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Matthew 5:38 - 5:42



Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

In this segment, Steve Gregg discusses Matthew 5:38-42, where Jesus provides examples of how the law applies to his disciples. Jesus explains how justice, faithfulness, and mercy should be practiced based on God's previous teachings. He emphasizes the importance of not retaliating against those who have wronged us and to go the extra mile when asked to do so. Furthermore, he states that being merciful is an essential component of love.

Transcript

It's time now to continue in this section of the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus is giving examples of how the law applies to those who are his disciples. The law, meaning the Old Testament law and its moral standards, which in Jesus' day had been greatly corrupted in the way it was taught. It's not so much that there was anything wrong with the law of Moses itself.

It's simply that the way it was taught by the rabbis basically missed the point only too often. They kept the law outwardly in the letter in a legalistic fashion. Many of the Pharisees did at least.

And they taught that others should do so, but they did not see that what God was after was a matter of the heart. What God wanted was that people would love their neighbor as they love themselves. This loving of neighbor as you love yourself is really accomplished by being exact in all of your dealings with your neighbor in terms of being just and faithful and merciful.

Justice, mercy, and faithfulness, these three things are what Jesus called the weightier matters of the law. And here in this portion of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is illustrating what justice is about, what faithfulness is about, what mercy is about, and how this applies to what God has already revealed to the Jews hundreds of years earlier through Moses. And how the law that the Jews desired to be faithful to had really pointed in this direction all along, but they had missed the meaning.

So Jesus is now uncovering the law, its original intent, from all the traditional obscurity

that the rabbis had heaped upon it, which had prevented them from really pleasing God in their behavior because they had really failed to recognize what God wanted when he even gave these commands. Now, in the first two examples that Jesus gave, I have suggested that he was illustrating God's concern for justice. In the second two examples, he was illustrating God's concern for faithfulness.

He talked about divorce and the taking and keeping of vows. The final two examples he gives are here at the end of Matthew chapter 5, and they illustrate God's concern for mercy, that is, that his people be merciful. And here we have it in Matthew 5.38-42, the fifth example that Jesus gives clearly has to do with underscoring the need to be merciful to others.

In Matthew 5.38, Jesus said, You have heard that it was said, An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. But I tell you not to resist an evil person. But whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also.

If anyone wants to sue you and take away your tunic, let him have your cloak also. And whoever compels you to go one mile, go with him too. Give to him who asks you, and from him who wants to borrow from you, do not turn away.

Now, let us try to understand what Jesus is saying and what he is not saying. I don't mean to water this down at all, but there is certainly a point that Jesus is trying to make, and because of our unfamiliarity with his idiom, we might misunderstand that point, just like we could misunderstand him on occasions when he talks about cutting off your right hand or plucking out your eye. He starts out by saying, You have heard that it was said, An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.

And indeed, that was stated not once, but many times in the Old Testament, in Exodus 21-24, in Leviticus 24-20, in Deuteronomy 19. In all these places we have the repetition of this eye for eye and tooth for tooth law. It is sometimes called the Lex Talionis.

It is the law of retaliation. It is the law of retribution. Now, Jesus obviously instructs his disciples that they do not need to follow this law, and tells them what to do instead.

Before we look at the specific things that Jesus said his disciples should do instead of following this law, we need to ask whether this law is still valid, and whether Jesus is trying to say, Okay, this law is no longer any good, let's replace it with what I am about to say. No, that is not what Jesus is doing. When Jesus gives the various examples in this passage in Matthew, and he says, You have heard that it was said, Don't murder.

Or, You have heard that it was said, Don't commit adultery. He is not changing the moral teaching of the law. He is not saying that murder is now all right, or adultery is now all right.

Likewise, when he says, You have heard that it was said, and he quotes the law, An eye

for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, He is not saying, Now this law is no longer a just law. He is actually making an entirely different point, and that is how his disciples should respond to those who wronged them. Now the law in the Old Testament, An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, it actually went further, it said, Burn for burn, stroke for stroke, life for life.

