

What About Revenge?

Matt 5:38-42

Gregg Caruso



A. INTRO

- A. We are currently in a series entitled “What About...?” where we are seeking to engage important questions as we work our way through the SOTM. You have considered the questions: What About My Mission? / God’s Law? / My Anger? and last week / My Lust? Today we will ask the question: **What About Revenge?** and we will be in **Matthew 5:38-42 (p. 970)**.
- B. Martyn Lloyd-Jones: “There is possibly no passage in Scripture which has produced as much heat and [contention as these verses].”¹ So, as we launch, I’d like to thank Pastor Dave for assigning me this passage 😊.
- C. As you are navigating there, it’s important to keep in mind that we are building on the previous series entitled “A Beautiful Life” where you walked individually through the Beatitudes in Mat 5:3-10.
- D. Today, we can compare the SOTM to a grand symphony with four movements that build upon each other.

¹ Lloyd-Jones: 273.

1. The first movement covers the Beatitudes and crescendos with the promise that those who surrender to the shaping of the Beatitudes will become salt and light in the surrounding culture.
2. In the second movement of this SOTM symphony we find six reinterpretations of the LAW. Jesus makes six, “*You have heard it said, but I say...*” statements. With these statements Jesus is diving into our innermost being probing the heart and raising the question of motive.

