

Doormat Christians?:

An Examination of Jesus' Teaching on Vengeance and Retaliation

Matt 5:38–42

CT: As a follower of Jesus Christ God expects you to respond to those who wrong you with love and grace, not retaliation and vengeance.

Engage: Ibn Saud, the king of Saudi Arabia from 1932–1953, once had a woman come to him and **demand the death of a man who had killed her husband**. The man had been **picking dates** from a palm tree when he accidentally fell, hitting the woman's husband and fatally injuring him. Although the king tried to persuade the woman not to pursue her rights, **she insisted** on them. **Finally, the king said, "It is your right to ask for this man's life, but it is my right to decree how he shall die.** You shall take this man with you immediately, and he shall be tied to the foot of a palm tree. **Then you yourself** shall climb to the top of the tree and **cast yourself down** upon him from that height. In that way you will take his life as he took your husband's. The woman quickly changed her mind, realizing **that in following the letter of the law and demanding her rights, she might lose her right to life.** (Cf. H. Robinson)

FOCUS: How should you respond when people trample on your rights and don't show you deference? How should you respond as **a student** to the classmate who constantly picks on you? What should your response be at work to a supervisor who seems to take delight in making life miserable for you? How should we respond when people trample on our rights, as they put their own interests first? **When people mistreat us do we have the right to get bent-out-of shape and respond with vengeance and retaliation?**

SET THE STAGE biblically: Our sermon text this morning is **the fifth in a series of six related to God's moral law in which Jesus Christ explains the spirit of the law as opposed to the mere letter of the law**. Jesus explains how we are to apply the law in light of being citizens of his kingdom. **How are you or me, as a new creation in Christ to live in relationship to others?** Rather than murder we are to pursue service. Instead of adultery we follow after purity. Instead of divorce we labor to be faithful. Rather than resorting to vows to prop up our speech we speak truthfulness. **Now where does our relationship to Christ take us as Christians in regard to those that wrong us?**

As we read the Scripture we want to consider today, it appears, at least on the surface, that Jesus says we should let people take advantage of us, and do nothing about it. Is that so? **Does Jesus teach we should be doormats for the world to walk over?** How are we to respond as Christians to those who wrong us?

PREVIEW: This morning we are going to see that **instead of responding with revenge and retaliation to those who wrong us, we are to deal with others with generosity of spirit; the kindness and grace God shows to you and me**. Jesus calls you and me to "decisively break the natural chain of evil action and reaction that characterizes human relationships."

ANNOUNCE the passage: For the Scripture reading this morning turn with me to **Jesus' teaching on vengeance and retaliation found in Matthew 5:38-42**. Listen as I read: **Matthew 5:38-42 (p 853)**

As we consider this passage of Scripture some of you are asking, "Is Jesus teaching us here to let people walk all over us? Do we not have a right to defend ourselves; to stand up for our rights?"

Another person asks, “**Don’t I have a right to be treated with respect and shown deference?**” **And the short answer is “Yes, you do.”** But to understand the attitude we are to have toward people who hurt us, we must understand and apply what Jesus teaches us here. Jesus’ teaches we must overcome our natural tendency for revenge and retaliation. **How does God want you to respond when you are wronged?** Here in Matt 5:38-42 Jesus teaches us:

Do Not Respond with Retaliation And Vengeance.

When people wrong and hurt you, do not respond with retaliation and vengeance. **Don’t take revenge on someone who wrongs you. Retaliation and vengeance are natural, but sinful responses to one who treats you unjustly.** Because the Jews were under Roman oppression, they wanted retaliation against their enemies whom they hated. But Jesus teaches a new, radical response to injustice: Instead of demanding rights, give them up freely! According to Jesus, it is more important to give justice and mercy than to receive it (cf. Barton, LAC on Matt 5:39). **Note what Jesus says (vv. 38-39a):** “You have heard that it was said, ‘*An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.*’ [cf. Exod 21:24; Lev 24:19–20; Deut 19:21] ^{5:39} But I say to you, do not resist the evildoer” Matt. 5:38–39a [NET]. The common understanding of the people in Jesus’ day was that it was fine for you to retaliate against someone who wronged you as long you did not do more to the other person than he or she did to you. **The Jewish leaders in Jesus’ day wanted to exact revenge by physically harming any offender or, if they were the offender, only wanted to repay the minimum the court demanded.** And they thought they had Scriptural justification.

