

WHEN PUSH COMES TO SHOVE MATTHEW 5:38-42

How do you react when someone demeans or disrespects you, or when someone insults you for no good reason? How do you respond when someone treats you like a doormat?

I don't know about you, but I struggle with my response when these things happen to me. I don't mind if someone disagrees with me, or if someone confronts me when I've done something wrong. I don't particularly mind if someone doesn't like me. But when someone disses me or insults me for no reason, or when someone tries to take advantage of me, I tend to get angry. I want to communicate my displeasure and my disgust for their audacity. I want to give them a piece of my mind. I may even retaliate with a proportionate amount of disrespect or disdain.

Some people call that sticking up for yourself. Some call it assertiveness, and in our culture assertiveness is considered an admirable quality.

But what does Jesus think about it? How did *He* react when He was disrespected and insulted and abused? And how does He expect us to react?

The passage we are going to look at this morning provides the basis for the answers to these questions. They are the words of Jesus Himself in **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 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 (ESV).*

This passage has had biblical scholars scratching their heads for centuries. Not surprisingly, it is also one of the most misunderstood *and* misapplied—used to promote everything from pacifism to anarchy. Leo Tolstoy based one of his most well-known novels, *War and Peace*, on this passage, in which he concluded that the elimination of the police and military would bring a utopian society.

So we need to look carefully at Jesus' words, so we can know exactly what He meant and how He would have us apply them.

You already know by now that Jesus was addressing people whose lives revolved around the Law, and the Law was not merely their moral code; it was their constitution. It covered everything in their society, including their system of justice and their civil rights.

Jesus is talking about civil rights in these verses. And the first thing he does is recite the law that provided the basis for their civil rights. **Verse 38.** ³⁸ *"You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.'* (ESV).

This was one of the most familiar and frequently quoted statements in the Old Testament, found in Exodus, Leviticus *and* Deuteronomy. (Ex. 21:24; Lev. 24:20; Deut. 19:21). Actually the phrase, *eye for eye, tooth for tooth*, is part of a longer list in the OT Law that included "hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, bruise for bruise, fracture for fracture". And it was taken literally. If someone hit you and knocked your tooth out, *his* tooth would be extracted as a punishment. If someone broke your arm, *his* arm would be broken.

This law may seem vengeful, but it was established to serve two very good purposes. One, to curb violence. Deuteronomy says that it was intended to instill fear in the hearts of people who wanted to retaliate (19:20). In other words, the law was given to be a deterrent.

Secondly, it was intended to keep the violence from escalating. Human beings are not always satisfied with reciprocity. Sometimes we want to inflict *more* harm than was inflicted

upon us. So if someone cuts off my hand, I want to cut off his arm, which leads him to want to cut off my leg, which leads me to want to cut off his head.

To put it plainly: We want a pound of flesh for an ounce of offense. We're not content to get even; we want to get ahead (Robinson).

This law restricted the penalty so that the punishment fit the crime but didn't exceed it. It also minimized the possibility of blood feuds, which is usually fueled by violence that has escalated from retaliation.

But there's something else about this OT law. These punishments were intended to be administered by judges or public officials in a court of law. They were never intended to be executed by individuals who were out to get revenge.

However, in Jesus' day, this law had become commonly known as the "law of retaliation". *Individuals* were permitted to be their own judge, jury, and executioner, and they were using this law to carry out personal vendettas.

And Jesus said, "You've missed the point. This law has nothing to do with retaliation. It's not even about self-protection. It's about *justice* and *restraint*."

Restraint is something that has never come easily to human beings. We are, by nature, defensive, reactive, and retaliatory. When something bad happens to us—when we're mistreated, maligned, harassed, or taken advantage of—and it's in our power to do something about it, we tend to get angry, strike back, or get revenge.

Yet Jesus says that restraint is a mark of discipleship. Restraint is a characteristic of a kingdom person. Look at **verse 39**. ³⁹ *But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. (ESV).*

An evil person is someone who is malicious, someone who is out to get you, someone who wants to exploit you.

