

Putting Aside Vengeance

Matthew 5:38-42

Rev. John Pennylegion

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Good morning. Welcome to Christ the King. If you're a guest or a visitor, my name is Penny, and I'm the senior pastor here, and it is great to be with you. We're glad that you would join us, and as Bob mentioned in his prayer, we are in the midst of a sermon series in the Sermon on the Mount. And so if you have a Bible, you can turn to Matthew chapter 5. The Sermon on the Mount is Matthew 5 through 7, and we've been in Matthew 5 for the last, well, a couple months now, and we are looking at verses 38 through 42. But you remember that the Sermon on the Mount is Jesus's most famous teaching, right? I mean, you don't have to have grown up in the church to have heard some of the phrases in it. You don't have to have read your Bible to have heard some of these statements that he makes. They're very well known. Things like, blessed are the merciful, blessed are the meek, blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are the peacemakers. Or even in our passage this morning, an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. These are phrases that we've become accustomed to.

We're used to hearing these phrases, but when we get them in the Sermon on the Mount, what is happening is that Jesus is situating them in the life of the kingdom of God. And so what he's saying is that this is what God's kingdom is to be marked by, and as citizens of that kingdom, people who reside in it, that this is the ethic that we are to embody. That these are the qualities and the virtues that we are to take on as we live out what it means to be in the kingdom. And so we're to be salt and light, we're to put aside anger, we're to be done with lust and cling to our spouses, we're to speak truthful words. I mean, as we go through the ethic of the sermon, it's clear this is a kingdom not of this world, right? Jesus is describing a kingdom of another place, a kingdom very different than the kingdoms of this world and the kingdoms we create in our own hearts. And this morning, that call continues for us to live out this kingdom virtue.

And we have the fifth of Jesus' six antithesis statements. So remember, these are the statements where Jesus says, you have heard it said, but I say to you. And this one deals with retaliation and vengeance. In essence, what Jesus is doing is he's fleshing out that beatitude, blessed are the peacemakers. So what does it mean for us to do that? Well, let's read Matthew 5, beginning in verse 38. Jesus says,

“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ 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. And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you.”

Friends, this is the word of the Lord. Let me pray for us.

Heavenly Father, we ask that you would lead and guide us now, that you would direct our ways and teach us. Father, we need your help to understand your word. And so we ask, Holy Spirit, that you would guide us and you would allow my words to honor you and that you would allow all of our thoughts, our meditations to give you glory. We pray this in Christ's name. Amen.

So as we get started, I want to ask us a question. I want you to think about it a little bit. How would you describe the difference between justice and vengeance? If someone was to ask you, what is the difference? What are the things, the qualities that demonstrate them? How would you answer that question? And as you're thinking about that, maybe different ideas are running through your mind. And maybe you start looking at your heart and you're thinking about those times when you wanted justice, when you declared you were pursuing justice. And now maybe you're starting to wonder, well, was it really justice or was it vengeance. Maybe we're feeling that. Maybe we're feeling that tension, that struggle a little bit. And so as I was thinking about this question and how to answer it, I went to the source of where many of life's questions are found, where the answers can be found. And I turned to *The Godfather*.

So, because after all, as Tom Hanks says, in *You've Got Mail*, *The Godfather* is the sum of all wisdom, the answer to any question. When should I pack for summer? What should I for summer vacation? Leave the gun, take the cannolis. What day of the week is it? Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, Wednesday. This is it, right? *The Godfather* gives us answers. And in the opening scene of *The Godfather*, we have this incredible scene where we're introduced to Don Corleone, Vito Corleone. And we're introduced to him because it's the day of his daughter's wedding and he's sitting in his study, in his office. And on the day of his daughter's wedding, it is Sicilian tradition that he will take requests from different people. And so we're introduced to an undertaker, a mortician, and he is there describing to Don Corleone what has taken place against his daughter. She's been harmed and abused and hurt. She's in pain and sorrow at the hands of a handful of men. And so Don Corleone asks the mortician, the undertaker, well, what would you have me do? And he gets up and comes around and he whispers in his ear and he goes back and sits. And it becomes very apparent that the undertaker would like for Don Corleone to murder these men.

