

Refusing Retaliation and Defensiveness (Mt. 5:38-42)

Jamaica House of Prayer – Yakum Fitz-Henley

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I. INTRODUCTION

- A. RECAP #1: The Sermon on the Mount is the most practical message on discipleship and loving people in the whole Bible. It tells us what Jesus Himself considers great (*Mt. 5:19*), and loving well (*Lk. 6:32-36*), because it is how He and His Father love.
- B. RECAP #2: Jesus first gives eight perspectives by which to define success (*Mt. 5:3-12*) popularly called the Beatitudes, and then moved into addressing six ways of life we naturally accept, but which prevent us from being like Him and His Father: anger (*Mt. 5:21-26*); lust (*Mt. 5:27-30*); dishonouring marriage (*Mt. 5:31-32*); not keeping commitments (*Mt. 5:33-37*); retaliation and defensiveness when mistreated (*Mt. 5:38-42*); and passivity in loving those who mistreat us (*Mt. 5:43-48*). We have already looked at the first three and will now look at the fourth: retaliation and defensiveness when mistreated.

“[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** [become defensive/retaliate against] **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.”*

(*Mt. 5:38-42, ESV*)

- C. CONTEXT #1: Jesus preached this message to announce what the people who live in His eternal Kingdom are like. He preached it to a primarily Jewish audience suffering under racial, cultural and class-prejudiced oppression from wicked Gentiles. This audience, knowing the Bible, were looking for God to destroy their enemies. Instead, like YHWH in the Sinai wilderness, He speaks to the slaves He is delivering and tells them that the very thing they hate in their oppressors is inside them (*Mt. 5:43-48; Lk. 6:32-36*). He warns them that they must be transformed at the deepest level, or else they will rule just like their wicked enemies when He gives them His power.

“[32] *But if you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For **even sinners love those who love them...*** [35] *But **love your enemies, do good, and lend, hoping for nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High. For He is kind to the unthankful and evil.*** [36] *Therefore **be merciful, just as your Father also is merciful.***”

(*Lk. 6:32, 35-36*)

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D. CONTEXT #2: God loves His creation too much to allow them to be this way and rule, so if they cease to be like salt (i.e., like God in how they think and relate to everything including enemies) they will be exiled from the land into suffering just like He said in His covenant (*Mt. 5:13*). Since God never changes in His leadership, those who are not on the way to being transformed to be salt in the whole earth, will be exiled from it into a place known as the lake of fire.

*"You are salt for the Land. But if salt becomes tasteless, how can it be made salty again?
It is no longer good for anything except being thrown out for people to trample on."
(Mt. 5:13, CJB)*

II. FOUR ILLUSTRATIONS OF REFUSING DEFENSIVENESS/RETALIATION

- A. In *Mt. 5:38*, Jesus countered a misreading of the Bible being taught by some of the most respected teachers at the time, i.e., that God required that His people enact revenge for unjust treatment. They used Bible verses having to do with justice and requiring that judges were not too lenient or severe (*Ex. 21:24; Lev. 24:20; Deut. 19:21*) in order to support this teaching. In doing so, they promoted people taking 'justice' into their own hands and reduced it to simply making others suffer what they believed was warranted by their adversaries' actions. Biblical justice requires way more than this, and ultimately will be administered by God¹.
- B. Then, in *Mt. 5:39-42*, He gave four examples of unjust treatment His audience had seen or may have experienced under Roman oppression, and the spirit in which He desired His people to respond we suffer such treatment by a person who has evil motives. Jesus was not here giving a line-by-line code of conduct², but using extreme real-life examples, to show how unusually He wants His people to respond to all sorts of mistreatment.
1. Someone who does the very insulting action of delivering a backhand slap for no reason (*v.39*):
RESPONSE: Do not return insult for insult or threaten, but remain open to them.
 2. Someone who uses the legal system to take something small from us because of their offense with us (*v.40*):
RESPONSE: Generously give them more than they ask for.
 3. Someone who uses their legal authority to demean and inconvenience us (*v.41*);

¹ Biblical justice is a vast subject, on which there are excellent resources which can be found with a little research. Isaiah 42 is a crucial chapter on how Jesus approaches justice.

² I do not think these verses address war/physical abuse/self-defence etc., specifically because of how we see Jesus and the apostles respond to such things in other places. E.g., He told His disciples to carry a sword to defend themselves (Lk. 22:36) and taught them how to resist one who sinned against them (Mt. 18:15-17).

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RESPONSE: Cheerfully do more than even they required.

4. A bad person who wants our help;

RESPONSE: Give help to those in need, even those who do not deserve it.

C. A very natural response to these passages is to focus on the extreme examples that Jesus used or try to find extreme/unworkable applications, in order to avoid wrestling with the requirement to be kind to unthankful and unkind people. He knew that we would be tempted to do this, showing how resistant our heart is to His ways. We must remember that Jesus is after our heart being as free, kind and generous as His Father's (*Mt. 5:48*). He tells us these things because He is jealous for us to have free and cheerful souls even when mistreated. God will address every single injustice that has ever happened.

III. BEHOLDING THE GOD WHO IS KIND TO THE UNTHANKFUL

A. We are transformed into responding like God, by first beholding and perceiving the beauty of how He responds to us and others (*2 Cor. 3:18*). Therefore, rather than feeling pressured and discouraged by how unlike Him we are, we should look at how God is non-retaliatory and non-defensive throughout the Bible and talk to Him about this. He will transform us as we grow in understanding Him and seeing how good it is that He is the way He is.

B. We should also remember that ultimately God wants to give us His power and authority over creation (see *Mt. 5:3 & 5*, for example). Therefore, His primary concern in this age is not dealing with all injustice (He will certainly do so when He comes), but gently leading us into having His character even though it causes us to suffer loss in an unjust world.

C. Some examples of God's response to mistreatment on which we can meditate are as follows:

1. *Gen. 3* – when creatures who owed Him everything falsely accused Him of dishonesty/unkindness and then sought to rule His creation without Him, He helped them to address the immediate problem they caused and then invited them to become His partners in ultimately solving it;
2. *Ex. 33, Hos. 6* etc. – when the nation He chose for Himself and gave privileges no one else received betrayed Him by parading other gods right in front of Him, He continued to seek good/mercy on their behalf even though the fellowship had to be interrupted because of their actions. He then put in place a plan to re-establish the fellowship;
3. *Lk. 22* – when a soldier came to arrest Him without just cause, He did not resist and in fact healed the soldier's ear when it was cut by Peter;
4. *Mt. 5:45* – He continues to use His creation to help and sustain those who insult, belittle, and openly defy Him.