

Around thirteen years ago, when my oldest son, Christian, was five, we engaged in a bit of a blood feud. One day, sitting at the pool, I took a cup of ice water and splashed a little on his bare back. Naturally, he jumped, laughed, and then looked at me and said “That was a good one dad. But oh, I’m gonna get you back. I’m going to get you back.” Never have truer words been spoken.

Over a week later, after having long-forgotten about his threat of revenge, I was sleeping soundly in my bed at about 5:30 AM. I started to have a dream that I was underwater, the water was rushing aggressively, and water was going into my ears. Now, you ever have something happen in real life that makes its way into your dreams? Well, I did. You see, Christian had plotted his revenge and carried it out that morning. He took a 32 oz cup, filled it with water, crept in my room, and poured it all over my head as I slept. After realizing this wasn’t a dream, I jumped up, took in a huge breath like I had been underwater for too long, and found him standing next to me with the biggest grin he’s ever grinned. I screamed “What are you doing?!?!?” He looked at me and said, “I told you I was going to get you back.”

We live in a culture of vengeance. If someone is wronged, they want retribution. They want to make the other person pay. Every flame war on social media, bad customer service experience turned violent, or case of road rage is someone repaying one person’s wrongdoing with wrongdoing of their own. The problem is, when does it stop? And for American Christians, that problem has grown more complex. As we move more and more into a post-Christian world, as the institutions of culture move from disagreeing with our beliefs and worldview to outright hostility, what follows is marginalization, persecution, and evil directed our way. When that happens, what should our response be? Is the Christian response supposed to be my Christian’s response? “Oh, I’m going to get you back?” Or is there another way? This morning, Jesus answers that difficult question and does so in a way far different than the world would respond or expect.

**[Matthew 5:38-42] <sup>38</sup>“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ <sup>39</sup>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. <sup>40</sup>And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. <sup>41</sup>And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. <sup>42</sup>Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you.**

As we see now for the third week, Jesus takes a current-day teaching, evaluates it, and then offers the true meaning of God’s desire and Law. Here, he summarizes a command that comes from Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy called the Law of Retribution or Retaliation. It was a legal doctrine making sure justice would be done, the punishment would fit the crime, and revenge would not be taken. My son would have failed miserably! The Pharisees, though, had taken this legal standard and applied it to personal relationships, essentially authorizing revenge. They pridefully demanded recompense and determined they were the arbiter of justice. “I’ve been wronged, and I deserve to make it right.” So they’d return evil for evil, which would often be responded to with more evil. It’s mad! In fact, there is a military concept having to do with nuclear war called MAD...Mutually Assured Destruction. If one country strikes another with nuclear weapons, the attacked country will respond in kind, back and forth, until both countries are destroyed. That’s what the Pharisees were getting into, and Jesus warns against both their attitudes and execution.

Some of us are thinking “Makes sense to me!” How do you respond, or at least want to respond, when you are done wrong? Someone cuts you off in traffic, you return the favor. Someone lights you up on social media or in public, you strike back. Your spouse is unkind, you return unkindness. This happens with siblings. My middle brother was perpetually 6-12” taller and 50-100lbs larger than me, and he had the spiritual gift of antagonism. One day, we were going back and forth, and I had finally had enough, so I punched him in the face...and then I ran. I was dead! Thankfully, he went easy on me, though it wasn't pleasant. Our instinct is to get even, but Jesus says that's not the way of the Kingdom of Heaven.

When we respond with vengeance, we do more harm than good. Our pride says God is incapable of, or I'm not willing to wait for, his justice, so we make ourselves judge, jury, and executioner. We insist that we deserve to be made whole, but if we all got what we deserved today, we'd all be in bad shape. Rather than being salt and light, we return evil for evil, we destroy relationships and put distance between us and those God has sent us to, and this world grows darker as a result. Jesus says there is a better way and would ultimately model that way for us.

**[1 Peter 2:23] <sup>23</sup> 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.**

Jesus did not return evil for evil, nor did he demand justice against those who brutalized him. He renounced his rights, trusted himself to the plan and justice of the Father, and patiently endured this suffering to fulfill the purpose for which the Father had sent him. **When we follow Jesus' example, we manifest the Kingdom of Heaven.** He gives four illustrations as to how this endurance is to look. These are not four specific commands or situations to live this way. They are examples to illustrate his point. They show just how far Jesus asks us to go to avoid retribution.

We may suffer the loss of honor. A slap across the face was a major insult in Jesus' day, and if the slap was on the right cheek, it came from a left-handed backhand, which was a double insult. Jesus' response? Turn the other cheek. Don't run. Jesus is not telling us to leave our post when evil comes. Don't hit back. Offer the other cheek. It says, “I will not return insult for insult, nor will I leave you in shame. I'm staying here because I'm here for you.” And, in a culture where you greet one another with a kiss on the cheek, it is a second offer to relationship with this person.

We may suffer material loss. If wrongfully sued, the law said you had to give your tunic (shirt) for collateral, but they couldn't take your cloak (coat). Jesus says give it anyway, even if it leaves you naked and cold, because it shows there is no cost too big to ruin a relationship over!

