



A LOVE THAT OVERCOMES

SERIES: THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

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Matthew 5:38-42

14th Message

Gary Vanderet

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The words of Jesus in our studies in the Sermon on the Mount are helping us understand the true intent of the Law. In his discourse, Jesus corrected the false interpretation of the Pharisees with regard to the law. He said that the purpose of the Old Testament is to produce in us a love for other people. That was, is, and always will be the mark of citizens of the kingdom.

If we don't love people, then we don't understand the Scriptures. The point of Bible study is not to get our theology correct, although that is important, nor is it to make us smarter or enable us to discover what is going to happen next. The purpose of all Bible study is to know God and to become conformed to the image of his Son.

The final two antitheses in Jesus' remarks, to which we come now from chapter 5 of Matthew's gospel, mark the apex of the Sermon on the Mount. The verses which we will look at today and next Sunday are the most admired, and also, alas, the most resented in the sermon. Jesus' words speak of an attitude of total love, a love that overcomes evil with good. Here is the greatest challenge facing Christians. Nowhere is the distinctiveness of our Christian counter-culture more clearly seen than in this area.

While I long for these truths to be a part of my life, they are at times more longed for than real. I grew up in a home where fighting was the norm. I am a survivor of this kind of background. It was my wife who finally got my attention one day when she said to me, "You love to fight! You are not content without conflict." So we approach with great humility the words of Jesus.

Chapter 5, verse 38:

"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 him who is evil; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if anyone wants to sue you, and take your shirt, let him have your coat also. And whoever shall force you to go one mile, go with him two. Give to him who asks of you, and do not turn away from him who wants to borrow from you. (Matt 5:38-42, NASB)

These words from the oral teaching of the rabbis come right from the Mosaic law. As we have already seen, the law has a civil as well as a moral code. Exodus 20 lists the commandments, and chapters 21-23 of that book set out a series of statutes designed to teach the young nation how to apply the Ten Commandments. In

the middle of many different examples given with particular emphasis on damage to persons or property we read these words:

"If men are fighting...and there is serious injury, you are to take life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise" (Exod 21:22-25).

It is clear from the context that this instruction was addressed to the judges of Israel. In fact, the judges are mentioned in Deuteronomy 19:17-18. This is the principle of exact retribution, and it had a two-fold purpose. It laid the foundation of justice, identifying the correct punishment that is deserved for a crime, compensating the victim to an exact equivalent and no more. And it prevented revenge. It prohibited someone from taking the law into his own hands, forming a vigilante committee or starting a family feud.

In Jesus' day it is likely that the literal retaliation for damages had been replaced in Jewish legal practices by a financial payment. The problem lay in the fact that the Scribes and Pharisees extended this principle of just retribution from the law courts, where it belonged, to the realm of personal relationships, where it did not belong. Essentially they were justifying personal revenge, even though that was forbidden in the law, as Leviticus 19 states: "Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of *your people*, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord." So this principle of just retribution was being used as an excuse for personal revenge—the very thing it was designed to prevent.

Notice that Jesus doesn't necessarily contradict the principle of retribution. In fact, in many places his teaching on the reality of a divine judgment on the last day affirms that principle. What he clearly says is that although this principle may pertain to the judgment of God, and to a court of law, it is not appropriate in the realm of personal relationships. Personal relationships are always based on love, not justice. So our response to individuals who wrong us should not be to retaliate, but to accept injustice.

Jesus words are very powerful: "*do not resist him who is evil.*" What does that mean? The verb "to resist" is very clear. It means "to oppose, to withstand or set yourself against someone or something." So who or what is it that we are forbidden to resist? There are certain things that Scripture, using this same verb, makes it clear we are not to resist. We are not to resist God, his

will, his authority or his instruction. But we are commanded to resist the devil, the “evil one.” So Jesus certainly isn’t saying to compromise with Satan or with sin. What we are forbidden not to resist isn’t evil, or the “evil one,” but an evil person. Notice that Jesus doesn’t deny that the devil is evil. Our Lord is not asking us to pretend that the devil is not bad, or to condone his behavior, but what he will not allow us to do is retaliate. The Good News Bible translates this, “Do not take revenge on someone who wrongs you.”

Jesus goes on to give four illustrations that set out how to apply this principle of non-retaliation. In each case there is someone who in a sense is evil in that they are seeking to hurt us. The first hits us in the face; the second sues us; the third seizes our service, and the fourth begs money from us. Verse 39:

“But I say to you, do not resist him who is evil; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if anyone wants to sue you, and take your shirt, let him have your coat also. And whoever shall force you to go one mile, go with him two. Give to him who asks of you, and do not turn away from him who wants to borrow from you. (5:39-42)

All of these, except the third, have a very contemporary ring to them. The verb “forces,” in verse 41, was used with reference to the compulsory transportation of military baggage. The lesson can be applied today to any kind of service where we find ourselves selected rather than volunteering.

