

# Mercy in the Face of Injustice

## Principles for Kingdom Living

Matthew 5:38-42

Question: if you hear someone say something bad about you, how do you respond? When someone cuts you off on the road, what do you do? When the rubber meets the road, what's your response when some sort of perceived injustice happens towards you?

I find it intriguing that when I read the Scriptures, I can often know *how* people should respond, and I can be shockingly judgmental when I know they've not responded rightly. Wow, Job's wife. You're just going to say, "curse God and die?!" But when the circumstances come to my life, and if I were to lose all things, including my children, do I really think I'd be perfect in my response? I remember years ago being in a church situation where I was completely put down in a couple of very hurtful ways by some in leadership. I was shocked, sad, and very disheartened. Those feelings, without even realizing it, led to bitterness and resentment. If I had been reading a story about my situation, I'd know how I ought to respond, but when the circumstances came in, things became so much more confusing.

If we have a difficult time responding with kindness and love when hurt by a Facebook post, I think we might all need to admit that we need Jesus' words found in the text we're studying this morning. Here Jesus addresses our tendency to sinfully respond when injustice comes our way. I think we see that we tend to emphasize our self as opposed to emphasizing Jesus and his Kingdom. But, if we are Kingdom citizens, then Jesus has set us free to tell others in our words and actions about the greater Kingdom. What good is it if people honor us but they don't honor the Lord?

Before we get into the text, I do want to remind you of a couple of things. Please remember Jesus' two-fold purpose in his sermon: 1) He's speaking to his disciples. In speaking to his followers (which also include anyone here who has turned from their sins and turned to Jesus for forgiveness and reconciliation with God), remember that Jesus stated in this sermon that he came to fulfill the Law even through *us*. So, while we could say, "Obey Jesus' words is impossible," we can also say, "But with Christ, all things are possible." We can live out Jesus' Kingdom values in this world! 2) Jesus is also speaking to intrigued listeners. These are people who aren't followers of Christ. If that's you today, these words of Jesus should reveal to you the extent of God's demands. You ought to realize that you have sinned, but you can also turn to Jesus for forgiveness and find amazing forgiveness and love if you turn him for grace and mercy!

With all this in mind, I want to give you the main idea of the sermon today: **Kingdom citizens are called to die to self and sacrificially love others even in the face of injustice.** Because we are citizens of a greater Kingdom, we aren't primarily concerned about our individual welfare in this world. This is the practical outworking of Jesus' beatitude of being merciful. To be merciful is to get in the skin of others and give what's needed for them. So, that's why the title of this sermon is "Mercy in the Face of Injustice." Jesus has set us free to die to self and to sacrificially love others. Through that kind of living, Jesus works through us as lights for his Kingdom so that sin and brokenness is destroyed and many more might enter his Kingdom and glorify God for all eternity! Therefore, we must live with concern about the souls of people who haven't trusted in Christ. And, in order to show this concern to others, we need

actions that shock the world to see their need for God. With this backdrop, let's jump into the text. We're going to evaluate the scribes and Pharisee's teaching and then we will contrast it to Jesus' teaching.

**1. The scribes and Pharisees emphasized their individual rights, thus enhancing injustice and revenge (v. 38).**

Look again at verse 38: You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.'<sup>1</sup> This statement can be found in Exodus 21:24, Leviticus 24:20, and Deuteronomy 19:21. This statement is also a command from God. "Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth" is commanded by God. And, that might sound shocking to some people because when you hear the phrase, you may think that means God is commanding revenge. But that's *not* what God is commanding in any of these passages. That's actually how the scribes and Pharisees manipulated the verses to mean.

When they stated "eye for eye and tooth for tooth," they then said that it is right and good to stand up for yourself and make people pay for how they treat you. Clearly that's not a godly attitude; so, what was the original meaning of this phrase? The commands were given to Israel's government to ensure that legal punishments were limited to the crime itself. In other words, today we say that the punishment must fit the crime. That's what "eye for eye and tooth for tooth means." If someone punched you and a tooth fell out, don't crucify them. Don't go beyond the crime. To do that is to perpetuate violence. To do something like this is actually unjust, and God doesn't solve sin and injustice by more injustice.

That said, the scribes and Pharisees negated the context of these verses, and instead of applying these only to legislative consequences, they made these commands personal. Meaning, you can take the law into your own hands and get revenge if needed. If someone mocks you. If someone puts you down. If someone takes something of yours, then you can get an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.

I can't help but wonder how many people today think this way. We might say to ourselves something like, "God values us as individuals, and God hates it when someone puts down another person. God also loves me, and that person isn't respecting me; so, I'll show them to respect me. I have rights, you know?!" And, while Jesus does say that God's children are valuable and that God hates people hating others, Jesus teaches his children to not live defending their names. Instead, our objective is to magnify the name of God and see people changed and transformed by Jesus.