What Scripture did they base this on? **Jesus’ quotation “*An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth*” [in v. 38] is based on three OT Scriptures.** The Jewish leaders of Jesus’ day twisted these Scriptures from their purpose to justify responding with retaliation and revenge. The people Jesus addressed failed to understand the spirit of the OT law. **Now the point of these three OT Scriptures [Exod 21:24; Lev. 24:19-20; Deut 19:21] was that the punishment should fit the crime.** The context of these three passages involves punishment administered by society at large in response to a personal crime. Oftentimes this could be done by the payment of fines or other suitable compensation.

Trans: Now the teachers of the law and the Pharisees took the just law of “an eye for an eye, which God intended to show justice and prevent revenge, and **turned it into a license for retaliation and vengeance against those who had wronged them.** When we take the principle God gave in the OT of an “eye for an eye” and practice this principle on a personal level, this leads to revenge. **God’s intention was to RESTRICT compensation to the value of the loss.**

Reiteration: So a primary point Jesus teaches us in this passage is this: **Do not respond with retaliation and vengeance against those you wrong you.** Retaliation and vengeance are sinful responses to those who wrong you. How do we know this is what Jesus is saying?

The key to interpret this passage is Jesus summary statement (recorded for us at the beginning of v. 39): “**Do not resist the evildoer**” [Or, “Do not set yourself against an evil person.”] **Jesus instructs us here about OUR ATTITUDE toward those who offend us.** Jesus does not say nations never have a reason to go to war; or that we are not to resist an intruder who might break into our homes.

When Jesus says “Do not resist the evildoer,” what Jesus means is “Don’t take revenge on someone who wrongs you.” How do we know this? The word “resist” here, (Gr. *anthistemi*),

means to **resist by actively opposing**; to set one's self against; **take aggressive action against someone**. Here Jesus instructs us that **when evil-intentioned people do bad things to us, when evil people treat you unjustly, don't respond to them with a spirit of revenge**. When Jesus says **"Do not resist the evildoer,"** this means then: **"DON'T TAKE REVENGE ON SOMEONE WHO WRONGS YOU."**

What is our natural tendency when someone wrongs us? Our natural tendency to someone who wrongs us is to take revenge and do it in the extreme. "You hurt me or offended me so I am going to take an 'arm and a leg' or sue you for all you have!" Now **some people when wronged retaliate publicly; others plot their revenge quietly, behind someone's back.**

ILL: A young Chinese man was hired to be the housekeeper of a well-to-do family with two teenage sons. The boys made it their mission to make things miserable for this poor fellow. **One day they nailed his shoes to the floor, but he just smiled and pulled out the nails.** Another time they put a bucket of water over the door, but the housekeeper just smiled and dried himself off when a bucketful of water fell on him. He continued to show those teenagers the utmost respect. In fact, his courtesy made the boys feel so guilty that they approached him one day and assured him they would reform. "No more shoes nailed to floor?" he asked. "No," the boys assured him. "No more water over door?" he questioned. "No," they replied. **"Ah, very good,"** he said. **"Then no more spit in soup."**

APPL: What about you? Are you "spitting" in someone's soup? Do you find yourself retaliating, seeking to settle scores with someone?

Appl: Whether you are here today as an employee or employer; married or single; child or parent; wife or husband; whoever you are God's call is the same for all of us: **Do not respond with retaliation and vengeance to those who wrong you.**

Transition: Now if we are not to retaliate and seek to harm those who wronged us, how are we to respond? After Jesus states the general principle, "Do not resist the evil person," in other words "Don't take revenge on someone who wrongs you," Jesus gives four examples of evil intentioned people and the attitude we are to have in our response to them. **Here in Matt 5:39b-42 Jesus gives four extreme examples to make a point about the attitude we are to display toward those who wrong us.** Jesus addresses those who insult us, sue us, compel into service, and those who want to borrow from us. In each case, these who may be evil-intentioned are to be treated with grace and love, not responded to with retaliation and vengeance.

