

## **Intro**

This morning Jesus is calling us to a higher and shocking standard, one that if left to ourselves is impossible. Because Jesus has a radically different value system than we do. Questions abound. Is Jesus really telling me to endure physical abuse? Is Jesus really telling me to do whatever someone asks of me? Is Jesus really telling me I have to give to every beggar I come across? What do we do with Jesus' seemingly impossible and perplexing expectations?

Maybe you're thinking, these commands are impossible to follow so you don't even bother trying. Maybe these commands rack you with guilt because you're not living like this. Maybe you take them literally and try to obey them, but they're unlivable. What is Jesus getting at?

This morning Jesus asks us: what do I value? And he instructs us to...

**BIG IDEA: Prioritize neighbor love that is merciful, generous, and serves over self-interest**

## **READ PASSAGE**

## **PRAY**

## **Body**

### **Passage Focus**

Jesus continues criticizing the manner in which the scribes and Pharisees interpreted and applied the OT. An OT quote is followed by three illustrations of how to respond to the evil person. Then a general principle concludes this section.

### **Point 1: Return insults by taking more insults (5:38-39)**

#### **Explanation**

Jesus cites an OT teaching and then teaches us how to respond to evil people: "But I say to you." Here's what the OT said:

**Leviticus 24:17-21** "Whoever takes a human life shall surely be put to death. <sup>18</sup> Whoever takes an animal's life shall make it good, life for life. <sup>19</sup> If anyone injures his neighbor, as he has done it shall be done to him, <sup>20</sup> fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth; whatever injury he has given a person shall be given to him. <sup>21</sup> Whoever kills an animal shall make it good, and whoever kills a person shall be put to death.

The point of an eye for an eye was that crimes required appropriate consequences. On one hand, committing murder shouldn't be punished with a small fine. On the other hand, inflicting a minor injury in a fight shouldn't result in execution. The punishment shouldn't be too severe, nor should it be too lenient. The issue is justice. God has delegated authority to human governments for the benefit of their citizens. When the law is functioning justly, law-abiding citizens are being protected and law breakers are being punished according to the nature of their crimes. It wasn't supposed to be this way from the beginning. Human society was intended to flourish with God's image bearers, men and women, instructed to take dominion over the earth (Gen 1:28). But Adam fell and the creation with him. As a result, the human race has been corrupted, to the extent that Moses could say this:

**Genesis 6:5** The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.

Because mankind's thoughts, desires, and motives were radically corrupted by the fall, laws were necessary to hold sin in check. And these laws (eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth) reflect the justice of God. Wayne Grudem defines God's justice, or righteousness:

"The doctrine that God always acts in accordance with what is right and that he is himself the final standard of what is right."

An eye for an eye reflects the nature of God. And because we're created in God's image, God has written his law on our heart. We have a conscience that troubles us when we violate his law. And we're troubled when we see injustice in our society. Because God is just, we his people should love what is right and hate what is wrong.

In recent days, our country has experienced an outcry because of injustice. Some are protesting peacefully while others are rioting and looting. Why? A number of incidents have occurred, but I'll highlight two. On February 23, a 25 year old unarmed African-American man named Ahmaud Arbery was shot in Georgia by two white men while out for a jog. Investigators initially trusted the testimony of the killers, that Arbery was a burglary suspect who initiated a fight with them and they shot him in self-defense. Arbery had technically trespassed a construction site briefly, children had done the same. But Arbery didn't burglarize or instigate the men who killed him. A video of the incident surfaced May 5<sup>th</sup> and the shooters were arrested on May 7<sup>th</sup>, 74 days after the murder. Why did it require a video for justice to be done?

More recently, another African-American, George Floyd, was arrested for attempted forgery. Accused of resisting arrest, the handcuffed Floyd was pinned to the pavement while a white police officer drove his knee into Floyd's neck, preventing Floyd from breathing. Floyd repeated said, "I can't breath" while the officer told him to get in the car with Floyd saying, "I can't." Floyd died shortly thereafter. With these murders captured on video, public outrage erupted in cities throughout the nation. Why?

Because justice wasn't carried out. Because those tasked with the enforcing the law, police and investigators, failed to uphold their responsibility to those they've vowed to serve. Because an eye for an eye was violated. And black people have suffered injustice more than once. Arbery was killed for peeking at a construction site. Floyd was killed for using counterfeit money. In each case, the punishment went way beyond the crime. This what an eye for an eye intended to prevent: unjust punishments. We're so grieved and angry because God's law, an eye for an eye, is in us. We know Arbery and Floyd were the victims of injustice. We know God's holy law was violated. We're also grieved and angered by looting. Because we hate lawlessness.

