

**MATTHEW 5:38-42 | Yield!**  
**Del Shimandle | August 30, 2020**

Good morning, First Free Church. I'm so thankful to be here with you today, in-person with some, but live-streaming with you folks at home. I certainly wish we could all be together in person, but I'm so glad that we have technology that makes it possible to be together in spite of the circumstances.

If you're like me, you love a good "bully get's what's coming to him" story. It's a specific sort of good vs evil plot, an underdog gets picked on by a thuggish tough. The underdog factor is the key to these types of stories. The tension of bully come-uppance stories derives from the unjust antagonism, but also the seemingly insurmountable odds that the "good guy" faces in trying to overcome the "bad guy."

You'll find these kinds of stories come in every genre, from comedy to fantasy to super hero movies.

Marty McFly vs Biff in Back to the Future movies... You remember, Biff (or his ancestors and descendents depending on where the movie is in the timeline at any given time...) is the school jock, big and strong, but can't string a sentence together. He was always saying things like: "Act like a tree, and get out of hear..." And Marty and any of the McFly's who are short, or wimpy, or whatever, and are always getting called "chicken" by Biff.

There's Steve Rogers (aka Captain America) vs Brooklyn bullies in the 1940s (and then the Nazi Army and the evil cabal Hydra). Even before he is transformed into a hunky superhero, he always gets back up when a bully knocks him down. "I can do this all day!"

There's the Karate Kid vs Johnny and the Cobra Kai; Harry Potter vs Voldemort; and then there's Spiderman, Diary of a Wimpy Kid, Carrie, Revenge of the Nerds... and so many more.

Stories about bullies getting it are popular not only because we want to see the "good guy" win, we want to see the bully defeated and humiliated. We want them to know how it feels to be wounded, oppressed, beaten down.

You probably have a story or two from your own life where you've encountered a bully.

I remember a teacher I had in the fourth grade who was a bully. I don't know why she had it out for me, but man did I hate going to her class. I remember my grandmother hearing about this teacher from my parents, she got so incensed that she said: "I ought to go into her classroom and pour a bowl of vomit on that teacher's head!" The grossness appealed to my 4<sup>th</sup> grade self, and the thought of my teacher-bully getting her come-uppance at the hands of my grandmother comforted me.

There were times I was bullied by kids too, in the more typical sense. I was called names, tripped in the hallway, had plenty of bloody noses. By the time we moved to a different school in 8<sup>th</sup> grade I had begun to fill out a bit, and I was determined to flip the script. Before anyone in the new school could determine I belonged on the bottom of the social structure I determined to fight back to anyone who picked on me. It took more than one fight, and hitting back hurts my knuckles of course. But there was something delicious about making sure I wasn't the only one with a black eye or bloody nose. And being able to walk with my head held high, instead of skulking around avoiding other bullies, felt more than worth it to me at the time.

The truth is, though, I went a step further. I decided that the best way to avoid being the kid who was bullied, was to BECOME the one who was doing the bullying. I began to take careful note of who was smaller or weaker or more timid than me, and then would pick fights or humiliate them in the most public way possible so that the rest of the kids knew not to pick on me. I was now on the top of the pecking order. But I hated it! I didn't like seeing the pain and fear in other kid's eyes. I hated myself, because I felt stuck now. I couldn't stop walking further down the path because I was unwilling to go back to being the kid who was bullied... This angst and regret, and awareness of my wretched state were part of why I wound up becoming a Christian. But that's a story for another time...

Well, giving a bully their just deserts is NOT what today's passage is about.

I'm going to read our text for today, then I'll pray, and then we'll dig in.

It's just one and a half verses, but it hits us where it counts.

Matthew 5:38-39a

38 You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.'

39 But I tell you, do not resist an evil person.

This is God's word! Please bow with me as I pray.

*Our Father in heaven, give us ears to hear. These words of Jesus are difficult to understand and more difficult to accept. When we are treated poorly we long for justice. Eye for an eye, and tooth for tooth. Yet we are told: "do not resist!" We are told: "yield!" Oh Lord, help us understand why you would give such a difficult command. And help us... to obey. Help us, O Lord, yield to your command.*

*Now may the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen!*

### **YIELD TO THE MEANING OF THE TEXT**

I've heard a lot of different interpretations of this passage that really miss the mark. Interpretations that just don't fit with this passage alone, much less with the rest of scripture.

I'm going to read it again, but this time I'm going to include the addenda that Jesus includes that clarify or specify what He means by "do not resist an evil person." I'll read Matthew 5:38-42.

