



Retaliation - Matthew 5:38-42

Though it cannot be confirmed, Gandhi is thought by some to have once said “An eye for an eye will leave the whole world blind.” Whether this is accurately attributed to Gandhi or not, there is a kernel of truth contained. The original purpose behind the line “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth” from Exodus 21:24,

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 the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. 40 And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. 41 And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. 42 Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you.

was an attempt to restrain the evil of revenge that was prevalent in that day. The function of the cities of refuge that God established throughout the new nation of Israel was an additional limitation to prevent those seeking revenge from exacting more damage in their rage than what was done to them or their loved ones. In fact, Exodus 21 is all about providing restraint when it comes to seeking payback for injury or death caused by others.

With this as our historical backdrop, what Jesus does here in Matthew 5: 38-42 is a move to even further restrain our sinful retaliatory nature. Jesus pushes His followers to not only restrain their desire for retaliation, but to generously give to those who harm us rather than attempt to exact any punishment back on them. Being slapped on the cheek is not a compliment. It is quite demeaning, but rather than defend yourself or treat the offending party with a similar disrespect, Jesus instructs us to treat them with the same respect that we should have received from them.

As if what Jesus has already said was not challenging enough, He finishes off this section dealing with people who ask or demand too much from us. Rather than resist, Jesus instead teaches His followers to give even more than demanded. We are to give two tunics when one is demanded. We are to walk two miles when we are forced to walk one. In the end, we are to bless others with the blessings that God has blessed us with rather than concern ourselves with how and why those others are asking for them. This is no easy teaching because this challenges us to set aside our pride and consider others before we consider ourselves. Just as Christ, set aside Himself on our behalf.

Thoughts for Reflection

How would you rewrite this section to use modern examples of the way in which we might be generous to others, even when they are demanding of us?