therefore whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves. 3 For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil. Do you want to be unafraid of the authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same. 4 For he is God's minister to you for good. But if you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God's minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil. 5 Therefore you must be subject, not only because of wrath but also for conscience' sake. 6 For because of this you also pay taxes, for they are God's ministers attending continually to this very thing. 7 Render therefore to all their due: taxes to whom taxes are due, customs to whom customs, fear to whom fear, honor to whom honor.*
- b. This is why the apostle Paul wrote just a few verses earlier, in **Romans 12:17-19** – *Repay no one evil for evil. Have*

regard for good things in the sight of all men. 18 If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men. 19 Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay," says the Lord.

5. God ordained civil government to be His duly appointed agents to carry out the punishment that was lawfully due to law-breakers and those who practice evil.
 6. And history has shown time and time again that when a God-ordained civil government either fails to carry out its responsibility to MAINTAIN civil order, or when a God-ordained civil government ABUSES their power, God eventually brings that government down.
 - a. A classic example would be the vast and mighty Roman Empire that has since faded into history.
- II. Now that we understand that there is no difference between what the Law of Moses taught regarding revenge and retribution, let's now focus on the quality of RIGHTEOUSNESS Jesus expects of His disciples when it comes the temptation to retaliate.

- A. When it comes to the quality of righteousness Jesus requires of His disciples, He revealed two very fundamental principles concerning the matter of retribution or revenge.
1. First, Jesus said, *"I tell you not to resist an evil person"* (**Matthew 5:39a**)
 - a. Not only should we not take vengeance into your own hands, but don't even oppose (resist) the evil person when the evil is being done!
 2. And second, Jesus said, in so many words, demonstrate love, compassion and grace: *"But whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also. 40 If anyone wants to sue you and take away your tunic, let him have your cloak also. 41 And whoever compels you to go one mile, go with him two. 42 Give to him who asks you, and from him who wants to borrow from you do not turn away."* (**Matthew 5:39b-42**)
- B. In the examples given by Jesus, He expects OUR righteousness to EXCEED that of the scribes and Pharisees in several ways – all of which are in direct contrast to our human nature.
1. For instance, our reaction to PHYSICAL ABUSE should be: *"... whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also."* (**Matthew 5:39a**)

2. In reacting to a CIVIL LAWSUIT, we should be willing to give up everything, if necessary: *"If anyone wants to sue you and take away your tunic, let him have your cloak also."* **(Matthew 5:40)**
 3. In reacting to what many believe is a reference to GOVERNMENT OPPRESSION, Jesus taught that we should be willing to do more than what is being demanded of us: *"And whoever compels you to go one mile, go with him two."* **(Matthew 5:41)**
 4. And finally our reaction toward those who are ASKING FOR HELP, our attitude should be to give them what they are asking for: *"Give to him who asks you, and from him who wants to borrow from you do not turn away."* **(Matthew 5:42)**
- C. In each case, the principles are the same.
1. Do not RESIST the person who would mistreat us or deprive us of our possessions.
 2. But demonstrate UNMERITED LOVE AND COMPASSION toward them – demonstrate GRACE – by giving them MORE than they were hoping to gain through force, oppression or manipulation.
- III. There are basically two schools of thought regarding the examples Jesus gave here in cases of unfair and unjust treatment by others.

- A. Some contend that Jesus is simply using the same figure of speech that He has used elsewhere in the Sermon on the Mount – the figure of speech known as a HYPERBOLE.
1. A hyperbole is a bold OVERSTATEMENT of a truth, and is used to EMPHASIZE the importance or the seriousness of that truth, but NOT to be taken literally.
 - a. One of the examples of hyperbole we've already encountered in the Sermon on the Mount was when Jesus said: **Matthew 5:29-30** – *"If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell. 30 And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell."*
 - b. Jesus was NOT suggesting we mutilate or disfigure our physical to avoid sin, but rather that we need to go to every reasonable extreme to avoid sins that will cause us to lose our souls.
 2. Therefore, some contend that Jesus isn't saying we should LITERALLY turn the other cheek or LITERALLY permit ourselves

to be defrauded, but that we should not retaliate or seek to revenge ourselves in such a way as to bring ourselves down to the level of the offender.

- B. However, others say Jesus meant exactly what He said, and that His statements ARE to be taken literally.
 - 1. And to defend this view, they offer several Old and New Testament examples of the very thing Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount.
 - a. In **Genesis**, we have a wonderful example of forgiveness in the way Joseph forgave the very brothers who had once planned to murder him, but instead sold him into Egyptian slavery. (**Genesis 45:4-15**)
 - (1). Joseph not only forgave his brothers, he gave them the grain they had come to purchase in Egypt during a terrible famine, and he sent them back to Canaan to bring all their families to Egypt where Joseph would care for and provide for them.
 - b. In **1st Samuel**, we have the example of David sparing the life of King Saul – the very man who was hunting David like a common criminal. (**1 Samuel 24:8-15**)