And very wisely, Don Corleone, *The Godfather* says, "no, no, that's not justice. That's vengeance." You see, what you want is not justice, for your daughter is still alive. It's not justice, it's vengeance. Now, listen. It's not hard to imagine if you were a father in this mortician situation that you would ask and request the very same things, right? It's not hard to imagine that. Your daughter's been treated poorly, she's in pain, she has suffered, and so you want those responsible to feel pain and to feel suffering. But that desire may not be justice, it may be vengeance. You see, vengeance is taking matters into our own hands. Vengeance is seeking punishment that is more severe than the crime that took place.

Withholding Vengeance

Vengeance is what Jesus is calling us to withhold, that the people of God are not a people of vengeance, that we withhold vengeance. Our passage begins, "you have heard that it was said, an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." Now, here, Jesus is quoting from Exodus 31, Leviticus 24, and Deuteronomy 19. And that can sound very harsh. "An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth." If we read those Old Testament passages, they go on and say a hand for a hand. I mean, that sounds like medieval, right? It sounds very, very harsh. But actually, this law from the Old Testament was a principle that later took on a Latin name called Lex Talianus. I think I said that right. You can ask Tobias later if I did or not.

But what this is getting at is this idea that the punishment should fit the crime. So an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, a hand for a hand was a way of actually restraining vengeance and overly harsh punishment unfit for a particular crime. And this is a good restraint. It's a good restraint. Because when you've been the victim of a crime or of injustice, we want

punishment, and we can easily be given over to our emotions, and we could want that person to experience more than they perpetrated. So right from the beginning, we have to acknowledge Jesus isn't doing away with that principle. He's not doing away with the principle that the punishment should fit the crime. Remember, there are those who want to see these antithesis statements as Jesus replacing that first clause, right? "An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. But I say to you..." Jesus isn't doing away with it. He's actually raising the stakes. He's showing us more.

He's not doing away with it. In fact, the examples that he gives us, turning the other cheek, giving up your cloak, going the extra mile, these are illustrations that Jesus uses to affirm this principle of withholding vengeance and not seeking retaliation. And y'all, that is needed. It is needed not just in Jesus's day, but it's needed in ours. Because our day is one of excessive retribution, right? I mean, that is the social law of the land. I mean, just think about that example I used a few weeks ago as we're going through the Sermon on the Mount. Remember I told you about that woman who's been called Philly's Karen? Y'all remember this? Some of you who are here. So this, just real quick, this is a woman who had a baseball game, a home run was hit and she thought that she deserved the ball because it was hit in her vicinity. But a father ran over, picked up the ball, and gave it to his son. Now, that's the law of the baseball field. That's how it works. First one to get it, gets it. And that's it. But she didn't like that.

So she goes over, she yells at the dad and the dad, you know, I'm not going to deal with this, takes the ball, gives it back to her. And everyone was rightly aghast at her behavior. That she would act in this way. And so online, what did people do? Well, they didn't just ask for a fair resolution. A fair resolution would have been she gives the ball back and apologizes, right? No, the world of the internet and the world of the mob wanted much more than that. They've called for her name. Let's find out who this woman is. And her address, let's get her address. And I'm going to bet that the world of the internet did not want her address so that they could show up at her house and very rationally, very calmly, very peaceably say, "Ma'am, Karen, whatever your name might be, please give the ball back." Right? That's not why they wanted her address and her name. They wanted her address and name so they could shame her. And they could mistreat her. And they could make sure that the world would know the injustice that she has done. She took a baseball. It was excessive retaliation.

And y'all, that's not just in the world, that's in our hearts. Because the truth is, is that when we've been hurt and mistreated, we want the person who hurt us to feel those biting words. We whisper and we destroy reputations. And it's not enough for us to receive simply an apology. We want them to feel it. But Jesus is calling us to something better. He says that his people, that we, the people of his kingdom, we are those who withhold vengeance. And we are people who don't retaliate, right? What does he say? "Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. Give him your cloak. Go with him two miles."

Now, I have to tell you, that first line, "do not resist the one who is evil," I've wrestled with this all week. And I've tried to understand it. And it has caused me a great deal of consternation. As I imagine it might be for you. Because it sounds like Jesus is saying, just let evil reign. That evil is going to do what evil does. And there's nothing you can do, so just simply let it go. But that can't be right, can it? I mean, is that really what Jesus is calling us to? I mean, the Bible is filled with calls to resist. Calls to resist temptation and calls to resist

the devil, the evil one. The Bible is filled with calls for us to pursue justice and to oppose the wicked. So, what does Jesus mean here?