Jesus says, "Do *not* resist such a person."

What does this mean? Does it mean that we should be passive when someone tries to assault us on the street? If we encounter a mugger or a rapist or a burglar should we allow him to violate us without putting up any resistance at all?

Christians have been debating this issue of nonresistance for centuries, and have come up with very different conclusions. Some believe that any kind of resistance is disobedience to Christ's command, and a lack of faith in His protection. And so they are passive in the face of opposition, or at least believe they should be.

Others argue that Christ wants us to use common sense, and claim that if you didn't resist evil persons then evil would eventually overtake society, and lead to anarchy.

When we were preparing to move to Nairobi, a missionary who had lived there and whose home had been broken into several times, counseled me to take a crossbow, with arrows made out of razor blades...and it wasn't for hunting wild game. How does *that* line up with Jesus' teaching here?

We are not going to satisfactorily answer all these questions in the time we have today, but they are questions with which each of us needs to thoughtfully and prayerfully wrestle. The point I want to emphasize is that restraint in the face of opposition from evil people is a kingdom attribute, and King Jesus expects His followers to express restraint when we are faced with such opposition.

So the attitude, "No one is going to push me around; no one is going to disrespect me or take advantage of me," is inappropriate. That's an attitude that emanates from our old nature, the nature that has been crucified with Christ. Our new nature, which is Christ in us, is *not* defensive, vindictive, or vengeful. Defensiveness and vindictiveness are the opposite

of who Christ is, what Christ has made us, and how Christ expresses His life through us.

A Christian attitude is meekness, and our example is Christ Himself. Peter tells us in chapter 2 of his first epistle that “...*when they hurled their insults at [Jesus] he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly*” (2:23).

Out of obedience to His Father’s will and submission to His Father’s plan to save the world through Him, Jesus did not resist evil persons, even those who succeeded in killing Him, because He had put His life in His Father’s hands, and He knew the Father would use the evil these people did to Him to do something that would bless the whole world.

So what does following Jesus’ example look like for us in our daily lives? We are told in the next few verses. **Verse 39b.** *But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.*

Since 90% of people are right-handed, the reason someone would get slapped on the right *cheek* is if they got hit with a *backhanded slap*. In Jewish culture, as in many cultures still today, a backhanded slap was a tremendous insult, more serious than any other kind of blow, since it was intended to shame a person. In fact, the book of Exodus tells us that if someone got hit with a backhanded slap, they were entitled to double the compensation, because it was so humiliating.

Jesus is talking about what we do when we’re insulted. How we respond to a person who intentionally wants to shame us or who deliberately puts us down. He may not actually hit us. He may do it with words, or with a look, or a sigh of disgust.

As I said earlier, there are few things that push my buttons more than when I’m insulted or berated or treated with contempt. And my natural reaction is to strike back by saying or doing something to get even. But that’s my pride, pure and simple. And that pride springs from my old operating system the Bible calls “the flesh”. That’s why it is imperative that I be controlled by my *new* operating system, *Christ in me (the Holy Spirit)*. That new operating system doesn’t give a rip about my ego, or my rights, or my reputation.

Why? Because I’m no longer merely a citizen of this world, and, therefore, my reputation and rights and resources in this world are not important. I’m a child of the King and a citizen of heaven. What is important is who I am in relation to Jesus and His kingdom.

So why should it matter how people treat me on this earth? I don’t have to prove how important I am; Christ has already made me important. I don’t have to defend my honor; Christ has given me a position of honor in the heavenly realms. I don’t have to hold on to my resources. I’m a co-heir with Christ! So, **verse 40.** *And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well.*

Again, Jesus is talking about lawsuits here. In the first century if someone was taken to court and lost his case, but he didn’t have any money, the judge might require the fine to be paid in clothing. Thus, a person’s tunic was fair game in a civil suit. A tunic was the undergarment worn by men in the Middle East. You’ve heard of suing someone’s socks off? In the first century a person could sue someone’s underwear off. But while a person could sue for a person’s underwear, which was relatively inexpensive, he could not obtain possession of a person’s cloak, which was worth much more.