And what that means is that when a person has injured another, and that injured party takes that person to court, the magistrate, the judge, was supposed to impose a penalty on the one who had wronged the other. But the question is, What penalty? Well, the penalty was to be exactly just. If a man had attacked another and knocked out his eye, then the penalty would be he must lose one of his own eyes.

If he had injured or damaged a man's hand so they could no longer work, then the man who had done the damage should have his own hand similarly damaged. If he had killed somebody, then the man would have to give his life for a life. Life for life, stroke for stroke, burn for burn, eye for eye, tooth for tooth.

All of this was simply to say, if a man has injured another and caused some ongoing damage that that man must live with for the rest of his life, or even has killed him, then the person who has done the damage must pay in kind, with his own life or with his own injuries. Now, some people might think that's a barbaric law. Like, for example, in some Muslim countries, if you would steal a loaf of bread, you would have your hand cut off.

Now, we think of that as a barbaric law, and I think it's correctly viewed as a barbaric law. To cut a man's hand off and permanently maim him because he stole a loaf of bread would never have been done in biblical times by the Jews because a man who was a thief under the law had to simply return what he had stolen with interest, and it was a very steep scale of interest. He had to sometimes bring back four times or five times as much as what he had stolen.

So, you know, the law would not maim him permanently for stealing a loaf of bread. But if a man maimed another man permanently and therefore was made to sustain the same injury himself, that's not barbaric, that's just plain justice. That's just plain exact justice.

If I damage your car, and then you're permitted to damage my car similarly. Actually, better yet, I should give you my car. But the point is, the law was given an eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth, in order that a man might not be punished more than his crime deserved, nor less.

In the Bible, there is a principle stated in Proverbs that he that acquits the guilty and he that condemns the innocent are equally an abomination to the Lord. In a court of law, when a man sits as a judge or magistrate, and it is his place to judge between parties that have a complaint against each other, and he finds that one is guilty of a crime against another, and it is up to the judge to determine a penalty for the criminal, he is

under obligation to mete out the exactly just penalty. It is wrong to take a man who stole a loaf of bread and send him to jail for 40 years.

It is likewise wrong to take a man who is a murderer and give him a slap on the hand and let him go free. One is an example of a punishment that is disproportionately severe. The other is disproportionately lenient.

Any judge who does not understand justice should not be in that position because God is concerned about justice, and this law, an eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth, was to guide the judges, the magistrates of Israel, in the correct penalty to prescribe for those who had done crimes that have damaged other people. Now, Jesus does not say that we should modify that so that the judges now don't punish criminals, or that they punish them in some other way. Notice Jesus does not address that subject.

Jesus does not say, it used to be an eye for an eye, tooth for tooth, but now I just say give them a slap on the wrist and let them go their way, or now I say let criminals go free. No, Jesus is not talking to the magistrates here. He is talking to his disciples.

He is not talking to men who are judges. He is talking to private parties who might have someone strike them on the cheek, or in some other way offend them, or irritate them, or violate their rights. Now, what are they to do? Well, he is saying you can absorb the injury rather than inflict one of a similar kind.

And in saying that, he is not saying that the judges now must let all criminals walk free without any punishment, because that would be a society that, I don't think, certainly Jesus and the apostles never believed that those who sit in government posts of authority are not supposed to punish anybody. I mean, Paul made that very clear in Romans 13. He said that the magistrates, the government officials, are there to be God's ministers of vengeance on those who do evil.

Peter, in 1 Peter chapter 2, said that those who are government officials are ordained by God to punish evildoers and to praise those who do well. Certainly the Christian gospel does not teach that those who are in the position to govern a land are supposed to ignore crime or not punish crime, or that they are supposed to punish crime on some other scale of justice than that which God gave originally. Justice is still justice, and those who are judges in courts are supposed to follow the standard of justice.

However, most of us are not judges in courts, and Jesus' disciples were not judges in courts. They were not magistrates. The problem was that the average Jew took these instructions which applied to the magistrates and assumed that these not only entitled them, but commanded them to retaliate against everybody who did them wrong.