In each of the four cases, Jesus says our responsibility is to withhold seeking revenge to the extent that we allow the evil person in question to double the injury. Notice that striking someone on the right cheek when one is right-handed means the perpetrator strikes with the back of his hand. In the Eastern world even today this is an insulting blow; it is a slap of insult and shame. This of course is what Jesus himself submitted to. It was written of him in the OT, “I offered my back to those who beat me, my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard; I did not hide my face from mocking and spitting.”

And that is exactly what happened. The soldiers spat upon him; they blindfolded him and struck him with their fists; and the guards beat him. They put a purple robe on him and twisted together a crown of thorns and set it on his head. Again and again they struck him on the head with a staff and spat on him. Falling on their knees, they paid homage to him, mocking him.

And our Savior responded with the utmost dignity, self control and love. He refused to retaliate, and allowed his persecutors to complete their mockery. One church Father, Justin Martyr, said, “Jesus’ greatest miracle is that he did not retaliate.” When he was stretched out on the cross, instead of bitter resentment against his executioners he offered up his life to God and waited for his vindication. That was the secret of his compo-

sure.

And Jesus calls his followers to share in his crucifixion. Peter put it this way: “Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. 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 Pet 2:21-23). Such non-resistance is not a sign of weakness. Rather, it is a sign of the strength and power of one who has such control of himself and so much love for others that he resists any form of retaliation.

We need to add at this point that although there will be times when we will have to apply these commands literally, we must be careful in our interpretation. These are not detailed regulations, but simply examples of a principle: the principle of love, the selfless love of someone who when he is hurt, refuses to retaliate in any form, but instead responds by seeking the highest good of the person who has hurt him. He doesn’t strike back, he doesn’t return evil for evil, because he is free from personal resentment. His desire is to return good for evil. And so he is willing to give—his body, his clothing, his time, his money—whatever love requires.

So the only limit is the limit that love itself imposes. And there are limits. Some would use this verse to keep a wife in a physically abusive situation but, according to this passage, such action would certainly not be for the highest good of that woman. There is a limit, and that limit is what love requires.

There was an occasion when the apostle Paul “resisted” (the same word) Peter to his face. Peter was acting wrongly, because he had stopped fellowshiping with Gentile brothers. Paul didn’t give in to him and let him continue to act that way; he confronted him publicly. He wasn’t bitter toward Peter. He didn’t insult him or berate him. He spoke the truth in love, standing up for the Gentile Christians whom Peter had offended.

The principle here is given to prevent revenge and retaliation, not to encourage others to take advantage of us. True love always acts to stop evil and promote good. So authentic Christian non-resistance means non-retaliation. Rudolph Stier put it this way, “This must be your retaliation—love and truth for hatred and lies.”

Unfortunately these words have been misinterpreted by some as the basis for pacifism, the refusal to use force in every situation. If that was true, then we would have to say that the apostles misunderstood Jesus, for the NT teaches that the State is a divine institution commissioned to punish wrong and reward good. I do not want to stray from the truth of these verses into a philosophical debate on a Biblical view of war. The point I am making is that the duties of the State are different from those of an individual.

The response we are to make is laid down by the apostle Paul in Romans chapter 12:

Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect

what is right in the sight of all men. If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men. Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay, says the Lord. But if your enemy is hungry, feed him, and if he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in so doing you will heap burning coals upon his head." Do not overcome evil by evil, but overcome evil with good. (Rom 12:17-21)

We are commanded not to seek vengeance, not because vengeance is wrong, but because it is the prerogative of God; he will repay.

So the first thing we must do when we are hurt by someone is turn to God and acknowledge that he is there, that he allowed the hurt and that he will use it for good, evil as it may be. Even when the action is cruel it will do us good, because we must learn to endure hatred. Our Lord was nailed to the cross. You can count on it that you will be nailed to the wall!

God gives us over to such hurt because that is part of the process that will make us what he intends us to be. The hurting makes us sweeter and mellower. In time we lose the fear of losing. We learn to let go of what we want. We're not so easily provoked to wrath by harm or reproof. We learn to absorb abuse without retaliation, to accept reproof without defensiveness, to return a kind answer to wrath.

God is producing in us the wonderful quality of meekness. As we learned when we studied the beatitudes, meekness is not weakness, but rather, strength under control. It is a refusal to defend ourselves or to retaliate for wrong; to be humble, non-defensive and unassuming in the face of brutal and heartless attack. We experience a wonderful sense of the Father's approval and affection when we lay down our lives in this way. Jesus said, "My Father loves me because I lay down my life" (John 10:17).

Because God is there and he will repay, we can trust him to deal with the person who has hurt us.