Matthew 5:38-42

38 You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.'

39 But I tell you, do not resist an evil person.

[For example...]

If anyone slaps you on the right cheek,  
turn to them the other cheek also.

40 And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt,  
hand over your coat as well.

41 If anyone forces you to go one mile,  
go with them two miles.

42 Give to the one who asks you,  
and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.

Once again I say, this IS God's word, Amen.

### **MISINTERPRETATION #1**

I've heard some people suggest that Jesus must be saying that we should resolve ourselves to being nothing but a doormat. Some find here a principle of such extreme pacifism, that they think God expects them to just let people walk over them. They read it as a command to timidity, and then they complain about how blessed they are! "Blessed are the poor in spirit... poor, poor pitiful me..." They complain about being persecuted, the avoid telling anyone about their faith because they fear don't want to offend anyone. They tell you "God sent me to India to be a missionary!" And then all they write about in their newsletters Is about how hot and humid it is, how big the bugs are, how bland the food is, how rude and backward the people are, how corrupt the government is, always requiring "tips."

My friends, this passage is NOT about being a doormat, and turning into a Christian curmudgeon.

### **MISINTERPRETATION #2**

Some people see these verses as a sort of rebuke to people who advocate for social justice. I'm embarrassed to say I've actually heard people suggest that these verses mean "oppressed people should turn the other cheek," that they should "suffer through..." and let God take care of judgment.

That's an absurd and wicked way to interpret these words. Besides many scripture passages that emphasize the Lord's command to care for the poor and oppressed, you don't have to look any farther than the context of the rest of the Sermon on the Mount to know that Jesus cares about justice and expects us to do so as well!

Don't forget the beatitudes: Mt 5:3-12,

3 "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

4 "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

5 "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

6 "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

7 "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.

8 "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

9 "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.

10 "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

See also chapter 6 verse 2. There Jesus assumed that His followers would care for the poor: "Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others.

In Luke 4, Jesus states that caring for the poor, setting captives free, and giving liberty to the oppressed was His very mission as the Messiah! While in the synagogue, the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to Jesus. He unrolled the scroll to Isaiah 61:1-2 and read:

18 "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me

to proclaim good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives  
and recovering of sight to the blind,  
to set at liberty those who are oppressed,  
19 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”

20 And he rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. 21 And he began to say to them, “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

So, make no mistake, Jesus cares about the poor and oppressed. This verse is NOT saying that people who are suffering under systemic injustice should just turn the other cheek.

### **CORRECTING OUR PERSPECTIVE**

No! Those are not the right way to read these verses. The proper way to understand the Sermon on the Mount is that Jesus is teaching about His Kingdom and how his followers are to live!

In the same way that Moses stood on Mt Sinai, Jesus stood on this “mount” and recites the Law to the people. Our verses today is part of the six “You have heard it said...” passages.

“You have heard it said: You shall not murder! But I say to you, if you are angry with your brother you’re already subject to the judgment of hell!”

These six passages are some of the most difficult things that Jesus said, for he overturns the sinful and legalistic ways that people had interpreted the Law & Prophets, and then raises the bar on the meaning and importance of each command.

These passages are Jesus’ teaching on Kingdom ethics. These are the instructions for disciples! If you want to be in the Kingdom, THIS is how you, personally, will have to live. You must not misread today’s verse as a call to be a doormat, and you must not misuse today’s verse to criticize those who call out injustice.

### **CORRECT INTERPRETATION**

What, then can we say that this passage DOES mean?

Do not resist an evil person!  
Turn the other cheek!  
Hand over your coat as well!  
Go the extra mile!  
Give money to those who ask!

This is counterintuitive stuff... Let’s take each phrase one at a time.

38 You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’  
39 But I tell you, do not resist an evil person.

The phrase “eye for eye, tooth for tooth” is sometimes referred to as the “law of retaliation,” and can be found in three key OT passages: Exodus 21:12-25, Leviticus 24:17-23, and Deuteronomy 19:15-21.

The cross-references or study notes in your Bible, probably tell you this much. Use those tools and you will be rewarded!

Ex 21:23 says: 23 But if there is harm, then you shall pay life for life, 24 eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, 25 burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe.

Leviticus 24:19 says: “19 If anyone injures his neighbor, as he has done it shall be done to him, 20 fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth; whatever injury he has given a person shall be given to him.”

And Deuteronomy 19:21 echoes: “It shall be life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot.”