So Jesus is opposing personal vengeance and retaliation, not the eye for an eye principle. Governing authorities hand out punishment, not us. The problem is using an eye for an eye to justify personal vengeance.

"But I say to you" triggers Jesus' instruction. How should we treat the evil person? Jesus gives his first radical illustration: "But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also." The issue is more insult than physical damage. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, assuming most people are right handed, it's a backhanded slap to the face. In other words, an insulting gesture. In such cases, Jesus says don't resist them. Instead, bear the shame and the pain.

Jesus is not condemning protecting our families against violence. He is not condemning intervening on behalf of a battered woman. He is not condemning Christians who labor in the legal system for justice. He is simply making a radical statement about enduring insults without retaliation. The principle here is that **kingdom citizens don't return evil with evil**. An eye for an eye was never intended to justify personal retaliation.

## Application

This radical command calls us to live in a way that we cannot if left to our own power. We need God's help, heart transformation that only God can produce. Our priorities need to change. Our desires need to change. Not responding in kind to evil insults is so hard because of our ingrained sense of justice. We think, a person shouldn't be able to get away with saying that to me. It's wrong. They need to be punished. Maybe it's being mocked because of your Christian beliefs. Or because you don't take part in a certain sin. Maybe it's insulting comments about your appearance, intelligence, or worth. Words are harmful. We've all suffered from hurtful words. But we're called to leave vengeance to God and the authorities he's established. Because our role is to love the evildoer.

Jesus is calling us to something that radically goes against our sinful bent: **to desire the good of another at the expense of our own good.** Our question should be, how can I commend Christ to them? How can I love them? Not, how can I get back at them? Our struggle to do this confronts us with the sin in our hearts. Our hatred. Our desire to retaliate in kind. We realize our need for God's mercy, and our need for God to change our values and desires. We realize we can't do this unless God does something in us. So we turn to God, sharing our sin, our struggle, our wrong desires, our selfishness. We ask for his forgiveness, for his wisdom, for his help to live out his commands. We memorize Scripture to keep afresh in our minds what we ought to desire. We memorize Scripture to remember that God will help us to do what he commands. To do what Jesus commands, we need God.

### **Point 2: If wrongly sued for your possessions, give your accuser more than they ask for (5:40)**

#### **Explanation**

Jesus' 2<sup>nd</sup> radical illustration, "And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well," tells us how to respond to lawsuits. If someone's awarded our tunic, give them our cloak too. A tunic was the garment worn next to the skin by both men and women. A cloak was the outer garment, which was also used for bedding in the open fields. If a poor man took out a loan they would give their cloak as a pledge, but the law required the lender to give back the cloak at night because the poor man needed it for sleeping:

**Deuteronomy 24:12-13** And if he is a poor man, you shall not sleep in his pledge. <sup>13</sup> You shall restore to him the pledge as the sun sets, that he may sleep in his cloak and bless you. And it shall be righteousness for you before the LORD your God.

In other words, if someone sues you for your undergarments, give your outer garment as well. This can't be literal because the disciple would be left naked. So what is Jesus getting at?

Jesus is saying, "**voluntarily surrender what can't be taken from you legally.**" By right of the Mosaic law, a Jew was entitled to keep their cloak. But Jesus says give it away to the person who took your other clothes. Jesus is attacking our value systems. He's attacking our selfishness. He's attacking our attachment to our possessions. Jesus is calling us to be generous to our enemies. Jesus is calling us to hold our possessions loosely.

#### **Application**

Personal struggle: lend out a book or a CD and never get it back...if I get it back it's never in the condition I lent it out in...and I keep such good care of my stuff...because I love my stuff

Jesus hits us at the heart level. What do I care about? My own interests or my enemy's good. Jesus says be more concerned about your enemy than yourself.

The problem is when we jump to the strictest interpretation and conclude it's impossible and say why bother. What if they demand my checkbook? What if they demand my car? What if they demand my furniture? Jesus isn't calling us to literally give up all our clothes, but he is calling us to be generous to evil people. Kind of like how Jesus dealt with us. If you're a believer, Jesus was generous towards you while you rebelled against his law. He died for you, he sent his servants to you, and he offered you mercy and eternal life through faith and repentance. If you're not a follower of Jesus, he is good and generous. If you come to him in faith and repentance, trusting his promises and turning from sin, you will experience the generosity of his mercy, comfort, instruction, and a new power, by the indwelling Holy Spirit, to do what he commands. Believers, Jesus calls us to do for others what he did for us: treat our enemies with generosity.