We may suffer loss of time or independence. Roman law said that a Roman soldier could conscript any ruled people for help at any time and, as you can imagine, most saw this as repressive. The maximum allowed distance was for the person to go one mile. Jesus says to volunteer to go twice as far. To go, as the saying says, the extra mile.

We may suffer loss of money. That we would be generous with those who have no claim on our resources and likely incapable of paying us back.

This is not a call to weakness or to just rolling over and taking abuse and injustice. Martin Luther wrote of a monk who read this passage that way and went so far as to not get treated for lice. That's not what Jesus is saying. Scripture says God set up the state to punish evildoers, we are called to love by doing good and taking action to deter evil. It's ok to protect your family if they are threatened or stand up for the marginalized. **Jesus is saying we cannot act from a heart bent for revenge.** That is not the way of the Kingdom. Our endurance is not weakness but strength that comes from the Lord. That strength allows us to do good when we're tempted to retaliate, and that strength allows us to lay down our rights because we know God will see justice done. Jesus is more concerned about the evildoer and using us draw them to him. So he says he has a better idea.

**[Matthew 5:43-47] <sup>43</sup>“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ <sup>44</sup>But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, <sup>45</sup>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. <sup>46</sup>For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? <sup>47</sup>And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?**

The Pharisees had taken a command in Leviticus 19 to love your own people and expanded it to mean hate all others. But that's found nowhere in Scripture because it was never God's intent. Scripture said to help an enemy, and Israel's purpose was always to point other nations to the one true God. So Jesus, in maybe his most outrageous statement in all of the Sermon on the Mount, tells us to love our enemies. For Jews, that was tax collectors, Romans, Samaritans, all Gentiles. Who is it for you? I bet someone came to mind. A neighbor, coworker, classmate, family member, a Philadelphia Eagles fan. Who is it, because that is who Jesus is telling you to love. This is more than being courteous and polite. This is agape love, that love that is selfless, pours itself out exclusively for the benefit of someone else, and asks nothing in return.

**In this upside-down kingdom, Jesus asks us to give our very best to those who would treat us the worst.** There are few things that show how counter-cultural this Kingdom is than the command to love our enemies. It's easy to love the people who love you. Everybody can do that, even those the Jews loathe like tax collectors and Gentiles. But in the Kingdom, Jesus calls us to love everyone, and especially those who have no love for us. Why? Because that's the heart of God.

Jesus says God brings rain and sunshine to all men, good and evil, just and unjust. It is evidence of the expanse of his love for humanity. It shows there is no one we will ever encounter who is not loved by God and isn't someone he wants to be with for eternity. That person who insults your faith? God loves them. That person who takes, takes, takes? God loves them. That person who undermined you at work? God loves them. That person who hurts you? God loves them, and Jesus is asking us to love them too. But how do we do that? Again, follow Jesus' example.

**[Romans 5:10] <sup>10</sup>For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life.**

**[Luke 24:33-34] <sup>33</sup>And when they came to the place that is called The Skull, there they crucified him, and the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. <sup>34</sup>And Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”**

From the moment sin entered the world, we became enemies of God, worthy of judgment and punishment. But Jesus chose to love. He expressed that love by sacrificing himself, defeating the evil of sin and death, and reconciling us to himself. And he expressed that love by praying for forgiveness for those who were crucifying him. Scripture tells us anyone who believes in him will be forgiven of their sins, made right with God, and live with him for eternity. The purpose of Jesus' life was to usher in the Kingdom of Heaven and make the way of salvation. And the purpose of our lives is to live faithfully as citizens of that Kingdom, manifest Kingdom culture, and point others to him, including our enemies in the hope they will become friends. Jesus overcame evil through love. And, as Romans 12 says, we are to overcome evil in the same way. Evil cannot overcome evil, because it still leaves things evil. **Only good can overcome evil, and when it does, the King is known and the Kingdom grows.**

I love how Jesus gives one specific way to love someone else; pray for them. Prayer is means and end. It is a means in that it intercedes on behalf of someone to God. And if that someone is persecuting you, prayer is good for the heart because it changes it. It's hard to stay mad at someone you are praying for (I wonder if that's why Martha is always telling me she is praying for me!) More than that, though, praying for someone inspires love for another because you begin to see them as God sees them, and God loves all. When we love like Jesus, we act like a child of God because we are following the example of the Son of God.

Now Jesus ends this section with **[Matthew 5:48]** <sup>48</sup> **You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.** Jesus said Kingdom righteousness is greater than that of the Pharisees, and he has laid out his righteous standard. We could read that and think we have to live sinless perfection. It's a worthy goal but not possible in this life. The word Jesus uses also means "mature". **God's not asking for perfection, he's asking for progress.** Jesus has set the bar high. He's not asking us to reach it every second of every day. He's asking us to declare our dependence on him, allow his righteousness to take root in our hearts, and let him grow us up so that we live more and more for the Kingdom of Heaven.

**Love "that person" this week.** Whoever has come to mind as we've talked about this, God is asking you to love them. I know who it is for me. So, if I'm nice to you.. It may be a hello, a favor, a conversation, an apology, or an invitation. **Just make a move towards them.** But before you move, pray, and let God change your heart so you can see them like he does.

Of all the things Jesus asks of us, this may be the hardest, but it may also be the most impactful. When you give yourself for the sake of the other, you show the world the values of Kingdom, and the character of the King.