In other words, if a man burned my field, and I lost a crop, according to this law, I should be able to go and burn his field, and so he loses a crop too. On the other hand, if I wish

to be merciful, I could absorb the injury and I wouldn't have to take him to court at all. I wouldn't have to inflict any penalty upon him.

Now, in that scenario, if a man burned my crop and I did take him to court, then the judge, of course, should say, Okay, you burned his crop, he burned your crop. It's equal justice here. But it is up to me as the injured party to decide whether or not I take him to court at all.

It is up to me as the injured party to decide whether I will simply, graciously, and mercifully absorb an injury rather than inflict one. And Jesus, of course, is not realigning the concept of what justice is for magistrates to dish out to criminals. He's talking about individual citizens, how they are to respond when they might have a case against somebody, when somebody has wronged them and they might take them to court, but they can decide not to.

If someone strikes you or damages your property or does anything like that to you, instead of requiring that he make retribution according to the standards that the law tells the courts that they should follow, you can always just forgive him and leave it at that. You know, Joseph, the husband of Mary, when he found out that she was pregnant, could have taken her to the courts and they would have condemned her to die because they would have assumed that she had been unfaithful, although we know she was pregnant miraculously and she was still a virgin, yet there was no way she could prove that to the satisfaction of any skeptics, and therefore she would have been assumed to not be a virgin, to have violated her oaths, and to be worthy of death according to the law. But Joseph decided that he would not subject her to that.

He did not wish to expose her to that, and so he just decided to quietly put her away and not marry her after all, and ignore the whole thing. That was a very merciful thing for him to do. Now, in 1 Corinthians chapter 6, Paul is criticizing the Corinthian Christians because they do not follow this pattern of justice.

In fact, he says that they should be rather willing to absorb an injury from a brother rather than to go to law against them. He says, by way of rebuke to them, he says in verse 5 of 1 Corinthians 6, I say this to your shame, is it so that there is not a wise man among you, not even one who will be able to judge between his brethren? But brother goes to law against brother, and that before unbelievers. He says, now therefore, it is already an utter failure for you that you go to law against one another.

Why do you not rather accept the wrong? That means, why don't you suffer the wrong without fighting back? Why do you not rather let yourselves be defrauded? Now, that's what Paul says in order to tell the Christians they ought to follow what Jesus said. If your brother wrongs you, you don't have to take him to court, you can forgive him. You can absorb the injury, you can let yourself be wronged, can't you? Why not? Now, that is being merciful.

If your brother wrongs you, and you take him to court, and a penalty is leveled against him, that is justice. But mercy is something different than justice. It means that I give up my right to retaliate, and I extend mercy and forgiveness to you, even if you have not asked for it.

Now, Jesus gives several examples of this, of how the disciples might follow this principle. He says in verse 39, I tell you, do not resist the evil person, but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also. If anyone wants to sue you and take away your tunic, let him have your cloak also.

And whoever compels you to go one mile, go with him too, and give to him who asks you, and from him who wants to borrow from you, do not turn away. Now, all of these things have to do with showing mercy. They have to do with laying down your rights for the benefit of another person, who has no right to expect you to do this.

For example, if a person, unprovoked by you, strikes you on your cheek, well, the law, an eye for an eye, tooth for tooth, would make it clear that you could just drag him before the courts, and say to the judge, this man just come up to me, and he struck me on the cheek, and I didn't do anything to provoke it. And the judge would say, well, it's quite simple, you strike him on his cheek, it's an eye for eye, tooth for tooth, cheek for cheek, you know, and then you would strike him on the cheek, and that would settle the matter, that would be justice. But Jesus said, if a man strikes you on one cheek, turn the other cheek to him also, in other words, give him permission, as it were, to strike you on the other cheek.

Now, this is showing mercy. When you could retaliate, that you don't. You instead forgive, and even extend an opportunity for him to further strike you.

Now, some have understood this teaching about turning the other cheek to be a teaching that would forbid all self-defense, even in a case where you're in mortal danger. I will not say that the passage does or does not extend so far. All I can say is that that is not the situation Jesus is depicting here.