### **Point 3: Endure government policies and give authorities more than they ask for (5:41)**

#### **Explanation**

I'm not making this up to fit with the times. This is just precisely what Jesus is calling for in his third radical illustration: "And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles." In Jesus' day Roman soldiers had legal authority to force Jewish civilians to carry their equipment. For example, Simon of Cyrene was forced to carry Jesus' cross (Matt 27:32). This legal provision was deeply despised by Jews who resented being occupied by Roman forces. If a Roman soldier forced you to carry their stuff for one for one mile what should a disciple do? They should give more than required and carry their stuff for two miles. In other words, when an oppressive government makes demands upon us, we should give them more than they demand. Go the extra mile.

#### **Application**

But what about Paul appealing to his rights? Here the individual simply gives the government their due. No rights were being taken away. In Paul's case, local officials were not upholding his rights. As a Roman citizen, he should never have been beaten. What about laws we perceive as unjust? It doesn't matter. Surely the Jews in Jesus' day viewed it unjust that Roman soldiers could force them into labor against their will.

As with the second illustration, being a generous people is more important than our comfort and desires. Go beyond what is required to help others, even those government authorities that enforce harsh regulations on you. Hold your perceived rights loosely and serve others.

### **Point 4: Give without reservation (5:42)**

#### **Explanation**

Here Jesus summarizes the three radical illustrations: "Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you." Be generous. Give freely and don't turn people away. Give without reservation. Hold loosely to your possessions.

#### **Application**

You're thinking, I know I'm supposed to be generous to the poor. But what about giving my money to a beggar so they can buy alcohol? What about those who refuse to work? What about 2 Thessalonians 3:10?

**2 Thessalonians 3:10** For even when we were with you, we would give you this command: If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat.

In each of these illustrations we're troubled because Jesus is commanding us to live in a way that is radical and counter-intuitive. To be generous and deny our own interests. We think, Jesus can't actually be serious so we move on and never actually apply them. We act cautiously and deny the force of Jesus' instruction. **But Jesus isn't giving us these commands to make us cautious about serving our enemies. And he isn't giving us these commands to make us cautious about being generous.** So how can we obey this instruction?

First, we need to recognize that in the kingdom of God, priorities exist that supersede our self-interests. Our desire for personal safety, our desire for our own improvement, and our desire to protect our possessions cannot be greater than our desire to generously help others. Jesus confronts our selfishness.

Jesus aims to shake us up. To show us how far off our priorities are. To show us how our efforts to meet the divine standard always come up short. To show us how much we need God's mercy. To show us how much we need divine enablement to live out divine commands. And Jesus is merciful when we struggle to do these things. He knows they are impossible for us about from him.

Am I there? No way. We are learners on a path towards greater Christlikeness. God chips away at us showing us one misplaced priority. Then he reveals something else. And so on. Each step of the way he helps to fight our sin at the root: in our hearts. **What we love and live for has to change.** This is what Jesus is getting at. If we find these commands troubling, and I bet we do, it's because our priorities need to change. And this is a process, not a one-time event. **Jesus isn't trying to give us a guilt trip. He's trying to correct our priorities.** We can live out the spirit of these commands when our priorities change and we seek God's help.

Second, at the root of these commands is love for our neighbor. These are concrete examples of what love looks like in certain situations. So in some instances, these commands should be obeyed literally. Except in the case of giving away all our clothes. Let people insult you. Forgive and be merciful. Bear with them in love. If someone wants to take what's yours, show them generosity. If authorities impose upon you, give them more they asked and show them love and respect. If people in need come to you for help, do what you can to help them. The issue is loving our neighbor, even those we're inclined to hate.

But in other instances, these commands shouldn't be followed literally because love would require something else. For example, if a violent person wants to attack my child, it wouldn't be loving to stand back and let them do it. Or if someone demanded me to give them my car so they could run over neighborhood children, love would demand that I deny their request. Or if someone who refused to work demanded that I support them, it might be more loving to help them develop skills that would lead to employment and their ability to support themselves. But in every case, love must guide.

So in short, **these commands challenge our priorities and they challenge our lack of love.** They drive us to our need for God's grace.

## **Conclusion**

**Prioritize neighbor love that is merciful, generous, and serving over self-interest.** This morning Jesus challenges our priorities. He shows us how far we are from living the divine standard. So let's confess to God how driven we are by self-interest. Be specific in your confession. And ask God to transform your desires. Our priorities can only be reshaped with God's help. And it's a process.