Now, we you read those verses in isolation you can easily come away with the impression that revenge is prescribed and okay! But if you were to go back and read those verses in their fuller contexts you would find that the “law of retaliation” was NOT granting free reign on taking revenge, but actually PROHIBITING personal revenge. The prescriptions of justice described here were extreme, severe, and demanded that ONLY the law courts hand down these judgments, though they were never applied literally [cf NIV Zondervan Study Bible]. The point was that any such punishments were prescribed by the LORD himself. He was the supreme authority. Personal revenge was forbidden!

So, for any people listening to Jesus that day during the Sermon on the Mount, for any who who assumed the phrase “eye for eye” meant they would be justified by retaliating would have been dumbfounded when He said: “But I say to you: ‘Do not resist an evil person.’”

But Jesus goes further, raises the bar higher, when he followed up with four practical examples of non-resistance.

If anyone slaps you on the right cheek,  
turn to them the other cheek also.

Scholars agree that this is most likely not a reference to actual physical violence such as a fist fight or beating. Rather it is understood as a colloquialism for “insult.” Either way, the point is the same: allow the offender to strike you again, rather than strike them back; or absorb additional insults, rather than insulting in return.

In other words, do not take your own revenge. Do not retaliate!

40 And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt,  
hand over your coat as well.

This is may be some sort of twist on a 1<sup>st</sup> century colloquialism as well. If someone wants one of your belongings, go further, and give him something of greater value as well! In this particular scenario, we have a strange picture, for the person would wind up basically unclothed!

So here, the bar is raised a bit higher. Not only should we NOT retaliate, we should give MORE than we are demanded of!

41 If anyone forces you to go one mile,  
go with them two miles.

In this phrase Jesus is probably referring to the practice of Roman soldiers who would conscript civilians to manual labor at any given moment for temporary tasks. Think, for example, of when Jesus walk to the hill of skulls to die. He was made to carry his own cross, but after being tortured he was unfit to carry it very far or for very long. Roman soldiers snatched a man from Cyrene named Simon, and forced him to help carry the cross of Christ!

In this phrase, Jesus is again, raising the bar higher than before. “Jesus commands voluntarily duplicating the legal limit” of forced conscription!

Are you beginning to see a pattern here? Jesus is flipping the script!

42 Give to the one who asks you,  
and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.

In this phrase, Jesus addresses an issue too personal for many. The wallet! We all live in a major city, so I know you’ve probably encountered panhandlers or beggars on the street or in the middle of an intersection. Without any qualifications Jesus says: “Give to the one who asks.” He knows our inclination to turn away and pretend we didn’t notice so he adds: “Do not turn away!”

Now, we don’t need to get into the finer points of if, how or when to give to beggars, and what other things we might do for them that might be more helpful. The point in Jesus’ words though, is not easily avoided. He raises the bar once again. He says give without qualification and don’t turn away. Am I giving all I can give to help others, or am I turning away!?

So, in each of these phrases Jesus flipped the script. He turned the ethics and the sense of personal justice upside down for His listeners. Remember, Jesus is teaching Kingdom ethics in these sections. He’s teaching people what it takes to follow Him and be part of His Kingdom. But why? What could be the point of “not resisting the evil person?”

I think the answer to that is in another question: What will giving way do to the bully, the oppressor, the victimizer? How will they respond to non-violence? How does a bully respond when we don’t fight back? How do the onlookers respond?

### **YIELDING AS A STRATEGY**

Let me try to clarify with a sports analogy. Have you ever participated in, or watched wrestling? Two athletes get on mat. They’re in top physical condition, strong as bulls, and what do they do? They grapple, pushing, pulling, twisting around, gripping wrists or arms or legs. They push against each other trying to pin their opponent’s shoulders to the mat. Not only does it take tremendous strength, but great endurance. Sometimes the strategy shifts though. Two athletes pushing against each other with all their strength, and suddenly one gives way. One releases their forward pressure and strength, yielding to the energy and momentum of the other. The one yielding is not giving up the match. By yielding

suddenly, one wrestler can use the weight, strength and momentum of the opponent to their own advantage. Yielding can quickly lead to a throw, or even a pin.

That's the very picture of Jesus' ministry. The apostle Peter wrote (1 Peter 2):

23 When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. 24 He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed.

Did you catch that? Jesus was reviled, but did not revile in return. Instead he suffered for us, he bore our sins on the cross! By yielding, His wounds have provided us with forgiveness and healing!

And in the same passage, Peter, who would have been sitting at the feet of Jesus during the Sermon on the Mount, added this:

21 For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. 22 He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth.