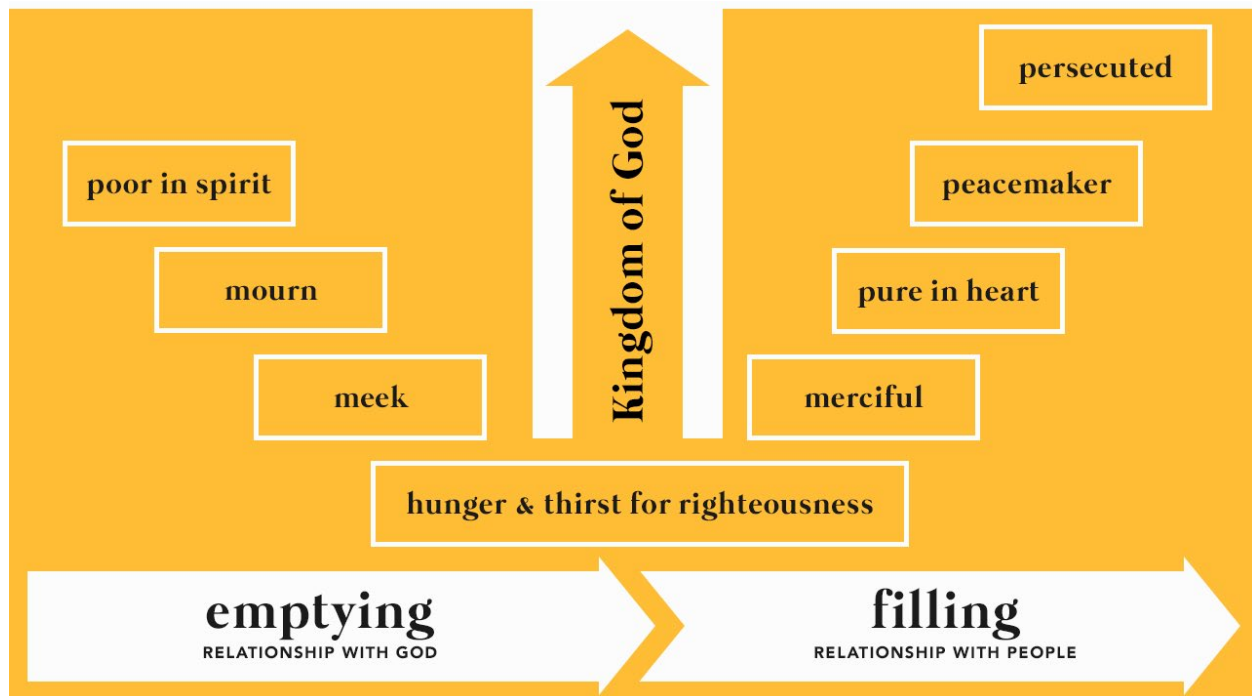
B. BODY

- A. Today we will be looking at the 5th of the six reinterpretations and we will be asking the question, “**What About Revenge?**”
- B. I will read the verses, pray, and then we’ll dig in: “*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 an evil person; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also.⁴⁰ If anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, let him have your coat also.⁴¹ Whoever forces you to go one mile, go with him two.⁴² Give to him who asks of you, and do not turn away from him who wants to borrow from you.*” --Matthew 5:38-42 [pray]
- C. I find it fascinating that this passage contains four very well-known sayings that are still common to our North American vernacular 2,019 years later...
 1. An eye for an eye.
 2. Turn the other cheek.
 3. Go the extra mile.
 4. Give ‘em the shirt off your back. (we’ll come back to those...)
- D. There are **6 phrases** in these **5 verses** that deserve our attention and understanding to grasp what Jesus is saying here. I have divided the 6-phrases into **three points**. We’ll put them up on the screen, so you’ll know where we’re headed and then we’ll go back and consider them one at a time...
 1. **Godly Justice: “An eye for an eye, and tooth for a tooth” (v. 38)**
 2. **Godly Resistance: “Do not resist an evil person” (v. 39a)** [most theologically controversial—and it sounds contradictory the way I’ve stated it...we’ll see]
 3. **Godly Defiance (vs. 39b-42)**
- E. We’ll look at them one at a time...
 1. **Godly Justice: “An eye for an eye, and A tooth for A tooth” (v. 38)**
 - a. Jesus could have said more; He’s quoting from Exodus 21:24-25 (and Lev 24:20; Dt 19:21), which reads “*eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe.*”
 - b. What these OT passages are communicating is that the penalty must fit the crime.

- c. This is sometimes referred to as the **principle of proportional justice** and it has become the **foundational principle for all human justice in a free society**. This law was given by God to restrain our human tendency to reactively pursue revenge.
 - d. So, in v. 38 Jesus is reminding His listeners that God’s Law says, justice must be proportional then in vs. 39-42 Jesus is telling us how to do that by emphasizing the spirit of the Law, not just the letter of the Law. Let’s take a look...
2. **Godly Resistance: “Do not resist an evil person” (v. 39a)**
- a. On the surface that’s a pretty startling statement! This phrase has caused much debate over the last two thousand years.
 - b. First, let’s consider what this verse is NOT saying... It’s not saying that we are not to defend ourselves against evil people.
 - 1) Some well-meaning followers of Jesus sincerely believe that Christianity rejects ALL violence at ALL times. These groups include (but are not limited to) the Brethren, Amish, Mennonite, and Quakers.
 - 2) Lloyd-Jones, in his commentary, points out that Leo Tolstoy, the great Russian author and novelist insisted that this v. meant that to be a truly Christian nation meant that there was to be no police, or soldiers, or even a judicial system...
 - c. So, what IS this verse saying? In our attempt to discern and understand what Jesus is saying here, it’s quite helpful to look at the Greek word translated in most of our English Bibles as “resist.”
 - 1) The Greek word for “resist” is **anthistēmi**. It’s the same word we use for **antihistamine** and it means, “**to stand against.**” (*anti* = against and *histēmi* = to stand)
 - a) The most literal meaning of the Greek word means, “do not forcefully set yourself against an evil person.”
 - b) John MacArthur: “Don’t start a feud.” (Don’t go all Hatfield and McCoy...)
 - c) Lloyd-Jones is a bit more sublime: “**It’s an ‘eye for an eye, and tooth for a tooth’ until the Spirit of Christ enters in to us. Then something higher is expected of us...**”²
 - d) So, it’s not that we resist the person so much as it means that, with the help of the Holy Spirit, we resist the gravitational pull to lower ourselves to their level.

² Lloyd-Jones: 277.

- 2) In any conflicted or confrontational situation (actually, with an evil person or not) seek to become a **responder**, not a **reactor**. (don't get sucked into the other persons drama!)
 - 3) I am a reactor on a lifetime journey to become a responder... (triggers)
- d. So, how does this happen? We need to go back and review the Beatitudes... (when the gospel is awakened in your heart... Emptying = Surrendering / Filling = Empowering)



- e. So, the goal in any conflicted situation is to respond with the mercy we've received, motives that are being purified, and promoting the peace of God.
 - f. And then we get persecuted 😊. This is how Jesus lived—and they killed Him.
3. **Godly Defiance (vs. 39b-42)**
- a. We can't dive into these four principles as much as they probably deserve but I'll try and provide an overview of each. (And just so you know, there's some theological diversity regarding how these verses are interpreted...)
 - b. The best way to grasp these four principles is to picture them being spoken to a 1st century occupied people. And in many ways, it was a triple occupation...
 - 1) Romans forces had occupied Israel for about 40 years.
 - 2) The ruthless King Herod was a Roman "client" King of Israel and then his wicked son Herod Antipas replaced him.
 - 3) The legalistic Pharisees and scribes who placed heavy religious burdens upon the people.