The cloak was the outer garment, and it was considered an inalienable possession. It was a person’s blanket in the winter and pillow in the summer. Exodus tells us that if someone took a person’s cloak and didn’t return it before nightfall God Himself would avenge that person (22:26-27).

Jesus says that even our inalienable rights and possessions should be surrendered or

relinquished so that there will be no animosity between us and those whom we have offended. He is actually telling us to go above and beyond what is required—to over-compensate for the sake of peace and resolution.

And speaking of over-compensating, look at **verse 41**. *And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles (ESV)*.

Under Roman rule it was lawful for a soldier or an official to commandeer civilians at will. The law stated they could force a civilian, any civilian, to carry their burden up to one mile.

Imagine being in town with your family, or working on your farm, and along comes some big shot and says, “Hey, you! Get over here! Carry my duffel bag.” If you were a Jew in Jesus’ day you would have been obligated to drop what you were doing right then and there, no matter how important it was, no matter what inconvenience it caused, and hop to it. What an imposition! What a demeaning act of servitude!

And so, the Jews held to the letter of the law on this. They measured the mile in steps—one thousand exactly—and they counted every one. When they got to one thousand, no matter where they were, they put the pack down and took off. They may have only had ten more steps until they reached the destination. It didn’t matter. They had performed their legal duty.

Notice what Jesus says. **Verse 41**. *And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles (ESV)*. Obviously, Jesus is not suggesting that you count 2000 steps instead of 1000. He’s talking about going above and beyond the call of duty. He’s talking about performing a demeaning act of service with a willing spirit, doing it as unto the Lord.

It’s pretty easy for me to be generous with those I love. I gladly give them my time and energy and resources. But I don’t like being used by someone, especially when he uses me to promote his own interests. And it’s even worse when he *demand*s that I do something for him. That’s because I think my time and resources belong to me—that I’m entitled to give them to whomever I want whenever I want.

But my time and resources *don’t* really belong to me. My *life* doesn’t even belong to me. I belong to Jesus. I am not my own, I have been bought with a price, the precious blood of Christ. And that means that my time is His time, my resources are His resources, my plans are His plans.

So if Jesus tells me to turn the other cheek and be willing to get slapped again, I’ll do it...for Him. If Jesus tells me to give the shirt off my back, I’ll do it...for Him. If Jesus tells me to go the extra mile, I’ll do it...for Him. I may not understand why He wants me to do it; I may not see any value in doing it or any good that will come from it, but I can trust that He’s got a greater purpose than what I know. And if I do it for Him, in the strength that He provides, He is honored.

He goes on in **verse 42**. *Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you (ESV)*.

Please understand that Jesus is not suggesting that we give to every panhandler or every person on the street corner who asks for a handout. In this statement He was specifically referring to making loans to people who were in dire straits financially. According to Jewish law, debts were to be canceled every seven years (Deut.15). “Shrewd” business men learned not to make loans in the sixth year, because if it wasn’t paid off within a year it would turn into a gift.

The point Jesus is making in verse 42 is that we are to be generous with others and consider their needs without regard to how we can profit from them. And that is, once again,

because kingdom people have no need to promote their material interests in this world. Our citizenship is in heaven, and that is where our treasure is.

Now, go back and look at all these commands. They all have something in common, don't they? They are all just the opposite of how we naturally react. We naturally want to stand our ground and stick up for our rights and make sure we are not taken advantage of by others. That's why in the last few years best-selling books have been written with titles such as "How to Get the Upper Hand"; "Winning Through Intimidation"; "Looking Out For Number One"; "Pulling Your Own Strings"; "How To Get Your Own Way".

And more than a few Christians have bought the philosophy that goes along with it, which is the very opposite of what Jesus says we are to be and do. We don't talk about self-denial; we talk about asserting ourselves. We don't talk about sacrifice; we talk about getting what's due us. We don't talk about submission; we talk about rights.