Reiteration: How are we to respond to those who wrong us? First, we've seen: Don't respond with retaliation and revenge against those who wrong you. Secondly, we see from these four examples:

Respond with Grace and Love to those who Wrong You.

Respond with God's grace and love to those who wrong you. Note vv. 39-42: *"But I say to you, do not resist the evildoer. But whoever strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other to him as well. ^{5:40} And if someone wants to sue you and to take your tunic, give him your coat also. ^{5:41} And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two. ^{5:42} Give to the one who asks you, and do not reject the one who wants to borrow from you"* (Matt 5:39-42 NET). **Jesus teaches us here:** Instead of retaliating and responding with revenge toward those who wrong you, **deal with others with generosity of spirit.** Show others the kindness and grace God has shown you.

Decisively break the natural chain of evil action and reaction that so easily characterizes our human relationships (cf. Blomberg, *NAC: Matthew*, 113). **Trans:** Now note with me these four specific examples Jesus gives. Then we will consider how we can obey these commands. **In the first example Jesus teaches us how to respond to those who insult us.** How should you or I respond to the person who insults us? Jesus teaches here:

Don't Trade Insults even if it Means Receiving More.

How should you respond to your classmate at school that makes fun of you? How should you respond to the person who has it in for you, and constantly insults you. Jesus tells us, “Don't respond back like they have responded to you. **Respond with grace to the person who insults you.** Note v. 39b: “*Whoever strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other to him as well*” (5:39b NET). Striking a person on the right cheek suggests a backhanded slap (from a right-handed individual). **A backhanded blow to the right cheek refers to an insult, being publicly disrespected.** It is to suffer the severest public affront to your dignity.

Note how this is brought out in the Hebrew parallelism Lam 3:30, where being hit on the cheek is compared to be insulted: “*Let him offer his cheek to the one who hits him; let him have his fill of insults*” (Lam 3:30 NET). Jesus prepares us here in Matt 5:39b for the insults we can expect to experience as his followers. Just as Jesus (1 Peter 2:19-24) and his prophets (both OT and NT) [cf. 1 Kings 22:24; Isa 50:6] experienced insults we can expect to experience insults as well. **When we do, Jesus says, “Don't trade insults with those who've insulted you, even if it means you are insulted more.”**

When Jesus says turn the other cheek, he teaches us to take an insult without striking back. Instead respond with grace. We can still let the other person know he or she is wrong in what they are doing. **The reason we know this is from Jesus' own example.** On the night Jesus was betrayed he was questioned by Annas, the high priest. When high priest questioned Jesus about his disciples and his teaching Jesus gave this reply:

“I have spoken publicly to the world. I always taught in the synagogues and in the temple courts, where all the Jewish people assemble together. I have said nothing in secret.”^{18:21} Why do you ask me? Ask those who heard what I said. They know what I said.”^{18:22} When Jesus had said this, one of the high priest's officers who stood nearby struck him on the face and said, “Is that the way you answer the high priest?”^{18:23} Jesus replied, **“If I have said something wrong, confirm what is wrong. But if I spoke correctly, why strike me?”**^{18:24} Then Annas sent him, still tied up, to Caiaphas the high priest (John 18:20-24 NET).

The high priest, Annas, questions Jesus about two matters, his disciples and his teaching. At the core of the religious leaders concern was Jesus' claim as to who he was (19:7), and consequently their fear that Jesus was leading people astray, into apostasy. Jesus, protecting his disciples to the end, says nothing about his disciples. Instead he protests that he has always spoken openly to the world; he has said nothing in secret. Some minor official, quick to take offense at Jesus' challenge to the high priest, slaps Jesus on the face (gives him a sharp blow with the flat of his hand). **Jesus does not back down.** If his response to the high priest was illegal or inappropriate, then appropriate contempt of court charges should be filed against him. But if he speaks the truth, why the assault? **Here in this account Jesus is asking for a fair trial. Jesus is appealing for his legal rights.** (Cf. Carson.)

The apostle Paul takes a similar tact to assert his rights as a Roman citizen when he is beaten without a trial in the city of Philippi.