We ought to do what we can to deliver someone who is being oppressed, of course. That is our responsibility out of Christian compassion. But we don't need to take the final responsibility to remove ourselves out of the hands of evildoers. We must do what we can. We don't need to permit ourselves to be unnecessarily abused or misused by others. We can speak up and say it is not right to treat human beings that way. But when all is said and done we have to trust God to work out the final result. When we do that we don't need to worry. We can put our oppressor in God's hands and leave the outcome with him.

Of course, that is an unnatural response! Our natural tendency is to set things right ourselves, to get the person who did us wrong and make him pay for it. This happens all the time in homes and marriages. One spouse wrongs another, and sometimes the wrong is

grievous, so the wronged partner resolves to get even. He or she withdraws conjugal rights, or acts coldly in other ways in an attempt to even things up. But it is far better to say, "What you are doing is wrong, and you are answerable to God. But I am answerable to God, too, and I will do what is right, no matter what it costs me."

That is what David means in Psalm 37 when he says, "*Trust in the Lord and do good.*" He reinforces his point later when he says, "Do not fret, it only leads to evildoing." When we get angry we are inclined to wrong people. But when we put them in God's hands, and let him deal with them in his time and in his way, then we are free to be generous. We can be courteous, gentle and loving, because we know that God will deal with everything in his time.

There is nothing harder on our psyches than trying to redress all the wrongs in our lives, seeking to set things right. It is far better to put evildoers in God's hands and go on about the business of what he has called us to do.

David says later in Psalm 37, "Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him." Compose your soul. Settle your heart and wait. That is hard, isn't it? We want swift answers to our needs. But God is always working on a grander scale than that. He has purposes in mind that we cannot envision. He is shaping us and making us into the people he intends us to be throughout eternity—and present unpleasantness and long-term injustice are ways he uses to accomplish that end. Even our Lord, though he was the Son, learned obedience through the things which he suffered.

So David says, trust the Lord. Put that person who is working his mischief on you in God's hands and let him deal with him. Do whatever God calls you to do, and he will give you the grace to obey. Delight yourself in the Lord and don't obsess about what is wrong. If you are going to be compulsive about anything, give yourself to worship and adoration of Christ. Your name may be clouded right now, your reputation ruined, but one day, God will pick you out of a crowd and say, "This is my beloved son in whom I am well pleased." We may not be vindicated until we stand before him, but he will set things right.

On this point David Roper writes: "This is the majesty of meekness: To bear patiently the spiteful attacks of malice and envy; to overcome evil with good; to live in the midst of difficult people and love them, to keep our mouths closed and our hearts open when we're in the presence of our critics; to be unruffled and composed through a storm of unkindness and misrepresentation."

Abraham Lincoln said, "The best way to overcome an enemy is to make him your friend."

We are reminded in this passage and throughout Scripture that the way we express love in the world is by not reacting in vengeance when we are mistreated. Can you imagine what would happen on this Peninsula

if Christians would begin to act this way? I wonder how many times we turn people away from Christianity by assuming the same attitude as the world around us. Surely this is the practical advice that Paul is suggesting when he reminds us that we are not to be “conformed to this age.”

So don't try to get even. That is God's domain. When we react that way, we are usurping his job. But we lack his power and wisdom, and the result is that we will make things worse. All we have to do is look around us to see how true this is. Vengeance only perpetuates evil, expands it and flings it out wider so that it touches more lives and hurts more hearts. The only One who has the wisdom and the power to do this rightly is God himself. Therefore, he says, “You leave vengeance to me. I will take care of the individual who has injured you. You must never try to handle this yourself.”

There is an old Quaker saying, “If we fight the beast by becoming a beast, then bestiality has won.” When we have done all we can do the only thing left is to wait patiently until God avenges the wrong and vindicates us. He will refute our critics in his own time and in his own way—in this life or in the next. God is the Alpha and the Omega. He and not our accusers will have the last word. It may be that our enemies will find out then that we are not so much to blame as they thought.

We must never nourish thoughts of hatred or retaliation. We should rather think of the misery of our enemies' hearts—full as they are of jealousy, envy and bitterness. We must pity them and pray for them. Consider Judas. Though our Lord knew from the beginning who would betray him, not one of his disciples knew (John 13:22). Nothing in Jesus' behavior betrayed the betrayer.

Jesus prayed from the cross, “Father forgive them”—not when the crucifixion was over and men were sorry for what they did, but in the very moment when it was being carried out. So it must be with us. “To see that my adversary gives me my rights is natural,” Oswald Chambers wrote, “but from our Lord's standpoint it does not matter if I am defrauded or not; what does matter is that I do not defraud.”

Is there someone in your life today who is causing you great pain? Jesus wants you to give that pain to him. Your natural response is to retaliate, but God can give you love for that person. Put him or her in God's hands, and let God fill you with his love.

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