Later on in Chapter 3 (8-22), Peter also said:

9 Do not repay evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary, bless, for to this you were called, that you may obtain a blessing. ... 17 For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will, than for doing evil.

18 For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit,

A moment ago I asked "how would a bully respond when we yield?" And "how would the onlookers respond. Consider the Roman soldier at the foot of the cross! He was likely one of the soldiers who tortured Jesus, perhaps pounded in the nails himself. And through it all, he witnessed Jesus yielding. Not retaliating. And what was his conclusion? This non-Jewish Roman soldier said: "Surely this was the Son of God!"

Jesus, who is God Himself come in the flesh, suffered at the hands of sinners. And by yielding instead of taking revenge, He flipped the script. He reconciled those sinners to God!

We should not be surprised that we too are sometimes bullied, sometimes persecuted, sometimes oppressed. It may happen in school, at work, in your neighborhood, sadly even sometimes in the church. But when we suffer, we must not resist the evil person. Rather, like Jesus we should yield. We should suddenly give way, that we might win our enemy over! For the ministry of reconciliation has been give to us! We are ambassadors for Christ, and God makes his appeal through us and through our actions. (2 Cor 5:18-20).

There are many accounts of Christians in the early church yielding in this very way. Polycarp, the Bishop of Smyrna, was threatened with death unless he recanted his faith in Christ. The Roman governor said to him: "Renounce Christ and I will set you free." Polycarp responded: "Eighty six years have I served Him, and He never did me any wrong; how then can I blaspheme my King and my Savior?" Polycarp was no timid wimp, yet he yielded to the bully. He was put to death. And there are countless other stories in the early church of Christians yielding to persecution, but remaining faithful to Jesus, and so amazing their persecutors that sometimes those torturers became Christians themselves.

I came across this the other day in my reading. It's a letter from a man named Aristides to Emperor Hadrian, written around 130AD, just 100 years after the death of Jesus and during the early church period. Listen to how the early Christians were known, even by their persecutors!

“The Christians know and trust their God. They placate those who oppress them and make their enemies their friends. They do good to their enemies. Their wives are absolutely pure and their daughters are modest. Their men abstain from unlawful marriages, and all other impurity. If any of them have bondwomen or children, they persuade them to become Christians for the love they have toward them; and when they become so, they call them ‘brother’ without distinction. They love one another. They rescue the orphan from him who does him violence. He who has, gives ungrudgingly to him that has not. If they see a stranger, they take him into their dwellings and rejoice over him as over a real brother; for they do not call each other brother after the flesh, but after the Spirit of God. If any among them is poor and needy, and they do not have food to spare, they fast two or three days that they may supply him with necessary food. But, the deeds which they do, they do not proclaim to the ears of the multitude, but they take care that no man shall perceive them. Thus they labor to become righteous. Truly, this is a new people and there is something divine in them.”  
—“Letter to Emperor Hadrian, Apology of Aristides” cited in Charles Foster Kent, *The Social Teachings of the Prophets and Jesus*, pp 325-26.

Let me bring us back to the main text for today. Jesus said: “You have heard that it was said: ‘eye for eye, tooth for tooth,’” but I say to you: ‘do not resist an evil person.’” So that’s a hard teaching. We’re in a series on the “hard teachings of Jesus.” This is certainly hard enough that we may not understand it, and hard enough that we may struggle to accept it! I’m not so SURE I want to turn the other cheek. But the bigger question is this: WHY!? Why did Jesus utter such a difficult teaching!?

The example of Jesus’ life, and the example of the early Christians show us the answer!

Because THIS is how His kingdom is established, how it is maintained, and how people are won over!

So do not resist an evil person. Do not resist, but yield. Yield the way Christ yielded, and for the same reasons that Christ yielded.

To those who are in the work force, when your boss or co-worker criticizes you unfairly or insults you, do not repay evil for evil. Instead surprise them by speaking words of grace, respect and honor.

High schoolers and college students, when your professor piles on the assignments that seem to be pointless, or when she grades you too harshly, do not resist! Instead, yield! Go the extra mile. Do, or re-do your work with as much excellence as you can muster!

Children, when your brother or sister or friend wants to play with your toys, give them the best toy you have.

Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the God. For the Scriptures say: “Vengeance is mine, I will repay,” says the Lord. Instead, if your enemy is hungry, feed him, if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by doing this, you will heap burning coals of regret on his head! Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good! (Rom 12:19-21)

This is what Jesus meant when he said: “Do not resist the evil person.”



Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good!

Amen.