At daybreak the magistrates sent their police officers, saying, “Release those men.” ^{16:36} The jailer reported these words to Paul, saying, “The magistrates have sent orders to release you. So come out now and go in peace.” ^{16:37} **But Paul said to the police officers, “They had us beaten in public without a proper trial – even though we are Roman citizens – and they threw us in prison. And now they want to send us away secretly? Absolutely not! They themselves must come and escort us out!”** ^{16:38} The police officers reported these words to the magistrates. They were frightened when they heard Paul and Silas were Roman citizens ^{16:39} and came and apologized to them. After they brought them out, they asked them repeatedly to leave the city. ^{16:40} When they came out of the prison, they entered Lydia’s house, and when they saw the brothers, they encouraged them and then departed (Acts 16:35-40 NET).

In both examples (Jesus’ and Paul’s) we see their concern not merely for their own rights being trampled on, but also their concern for the welfare of other believers. Here in Acts 16 I believe part of what motivates Paul to take the action he does is the concern he has for the welfare of these new believers in Philippi. Paul is going to leave the city, meanwhile new believers will be there. Paul asserts his rights as a Roman citizen to help the local authorities recognize their responsibility to respect the new believer’s basic governmental rights. Just because you are a Christian does not give someone the right to trample over you, but at the same time we are not to respond with revenge and retaliation against those who have mistreated us. Neither Jesus nor Paul respond as they do with a spirit of revenge or retaliation.

When Jesus says “turn the other cheek” he is talking about insults, not muggers on the street. When people hurl insults at you, Jesus says, “Respond with grace.” Don’t trade insults even if it means receiving more. **In no sense does this mean that as Christians we are to subject ourselves or others to physical danger or abuse.**

When you are insulted don’t retaliate in kind. Show those who insult you that its God’s honor you value rather than your own. **Don’t trade insults even if it means receiving more.**

APPL: What has your response been to those who have insulted you? You come home from work tired, fix a meal for your husband, and when he comes home he says, “We are having **that** again?” Can’t you fix something different?

Or you’ve gotten brave and decided to try a new hairstyle. You go to school and another girl responds in jealousy to you: “Did you get too close to the lawnmower?”

How should you respond when you are insulted. Jesus says, **“Respond with grace.”** While the sting of insults can run deep, Jesus says, “Respond with grace.” Isn’t that how God responds to us? Transition: In the second ill. Jesus says

Maintain a Right Spirit toward those who Wrong You.

Continue to respond with grace to those who try to take advantage of you. Note v. 40: “*And if someone wants to sue you and to take your tunic, give him your coat also*” (Matt 5:40 NET).

The tunic or “shirt” (*χιτών, chitōn*) was a long garment worn under the cloak next to the skin. The poorest people of the Empire (e.g., most peasants in Egypt) had only an inner and outer

garment. Although conditions in first-century Palestine were not quite that bad, this verse could indicate the removal of all one's possessions. What is Jesus saying here?

****A person brings a lawsuit against you. Since earlier Jesus instructs us, "Do not set yourself against an evil-intentioned person,"** apparently the person who brings this lawsuit is doing it out of selfish or impure motives, perhaps out of spite. **AND THEY WIN.** What are you to do? Become angry, bitter, resentful; talk against the corrupt courts? No! Jesus says don't just give them the shirt off your back; give them your coat also. In other words Jesus says: **Maintain a right spirit toward those who wrong you. The giving of your coat demonstrates you harbor no grudges against him or her. This is love; love that the world cannot duplicate.**

APPL: Who do you need to give your coat to this morning? Who has won a battle against you and you harbor a grudge against this person? Perhaps it's a co-worker, perhaps it's a coach or a neighbor. Jesus says to you this morning: **LET IT GO!** **All grudges do are infect you and me with resentment and anger.** Some of you have been hurt deeply by your spouse or your ex-spouse, or perhaps even harder you've seen a son or daughter be hurt by their spouse. **How do we overcome the resentment we feel toward the one who has wronged us?** Jesus says, the way to conquer resentment is by this: **Invest more of yourself into the other person.** *"Where you treasure is, there will your heart be also."* By voluntarily giving more than is required in a civil settlement, you demonstrate you harbor no grudges against the evil-intentioned person who has brought you to court. Don't retaliate against that ex-inlaw who has treated your son or daughter wrongfully. Pray for them. What can you do to show God's love to them.