Well, this is where I think the illustrations, especially the first one, help us to understand what Jesus means when he says, “do not resist the one who is evil.” So, let's think about what he's doing. So, I think what Jesus is encouraging us towards is not to retaliate and not to take vengeance. That's what it means to resist the one who is evil. Why? Because of that illustration about the cheek. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. Now, commentators will tell you that this is more than simply about a physical slap. That this is about an insult or an affront to one's honor. And the reason why is because it's the right cheek. So, think about most people are right-handed. I'm right-handed. So, if I was going to hit someone, right, I'd wheel back and I'd punch them with my right hand. I'm hitting their left cheek, right? Hitting their left cheek. Y'all got this, right? Okay. So, if I'm going to hit them in their right cheek, I actually have to hit them with the back of my hand. I'm backhanding them, right? And in this culture, that would be a sign of great dishonor. To receive a backhand would be a way of insulting them. And it's an affront to their honor. It's a way of dishonoring them. And what Jesus is saying is that when we've been treated like this, when this is the evil that has been against us, we don't need to retaliate. When we've been dishonored, when we've been spoken poorly of, we don't need to take to the internet. We don't need to respond in kind. He's actually calling us not to live with vengeance.

2. Living with Generous Hearts

Now, I imagine that some of us are sitting there thinking, but how can this play out in our society, in our culture, in our civil government, right? Because isn't that exactly what they were supposed to do? And they are. In fact, in Romans chapter 13, we're told that God has given to the civil authority the sword to exercise justice and to actually restrain evil. But Jesus here isn't talking about the civil government. He's not talking about a national scale sort of insult. What he is talking about is our personal relationships. And what he's saying is that we are people who don't take vengeance and we don't retaliate in our hearts, but instead, we have generosity within our hearts. That we live with generous hearts. And that's what these illustrations are getting at. If anyone would sue you and take your tunic, give him your cloak as well. And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who begs from you and do not refuse the man who would borrow from you.

So, let's look at a couple of these, right? First, the tunic and the cloak. It's clear there's a lawsuit going on, he says, “if you've been sued.” And the settlement is the tunic. So, the tunic is the inner garment that would have been closest to the skin that people would wear. So, that's what you have to give. The judge orders, you owe him a tunic. You give the tunic, but Jesus says, abide by the ruling, give the tunic, and go one step beyond. Give him your cloak. The cloak was the outer robe. Now, what is interesting about this is that Jesus is calling them to do something that even Jewish law never required. So, the Jewish law was such that the cloak was exempt from seizure, even from courts. The courts had no authority to require someone to give up their cloak. And Jesus is saying, you don't have to. The suit has been settled, but for the sake of your brother, for the sake of the person who came at you, give them more than what is required.

The same principles that play with the miles, right? In Roman law, the soldier could commandeer a local person to carry their equipment a thousand paces. That's that word, mile. So, I want you to think about, for the Jewish person, how humiliating this would be. That you are under foreign oppression, and this oppressor is requiring you to carry things like their

armor, their shield, their helmet. And you have to carry it a thousand paces, right? It is dehumanizing. It's treating you like a beast of burden, not like a man or woman. And Jesus is saying, don't only go a thousand paces, one mile, but go two. Go the extra mile. You see, this is not just a call to withhold vengeance, but it is a way of responding to those who would oppose us, to those who would seek our harm, with generosity, with love, and with grace. It's a way of taking care of even those who would mistreat us, giving more than what is required, giving up one's cloak, going an extra mile, giving to one who begs, being generous to the one who would borrow. It's caring for even our enemy. And we're not going to get into the enemy part, that's next week. But do you all feel how radically countercultural this is?

I mean, I'm sure every one of us is probably thinking, yeah, but, right? Like, there's got to be a but. Dot, dot, dot. Please be a but, right? And we're feeling that because we're expected in our world, and we expect others to not set aside our rights, but to invoke our rights, and to invoke our privileges for our own good. And that when we've been wronged, we expect people, and we are expected to retaliate. And many would say, well, the ethic of the Sermon on the Mount, it sounds really nice, it sounds great, it sounds beautiful, but y'all, that is not how the world works. And it won't work in our world. Because if we're going to win, whatever win might mean, we have to speak, and act, and fight, and battle like our opponents, and like the world. Y'all have heard people say that. I have. Grace, kindness, love, it sounds beautiful, it sounds like pie in the sky, but it will not function in this world.