Jesus does not depict a situation where you are in mortal danger. He just depicts a situation where someone strikes you on a cheek. Now, it's interesting, he says, if a man strikes you on the right cheek, as you would know if you just think about it for a moment, if somebody strikes you on the right cheek, it will either be with their left hand, because that is the hand that is facing your right cheek, if they're facing you, or it will be with their right hand, of course, and if it is their right hand, then they must strike you with the back of their hand.

If a person facing you hits you with his left hand, he may hit you squarely with his fist, but a person who's facing you and using his right hand, and it would normally be assumed that most people would be right-handed, if he strikes you on the right cheek, it

must be with the back of his hand, because his right hand is really facing your left cheek. And for him to strike your right cheek suggests that he's drawing his hand backward against you and striking your cheek with his right hand, the back of his hand. And in this case, it would not be so much a case where somebody is trying to beat you up as someone who's just trying to insult you.

To touch a man's face in the Orient is a supreme insult. To spit in his face or strike him across the face, to slap him across the face, is to push that insult a further step. And Jesus is describing a situation, not where a man is being attacked in mortal danger, but a man is being insulted, severely insulted, being provoked to fight.

And he does not take the provocation, he does not take up the invitation, he doesn't fight back. Someone strikes you across the face, and you give him the opportunity to strike you the other direction if he wants to do so. Now, this means that instead of demanding that you receive vindication for having suffered a wrong, you are willing to suffer further wrong, if necessary, in order not to do damage to this other person.

Likewise, if a person wants to sue you and take away your tunic, Jesus says, give him more than what he wants, give him your cloak also. If a man wants to force you to go a mile with him, go too. This was in the setting where the Romans, who occupied Israel at that time, under law were permitted to press any citizen who was standing by into service, carrying his baggage for him.

The Roman soldiers had a lot of stuff to carry, and so they could just grab any Jewish man standing around and say, you, carry this stuff for me. And the man, under law, had to carry it for one mile, but no further. The Roman law released that Jew.

After one mile, he could stop carrying it, and the soldier would have to find another guy to carry it the next mile. Well, Jesus said, if someone compels you to go one mile with him, go two. And that means, of course, that you don't hang on to your right to walk away.

If this man needs something carried for more than one mile, you don't have to do just what is within the limits of what's required of you by law. You can go beyond that, out of love for your neighbor, even out of love for your oppressor, the Roman soldier. You can serve him.

You can be merciful to him. You can extend to him greater generosity than he is entitled to require you to give. And that is what Jesus is saying all the way through here.

When he says, whoever asks you for something, give it to him. This is something of a hyperbole, because there certainly would be exceptions to it that Jesus and the apostles acknowledge. It would be really wrong to give your children everything they asked for, because many things they asked for would hurt them if you gave them to them.

And when Jesus said, give to him that asks you, it doesn't mean literally without any qualifications. In fact, in 2 Thessalonians 3, it says if a man will not work, neither should he eat, and that Christians should not support people who will not work. Now, of course, a person who cannot work, that's another story, but a person who refuses to work, who could, is not to be fed, according to 2 Thessalonians 3. What Jesus is saying is this.

You should be prepared to extend mercy in any way that you can be of service to a brother or to a sister. If someone strikes you, don't strike back. Let them strike you again if that gives them their jollies.

If someone wants to sue you, don't fight them. Extend mercy to them. Be kind to them.

Do good to the one who is hurting you. If someone forces you to go to a mile, go to. If someone needs your money, you don't owe it to them, but give them some.

Help them out. Now, technically, if you've earned that money, if it's your money legally, you have the right to spend it how you wish. That man who's asking for it has no right to it, but mercy would extend your livelihood to him.

That is, you have the right to use it on yourself, but you instead give it to him. Let him use it for his needs. These are all ways in which we are instructed to lay down our own rights in order to be merciful, and mercy is part of what it means to love.

Jesus is again pointing out that the law is given in order to help us to know what it means to love our neighbor as we love ourselves, and being merciful is one of the things that's an essential component of love. Without that, we cannot be obeying the law in any sense that pleases God. We'll take his last example in Matthew 5 next time, and we'll continue through the Sermon on the Mount.