Transition: In Jesus' third illustration he says:

In Cases where People Take Advantage of You in Duty and Unwelcome Burdens, Respond with Grace.

"And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two" (Matt 5:41 NET). In NT times Roman soldiers had the authority to press civilians into service to carry loads for them. The Romans adopted this law from the Persians. A soldier could require anyone else to take his baggage one mile (i.e., the distance of 1000 paces). Now the Jews would count their 1000 steps, and stop the minute they reached it. The Jews hated this law because it forced them to show their subjection to Rome. Yet Jesus says, "Take the load and willingly go two miles." Does he mean count out the next 1000 steps, and then stop, with the same attitude you had during the first mile? **NO! Respond with grace and love to those who take advantage of you in duty and the impositions they impose upon you. The first mile you do for Cesar, but the second mile, when you do your duty with kindness and generosity, you do for God.** Jesus calls here for a serving attitude. Didn't Jesus give us this example throughout His life, and especially at the cross?

Jesus' words here probably shocked his hearers. Think about it. Didn't most of the Jews expect a military Messiah? They never expected to hear Jesus issue a command of nonretaliation and cooperation with the hated Roman Empire. By these words, Jesus reveals that as his followers we belong to another kingdom. We are not to be like the first century Zealots, a militant group of Jews who fought against Rome. God has ordained the government over us. He puts down kings (and presidents) and raises up kings (and presidents). We are to work on behalf of God's kingdom. Serving Christ and seeking his kingdom means we willingly walk the extra mile

demonstrating God's grace. **In cases where people take advantage of you in duty and unwelcome burdens, respond with grace.**

APPL: At work some of you feel resentment toward your supervisor or company for the extra work you are being asked to do. Perhaps, due to downsizing, you now are being asked to handle more work. Or perhaps you have a boss that you feel asks a little too much from you. You're being asked to take work home. While we do have to keep our other responsibilities and God's priorities for us in mind, Jesus says "Don't stop with only doing what is required. At the same time don't do extra work with the wrong attitude. Rather go the second mile for your employer. Perform your work as if you were doing it for the Lord.

Trans: Finally, Jesus gives us a fourth illustration that helps us keep the right attitude toward those who wrong us. In Matt 5:42 Jesus teaches us to:

Respond to Requests for Help with Grace and Love.

"Give to the one who asks you, and do not reject the one who wants to borrow from you" (Matt 5:42 NET). **This has to do with the law of lending.** Deut. 15:7–11 **indicates debts were to be canceled every seven years.** If I were a lender and someone came to me for a loan in the sixth year, I would think twice before giving it to him, If he didn't pay it off quickly, the loan would turn into a gift. The closer the seventh year got, the more tightfisted businessmen became. But Jesus says here, "Be generous. "Don't allow the seventh year to govern you." **Whenever a brother or sister has a need, give generously, openhandedly.** After all, these people are not asking for home-improvement loans. They need money for food.

Now Jesus is not talking about every panhandler who sticks his hand out. Jesus certainly wasn't talking about lending money for business ventures. He talks here about people in need. Even then we have to be discerning. Is this person in need because he has refused to work or been irresponsible? In such a case Paul says if a person is not willing to work, neither should he eat."

"For even when we were with you, we used to give you this command: '**If anyone is not willing to work, neither should he eat.**'^{3:11} For we hear that some among you are living an undisciplined life, not doing their own work but meddling in the work of others.^{3:12} Now such people we command and urge in the Lord Jesus Christ to work quietly and so provide their own food to eat.^{3:13} But you, brothers and sisters, do not grow weary in doing what is right.^{3:14} But if anyone does not obey our message through this letter, take note of him and do not associate closely with him, so that he may be ashamed.^{3:15} Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother" (2 Thess 3:10-15 NET).

Jesus' teaches us here: **Have a generous spirit.** Because we loosely hold on to our personal rights and possessions (as illustrated in the three previous examples), we can freely *give* when the need arises. We won't *turn away from the one who wants to borrow*. Jesus is not teaching us to blindly give away our possessions. The Bible teaches us to be wise stewards of what we have.