So, why would we respond this way? Why would we respond this way? Well, well, the first reason is, well, Jesus says so. So, you know, that's a pretty good reason. But then there's two other reasons, I would say. Two other reasons. And the first is, we respond not with retaliation and vengeance, because vengeance belongs to the Lord. This is actually something that the Christian ethicist and theologian who is at Yale, talks a great deal about. That the reason why we can respond in peace and restraint to even our enemies is because we are confident that justice will one day prevail. And it is a justice not that we take into our own hands, but it's one that comes from God. Now, we may think that by not retaliating, evil will gain the upper hand, but we actually know something very different. That evil will not win. That evil does not win. And because we know that, that's why the Apostle Paul can say in Romans 12, "Never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God. For it is written, vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord."

And Jesus himself promised that the gates of hell will not prevail against his kingdom, and that when he returns, evil will be vanquished, and justice and truth and righteousness will abound. This is the day that is coming, but the amazing truth of the gospel is it has already begun. It has begun because on the cross, Jesus took oppression, and he took evil, and he was victorious over it. He took the evil of our sin, and he defeated it. He took the evil of death and the grave, and he rose triumphantly over it. You see, Jesus has started to bring about justice by going to the cross. And so, instead of pursuing our own justice today, as Paul says, do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. And so, we turn the other cheek, and we give our cloak, and we go the extra mile, and we don't refuse the one who will borrow. In other words, we respond with generous hearts because we trust and believe that God will bring about justice. And because contrary to popular belief, forgiveness is more powerful than retaliation. That's the other piece. Forgiveness is more powerful than retaliation.

Just the other week, I was reading an article. It was in *Slate Magazine* or *Slate Online*. I don't know if y'all look at that, but regardless, it was an article that was written by a Yale medical professor, and he was describing this study that's been taking place for over decades now

with over 60 neuroscientists across the world. And what they've been doing is they've been doing brain scans and looking at the parts of the brain that are accessed when people have been wronged, and they seek vengeance, like when they want revenge. And so, they're seeing which part of the brain is firing in those moments. And what's fascinating is it's the same part of the brain that fires in the midst of addiction, which is interesting. But then they go on and they start talking about how they're trying to relieve this firing of the brain in these places. And there's all sorts of things that are taking place, and that's about the extent of how I understand it. Like, things are happening in the brain. Okay. But they talked about medicine, chemicals, and all these sorts of things. But then they started doing these MRI brain scans, and what they found was that the best way for people to actually stop firing their brains, to stop firing that section when they want vengeance and revenge and retribution, is to simply imagine forgiveness. To not even have to say it out loud, but simply to imagine forgiving that person, and that part that was firing, it stops. Isn't that amazing? That, y'all, science is simply confirming what the Bible has been telling us, that forgiveness is more powerful than retaliation.

And we don't need science, actually, to tell us that, because we've experienced it firsthand, haven't we? We've experienced it firsthand because it was the kindness of the Lord that leads to repentance. And it's the forgiveness of the Lord that wins our hearts. And what has broken through our hardened hearts and done away with our sin is the forgiveness of Christ. You see, what Jesus is calling us to do in the Sermon on the Mount is the very thing He has already done for us. I mean, think about it. How did He respond when He was falsely accused and arrested and beaten and shamed? I mean, He could have called down legions of angels to destroy His oppressors, but instead He said, "Father, forgive them." What we deserved and what we earned, His judgment and His wrath, that is not what He gave us. Instead, He gave us grace and forgiveness. You see, friends, the Sermon on the Mount, the ethic that Jesus is calling us to embody, it only makes sense in a kingdom that is marked by mercy and forgiveness. And that is the kingdom of Christ. And that is the kingdom that He has called us to inhabit.

Heavenly Father, we thank You. Thank You that You have bestowed upon us forgiveness and grace, mercy and kindness, that You have led us to repentance. And so we pray, Father, that You would help us to be men and women who are of forgiveness, men and women who pursue beauty and truth, men and women who put aside retaliation and vengeance and uphold grace and mercy, forgiveness and generosity. And make us like this, Father, because You have been this way with us. Make us like this because that is our Savior, our Lord Jesus, who is gracious to us, who has forgiven our sins, who has called us into His kingdom of grace. And we pray that You would help us to do this. And we pray in Christ's name. Amen.