- (1). During the man-hunt for David, King Saul sought the privacy of a cave to go to the bathroom – a cave that happened to be filled with David and his men who were hiding in the shadows.
 - (2). One trust of a sword from the shadows and Saul would be dead. But instead, David secretly cut off a piece of Saul's cloak, and when the King rejoined his men, David came out of the cave showing the piece of cloth and told Saul he could have ended the king's life, but didn't.
- c. In **1 Peter 2:21-23**, we have the example of Jesus Christ Himself. Paul writes: *For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps: 22 "Who committed no sin, nor was deceit found in His mouth"; 23 who, when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously...*
- d. There is also the example of Stephen in **Acts 7:59-60**, who said as he was being stoned to death: *"Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." 60 Then he knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not charge them with this sin." And when he had said this, he fell asleep.*

- e. And then there's the example of the Hebrew Christians in **Hebrews 10:32-34** of whom Paul urged to: *"... recall the former days in which, after you were illuminated, you endured a great struggle with sufferings: 33 partly while you were made a spectacle both by reproaches and tribulations, and partly while you became companions of those who were so treated; 34 for you had compassion on me in my chains, and joyfully accepted the plundering of your goods, knowing that you have a better and an enduring possession for yourselves in heaven."*
- 2. All of these seem to have done the very thing the Lord taught in the Sermon on the Mount – including the Lord Himself during the time of His unjust suffering and eventual crucifixion.
- C. In fact, listen to these second-century Christians who wrote to their contemporaries about the need to have the same spirit of Christ when it comes to suffering and not retaliating or seeking vengeance.
 - 1. **Hermas (135 A.D.)** – *"Do good, and give liberally to all who are in need from the wages God gives you. Do not hesitate about to whom you should not give. Give to all. For God wishes gifts to be made to all out of His bounties."*

2. **Irenaeus (185 A.D.)** – *"And he [Jesus] said to love not only our neighbors but also our enemies, and to be givers and sharers not only with the good but also to be liberal givers towards those who take away our possessions."*
3. **Clement of Alexandria (190 A.D.)** – *"Do not judge those who is worthy and who is unworthy, for it is possible for you to be mistaken in your opinion. In the uncertainty of ignorance it is better to do good to the unworthy for the sake of the worthy, than by guarding against those who are less good not to encounter the good. For by sparing and trying to test those who are well-deserving or not, it is possible for you to neglect some who are loved by God, the penalty for which is the eternal punishment of fire."*
4. Keep in mind that these statements were written at a time when Christians were constantly mistreated, abused, and manipulated by others – even to the point of forfeiting all their worldly possessions, and even their own lives!

CONCLUSION:

- I. So how would we summarize the teachings of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount when it came to the subject of seeking vengeance or retaliation?

- A. It all boils down to two very simple principles:
 - 1. Do not resist evil.
 - 2. Respond to evil by doing good in return.

- B. As we said earlier, the teachings of Jesus in this passage are admittedly challenging, and are completely opposite to what we call "human nature."
 - 1. But we are called upon to be *"partakers of the divine nature."* This simply means we are to be more like God and less like humankind.
 - a. **2 Peter 1:2-11** – *Grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord, 3 as His divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us by glory and virtue, 4 by which have been given to us exceedingly great and precious promises, that through these you may be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust. 5 But also for this very reason, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue, to virtue knowledge, 6 to knowledge self-control, to self-control perseverance, to perseverance godliness, 7 to godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness love. 8 For if these things are yours and abound, you will be*

neither barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. 9 For he who lacks these things is shortsighted, even to blindness, and has forgotten that he was cleansed from his old sins. 10 Therefore, brethren, be even more diligent to make your call and election sure, for if you do these things you will never stumble; 11 for so an entrance will be supplied to you abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

- II. How does your righteousness compare to the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees when it comes to seeking revenge or retaliating against those who have done you harm?
 - A. To the scribes and Pharisees "*an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth*" was perfectly justified – OUTSIDE of the realm of the legal system.
 - 1. But Jesus taught otherwise.
 - a. He raised the standard of righteousness in the face of mistreatment and injustice back to where God had always intended for it to be.
 - b. In fact, Jesus will emphasize this same truth again later in the Sermon on the Mount when He says: **Matthew 7:12** –

"Therefore, whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets."

2. Are you a *"partaker of the divine nature?"* Are you more like God and less like humankind?
- B. The only way we can be *"partakers of the divine nature"* is to first be freed from the sin in our life.
1. We cannot become more like God and Jesus Christ until we are freed from the stains of sin.
 - a. The Scriptures tell us to be freed from the stains of sin we need to be cleansed by the redeeming blood of Jesus Christ through our obedient faith – by coming to Jesus in complete faith and trust, and by being washed in the waters of baptism.
 - b. And if we have done that, and yet our life as a Christian has become stained once again by sin, then we need to also be cleansed by the redeeming blood of Jesus Christ by repenting of those sins and confessing them to the Father in heaven.