When Jesus says *"Give to the one who asks you, and do not reject the one who wants to borrow from you"* (Matt 5:42 NET), he illustrates the heart attitude he expects from you and me. We must willingly put other's needs before our own and other's rights before our own.

Trans & Appl: Now how do we keep from responding with revenge to those who wrong us? How can you keep from taking the kid who is constantly pestering you, insulting you, calling your names, and lashing out at him in anger and revenge? How do you keep from spreading

slander about your co-worker who has been making life difficult for you? **How do we handle our natural desire for revenge against those who wrong us?**

Contained in Jesus' teaching here is the understanding that:

God's Promises to Take Care of His People.

Therefore, **when you or I accept injustice without retaliating, we demonstrate our trust that God will faithfully care for us.** The OT and NT teach us to leave vengeance to God (Lev. 19:17–18; Deut. 32:35; Ps. 94:1; Prov. 20:22; 24:29; Rom 12:17-21; 1 Thess 5:15; 1 Peter 3:9).

ILL: David, the shepherd boy, spent years on the run from mighty King Saul who out of jealousy tried to kill David. One day when Saul returns from pursuing the Philistines he's told, "Look, David is in the desert of En Gedi." So Saul takes three thousand of his best men from all Israel and goes out to find David and his men in the region of the rocks of the mountain goats. Saul comes to the sheepfolds by the road, where there was a cave. Now this cave by the road serves as a convenient port-a-potty. Saul goes into the cave to relieve himself.

Now David and his men are sitting in the recesses of the cave. David's men say to him, "**This is the day about which the Lord said to you, 'I will give your enemy into your hand, and you can do to him whatever seems appropriate to you.'**" David, this is your chance to get revenge on Saul." So David gets up and quietly cuts off an edge of Saul's robe. After he does this David's conscience bothers him because he had cut off an edge of Saul's robe. David then says to his men,

"May the Lord keep me far away from doing such a thing to my lord, who is the Lord's chosen one, by extending my hand against him. After all, he is the Lord's chosen one." ^{24:7} David restrained his men with these words and did not allow them to rise up against Saul. Then Saul left the cave and started down the road.... [David said to Saul,] **May the Lord judge between the two of us, and may the Lord vindicate me over you, but my hand will not be against you.** (1 Sam 24:6-7, 12 NET).

APPL: How BIG is your God?....

Abiding Lessons:

As Christ's followers, don't trade insults even if it means receiving more. To take revenge into your own hands is never right (cf. Rom. 12:17–19). Trust God to set things right in His time.

The Lord does not say "never protect yourself or your family," nor does he say to become a doormat.

Overcome evil with good (cf. Rom. 12:21). The purpose is that this may be the final link in bringing that one to salvation and/or repentance.

When we are generous with others, we reflect our Father in heaven. Jesus says, "Let your light shine before people, so that they can see your good deeds and give honor to your Father in heaven" (Matt. 5:16 NET). As you demonstrate generosity that doesn't retaliate, doesn't seek what is yours, you reflect God. The only people who can live that way are those who know the grace of God. **We can demonstrate God's love to others because we recognize that in God's grace we don't get what we deserve.**

ILL: Several years ago, a church was on the verge of a split. During a business meeting, a man stood up and said, “Look, all I’m asking for is my rights, and I demand my rights.”

Another man responded, “If you get your rights, if you get what you deserve, you’ll go to hell. Every drop of water this side of hell is the grace of God.”

That’s the key to understanding the Sermon on the Mount. God has dealt with you in grace, and you are to reflect his grace in all your dealings with others.

APPL: Let’s make sure we are not harboring bitterness, wrath, resentment, anger, malice, toward anyone else. Let’s be careful that we are not guilty of slandering those who have wronged us in the past. (Need for repentance, and to see anew God’s grace to you.) Who do you need to show God’s goodness to—who’s done evil to you?

A right relationship with God shows in the way we relate to people. If you are not relating properly to people it may be that you are not related to God. Are you trusting in Christ alone for forgiveness? Do you understand that it is only by God’s grace that we can be forgiven and receive eternal life?