

Learning to Bless Those Who Curse Us

September 4, 2022 Sermon by Stephen Portner

Matthew 5:38-42

³⁸ "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 evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also, ⁴⁰ and if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, give your coat as well, ⁴¹ and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. ⁴² Give to the one who asks of you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.

"An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth," Jesus quoted from the Old Testament (Ex. 21:24; Lev. 24:20; Deut. 19:21). This was known in Jesus' day as the law of reciprocity (or *lex talionis*). The principle was this: whatever you did to someone else, then that someone else can do it onto you. If you broke someone's arm, then justice demands that the other person break your arm. If someone accidentally cuts your hand off, then you are just when you cut that person's hand off in kind. For us today that law sounds pretty barbaric. Yet, when it was first written, it was thought of as an act of mercy. You see, the human tendency is to escalate things. In other words, it's more like if you break someone's arm then they feel like they should cut yours off. The law of reciprocity was created to establish limits. If someone did something to you, then you were not to escalate the severity of the damage as a penalty; the most you can do is to return like for like. People tend to escalate evil for evil. What if instead we escalated good for evil? When someone intentionally does something wrong to you, what if you turned around and intentionally did something generous to them instead?

So, in the days of the Old Testament, that law of reciprocity was sufficient for a checks and balances in terms of justice. It is not that the Old Testament was wrong. It is that following Christ meant you went above and beyond the requirements of the law. Jesus gives four examples of what he is talking about. We have to be careful here to understand that Jesus is not telling us to merely submit to abuse. That could lead to all kinds of misunderstandings about this Scripture. I remember early on in my ministry I struck up a conversation with a woman who worked at a woman's shelter. She told me that she really disliked pastors for the horrible advice that they give. I was intrigued and asked her what she meant. She said that the Women's Center often gets battered women who, after having been beaten, will turn to their pastors for guidance and the pastors tell them to just "turn the other cheek." As a consequence, these battered women return to their abusers who just beat them up all the more. I could understand

why she had a distaste for pastors. But being treated like a doormat or just subjecting yourself to repeated abuse is not what Jesus is talking about here in his four examples.

Example one: *"if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also."*

In Jesus' day it was common to see a master slapping a slave. A master could treat a slave any way he or she wanted. But a person could never slap someone in a higher rank. Because the left hand was never used for hitting, to slap someone on the right cheek meant hitting that person with the back of the right hand. Usually when this happened, the slave would cower in submission. This allowed the abuse to continue. A slave could hit the person back, but with grave consequences. If a person of the same social rank was struck, he or she could take the offender to court. Slapping was a punishable offense in Jesus' day. Jesus, however, offers a stunning idea: offer the left cheek.

In effect, doing this would leave the striker wondering what to do next. ...People of the kingdom have an alternative to retaliating or litigating. They can choose a nonviolent, even yielding approach. In so doing the aggressor might—or might not—wake up to the wrongness of the act; the person would have to think twice about hitting again.¹

In other words, turning the other cheek was not an invitation for the abuse to continue. It was a way of shaming the person who was doing you wrong.

Example two: *"if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, give your coat as well."*

In Jesus' day, the poor were often at the mercy of the rich. Many people were so poor that they had nothing but their clothing. If they borrowed money from the rich, they would use their clothes as collateral, the most common being the tunic ...a garment worn over the skin. A lender could ask for the money to be repaid at any time, and if the poor person could not pay it back, the lender could sue to keep the tunic. That would leave the poor person with his outer coat..., which allowed him to have something to wear. Technically this would be fair. But in reality, the entire system was unfair and oppressive. Jesus once again offers a stunning solution: offer your outer coat as well. This would be totally unnecessary, far beyond the legal demand of the lender. Even more, cloaks ... often doubled as a blanket, and there was a law (Exodus 22:25-27) that prohibited taking another person's cloak. Why does Jesus say to offer it freely? Because the guiding principle of the kingdom is love. If someone takes something from us, the normal reaction is to cling to it. Those who

¹ Smith, James Bryan. *The Good and Beautiful Life: Putting on the Character of Christ (The Apprentice Series Book 2)*. InterVarsity Press. Kindle Edition.

understand kingdom provision are able to take a different approach: "Here is my shirt. Do you need my coat as well?"²

Again, it is not about allowing perpetual abuse. It was about shaming the other person into realizing they were doing the wrong thing. You want my shirt? Fine Here. Take the coat I use as a blanket as well. Any person who has a twinge of conscience would realize that taking even more from a person would be the wrong thing to do. Jesus' culture was an honor and shame culture, which is very different than the culture we experience in America. In Jesus' day, if you were put to shame, it reflected on the integrity of your whole family.

Example three: *"and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile."*

In Jesus' day, if a Roman soldier asked a Jew to carry his luggage, the Jew would have to carry that luggage up to one mile. Notice he says "forces you to go one mile." No Jew would want to serve the hated Romans. Knowing that the soldiers might abuse this right, the Romans enacted a law that made it illegal for a soldier to force a Jew to carry his bags indefinitely. So they settled on the "one mile" amount. Once again, Jesus is asking his apprentices to do the unthinkable: go two miles. This is not like picking up a hitchhiker or helping a friend move. The person we are assisting is not asking for help; we are being forced to help.

Jesus offers more surprising counsel: go the second mile. Why? Because the guiding principle in the kingdom of God is love, and love seeks the good of the other. Those who lack a giving heart would go one mile begrudgingly and not a step farther. Those who live in the kingdom can say, "Do you need me to carry this farther?" In the kingdom the recurrent question is "How can I help you?" which even extends to those we find offensive.

Again, this is not about Jesus asking us to continually submit to abuse. If you are imposed upon to do one task, do that task and do the next one willingly. Not do task after task after task indefinitely. Do one extra task and be done. The point is that someone who asks you to do one task and you do that and "go the second mile," that in essence will shame the person into realizing that they should not have forced you to do the first task.³

Example four: *"Give to the one who asks of you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you."*

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

Need I say it? Again, this is not about giving to another person indefinitely. That only enables them to keep asking for more without trying to do anything to change their situation. If someone asks for food, I don't give them money, because the temptation is too great for them to spend that money on something that isn't food, like beer, drugs, or cigarettes. In cases like that, you are not helping. You are only deepening the problem.

[I shared about the scam artist who tried to get me to give to a "friend" through an email exchange. The scary part of it was is that the scam artist knew some personal information that I did not think they would know.]

The idea is not that you help perpetuate the problem but that you lead the other person to a transformation of heart and spirit. When people ask you why you are doing what you are doing, that is your opportunity to share the Good News of Jesus Christ. All that we say and that we do should point to Jesus and his salvation of us.