- c. So, the common person who Jesus was speaking to was living under the weight of foreign occupation, political corruption, and suffocating legalism.
- d. With that said, we’ll take a brief look at the remaining four principles of godly defiance. Notice how nonviolent resistance could startle reactive people and deescalate an altercation...
 - 1) *“Whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also” (v. 39b)*
 - a) The Jews said that the most demeaning, contemptuous, arrogant act of a person is to slap you with the back of the hand.
 - b) Most people were right-handed, and the left hand was considered unclean because it was used to manage the bodily functions.
 - c) In conflicted situations people of superior societal classes would backhand those of lesser societal classes—a Roman could slap a Jew, a master could slap a slave, etc.
 - d) However, peers in conflicted situations, would tend to fight with their fists. (The backhanded slap was much more demeaning.)
 - e) What Jesus seems to be saying is if someone treats you as an inferior don’t retaliate physically but **position yourself to cause them to treat you as a peer.**
 - f) In this case, if the person who was slapped turned their left cheek, the perpetrator would have to treat them as a peer and hit them with a fist to continue the altercation.
 - g) *“The nonviolent resister not only refuses to [hit] his opponent but also refuses to hate him.” --Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. ³*
 - 2) *“If anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, let him have your coat also” (v. 40)*
 - a) A working-class person often owned only one shirt and one coat. The vibe of this verse indicates that if a person is being sued unjustly, give them your shirt AND your coat, which in the 1st century, means you’re standing there naked.
 - b) In Jewish culture nakedness was not only shaming to the one who was naked but also to the one (or ones) who viewed the nakedness.
 - c) This cultural perspective goes back to the Garden of Eden where Adam and Eve experienced shame when they saw their own and one another’s nakedness after the Fall.

³ MLK. *Stride Toward Freedom*: 92.

- d) This action by the one being sued—giving up both their shirt and their coat, could startle the other party and cause them to settle the case quickly.
- 3) *“Whoever forces you to go one mile, go with him two” (v. 41)*
- a) A Roman soldier could conscript a Jewish person to carry his pack, which weighed about 70lbs. but he soldier was limited to only make the conscripted person carry his pack for 1-mile.
 - b) So, to go the extra mile would cause the soldier to fear the consequences of his superior if it appeared he was asking more than was allowed by Roman law.
 - c) This would cause the soldier to deal with the conscripted Jewish person more humanely. It would also cause the soldier to wonder about the kindness that was offered to him.
- 4) *“Give to him [or her] who asks of you, and do not turn away from him [or her] who wants to borrow from you” (v. 42)*
- a) We don’t need to know anything about 1st century culture to know that this principle is about being generous with our **resources**. This includes our time, energy, and money.
 - b) The protection contained in this principle is that we don’t always need to give people what they’re asking for. We need to be wise and discerning in this area. What Jesus is saying here is don’t be hardhearted, callous, and dismissive—be fully present with people.
 - c) Here’s an example: I live in Santa Barbara where we have a significant homeless population. When I pastored in SB we encouraged our church to buy and distribute MacDonald’s coupons (or other stores where alcohol was not sold) so that we were ready to give when asked.
 - d) We are to look for ways to generously serve others without becoming codependent.

C. CONCLUSION

- A. As we bring this to a close, as well as begin to prepare our hearts to partake of the Lord’s Supper, here’s another quote by MLK that summarizes what Jesus is teaching in our passage for today... *“Clearly the kingdom of heaven does not operate like the kingdoms of this world. How will we know when we see God’s kingdom? When anger results in reconciliation rather than retaliation God must be at work. When enemies are overcome by love rather than violence God’s reign is present.”*⁴ --Martin Luther King Jr.

⁴ From a speech MLK delivered to the YMCA/YWCA at the University of California on June 4, 1957.

- B. How do we get there from here? The revolutionary teachings of Jesus in the SOTM are beyond our human capacity to “will-power” them into existence. Many have tried and all have failed. Jesus teaches that anger = murder; to refer to someone as a fool condemns us to hell; lust = adultery.
- C. The SOTM is not about exchanging one set of rules for another (thank goodness!), rather it’s about trusting in what Jesus accomplishes on the cross to re-orient our values, our vision, and our habits from mere external righteousness to grace empowered change from the inside out. This is what we call the gospel. It’s not about what we do to please or appease God, it’s about celebrating what Jesus Christ has done.
- D. Here’s how Paul says it in his letter to the Ephesians: *“For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; ⁹ not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.”* Ephesians 2:8-9
- E. If you’re here today and have not surrendered to the “*gift of God*” talk with the person you came with—or talk to the person in the welcome center and they will connect you with someone...