One of my favorite books is *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, by Harriet Beecher Stowe, a classic novel about slavery written just prior to the Civil War. Harriet Beecher Stowe was a fine Christian (a minister's daughter), and she portrayed the main character of her story, Uncle Tom, as a thoroughly Christ-like figure. As a slave he was abused, mistreated, harassed, and insulted in the worst possible ways, yet he patiently endured. He was gentle, non-retaliatory, and nonresistant. A true hero if there ever was one.

And yet, in the black community today, one of the most derisive names that one can be called is "an Uncle Tom." Why? Precisely because he possessed the Christ-like qualities I just described. He didn't assert himself. He didn't retaliate. He didn't fight for his rights. He didn't become bitter. He did exactly what Jesus talked about in verses 38-42.

How a person responds to abuse, humiliation, and exploitation may be the way in which their true nature is revealed more than any other way. The true nature of a Christ follower enables him to respond with restraint, graciousness, and generosity to those who insult or exploit him. Because his operating system is Christ in him. That means when push comes to shove, he doesn't shove back; when somebody jumps all over his case, he doesn't jump all over them.

You say, "But I refuse to be a doormat!"

Part of our problem is that we associate the kind of behavior that Jesus talks about in this passage with weakness, insecurity, and passivity. We are inclined to think that unless we stand up for ourselves or stand our ground we don't have any strength or self-respect.

But that's not true. Practicing restraint takes incredible strength and self-control. In fact, it is so difficult and so unnatural that it takes *supernatural* strength and self-control.

Furthermore, practicing restraint in the way Jesus described is not an indication of a person's insecurity; it is an evidence that a person is truly secure in who he/she is. She can do it because she is loved and esteemed by God Himself. He can do it because he's a child of the King of kings. She can do it because she has been born again, and has been given Christ's nature.

Is it easy to do what Jesus says in verses 38-42? That all depends. One of those in his audience was Peter. Some months later some authorities came to arrest Jesus, and Peter pulled out his sword and cut off the ear of one of the men. Jesus said, "C'mon Peter, put that sword away. If I wanted to be rescued I could call ten thousand angels who could set me free just like that." Later that evening when he was confronted he threw Jesus under the bus in order to save his own hide.

Jesus knew, when he said these words in his Sermon on the Mount, that no one on earth at that time could obey His interpretation of the law. Turn the other cheek? Yeah right!

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Give the guy who just sued me more than what the judge said I have to give? You've got to be kidding! Go the extra mile when someone has humiliated me? No way!

It's true. There is no way anyone can do these things, apart from the work of the Holy Spirit to make him a new creature in Christ with new capabilities and new values and priorities. It's only when we are born again and receive a new nature (a new operating system) that we are able to do what Jesus says here.

Peter is a good example of that. After Jesus died on the cross and defeated the power of sin, and after the Holy Spirit came on the Day of Pentecost to be the new operating system for Jesus' followers, Peter was a completely different man. When he stood before the authorities accused of blasphemy, accused of insurrection, he did not get defensive. He didn't react or retaliate. He was completely calm and restrained. He was peaceful and joyful, even when they beat him and sent him to jail.

And we can be the same, because those of us who have put our faith in Jesus have the same Holy Spirit living in us. So, if you want to obey Jesus' words in Matthew 5, be filled with the Spirit. Let the Spirit give you the mind of Christ, the heart of Christ, and the character of Christ, which is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness faithfulness, meekness, and self-control.

WHEN PUSH COMES TO SHOVE MATTHEW 5:38-42

MAIN IDEA: WE ARE TO RESPOND WITH RESTRAINT, GRACIOUSNESS, AND GENEROSITY TO THOSE WHO INSULT OR EXPLOIT US

THE LAW OF MOSES (38)
THE ORIGINAL MEANING

JUSTIFICATION FOR RETALIATION

THE LAW OF JESUS (39-42)
NON-RESISTANCE (39A)

DO NOT RETALIATE (39B)

ABOVE AND BEYOND (40)

THE EXTRA MILE (41)

GENEROSITY (42)

APPLICATION