Honestly, what does it matter if someone respects you, but they never turn to the Lord? What does it matter to gain respect from every human being, but every human goes to Hell? Honestly, that was the mentality of many of the scribes and Pharisees, and Jesus even says to them that they make children of Hell because their focus is on self and not God. May we not buy into the "eye for eye" teaching of the Pharisees. Instead, let's turn to Jesus' teaching and learn what it truly means to be merciful and to not live for our reputation and rights.

**2. Jesus emphasizes mercy (death to self and sacrificial love) towards sinners and the needy (vv. 39-42).**

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<sup>1</sup> [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Mt 5:38.

Let's read verses 39-42: <sup>39</sup> 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. <sup>40</sup> And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. <sup>41</sup> And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. <sup>42</sup> Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you.<sup>2</sup>

In these four verses, Jesus gives four scenarios where we can experience injustice. And, before he gives these scenarios, he gives the principle we need to understand: **Do not resist the one who is evil.** At this point, I need to remind us all that Jesus uses figure of speech, and I believe, hyperbole to make his point. When I say hyperbole, I don't mean that Jesus is making a strong point to minimize something, but he's using big terms to emphasize the importance of following him. I'm saying this again because if we only took Jesus' words here in these verses, at face value, we would come to some pretty heinous, and unbiblical conclusions.

For example, what if a parent is abusive and slaps their children? Would you tell a child that in order to follow God, they need to take the abuse and not ever resist their parent's abuse? Clearly, the parent is acting evil. Or, would we take the conclusions of Leo Tolstoy who, as is my understanding, stated that government should get rid of law enforcement because Jesus says we are never to resist evil? Or, what would you say if someone says that you *must* give money to anyone without question whenever they ask because Jesus says to not refuse anyone who would borrow from you? We understand Jesus is speaking in generalities and also with an element of hyperbolic force. Other passages of Scripture – and Jesus' own teaching – emphasize this.

So, with this understanding laid out again, we can ask, "What is Jesus saying when he says to not resist the one who is evil?" I believe that Jesus is emphasizing the heart and spirit that should exist within all of his followers. God the Father, in his abundant mercy, sent God the Son to this earth to live the obedient life we couldn't live. And Jesus, God the Son in the flesh, willingly came to this earth to not only serve as an example, but to also receive the punishment and judgment our sins deserved. On the cross, he took an eternity's weight of wrath in the place of you and me! He was not forced by anything outside of himself to do this! He could have said, "These humans are sinners. They're rebels. They're unmerciful! I'll leave them to themselves," but he didn't. Before the foundation of the world, he looked on you, Christian, with love and commitment. **With the same love and forgiveness that God has towards you, we are now summoned to show that to people who act unjustly towards us.** In other words, we are to show mercy (which is death to self and sacrificial love).

That's what Jesus means by sinner here. It's not just how we are to act towards random people. We're all born sinners – loving us and things around us more than God. But when Jesus gets into examples, he puts us into them. He is saying that Kingdom living gets practical. How will *you* respond? Will you elevate yourself and emphasize you when hurt or will you "esteem others as more significant than yourself?" Now, let's look at the examples. What we see here examples relating to the following issues: **(my) Body, (my) Reputation, (my) Rights, (my) Resources.** I have the parenthesis there for emphasis. It seems Jesus shows us that we naturally view these things as belonging to us. However, if we've understood Jesus' teaching, we realize that if we've entrusted ourselves to him, then everything is his now. Jesus called his disciples salt and light in this world. He, the Light of the World, shines his light through us. This all must shape how we respond and live in this world. Therefore, is anything ultimately mine? No. It's his. So, how ought we respond? We should respond wanting to emphasize his glory with our body, his glory and reputation displayed with our resources and how we behave towards others.

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<sup>2</sup> [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Mt 5:39–42.

Let's now jump in with the first specific example and start with **"my body."** Look down at the end of verse 39 with me again: But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.<sup>3</sup> Again, this by no means whatsoever is encouraging people to silence in the face of abuse. If an abusive individual says, "Well, you have to be quiet and take it because Jesus says so," they have negated so much of Scripture that calls for sin to be brought to the light. If a spouse or parent is living in sin, part of honoring them is to lead them to truth and honesty. Remember, the same root word for honor is the same root for honest! Abusers and oppressors have negated the Scriptures that emphasize God's concern for the oppressed and for honesty to be treasured.

Now, having said this, that doesn't mean this verse has no application. I believe Jesus is essentially saying that **we should care for people's eternal welfare more than we care about our bodies.** The scenario here is that there could be someone who, for some reason, wants to put you in a place or is emphasizing their power, and so they slap you. The type of slap here is a backhanded one because Jesus then says, "turn the other cheek." In essence, Jesus says, "Let them continue all the way through." They get you with the backhand. Now, they can get you on the return slap.

As you hear this, you could say, "No way! I'm always going to defend myself." But what if defending yourself keeps someone from knowing Jesus? As many of you know, I love reading Christian biographies. One autobiography I loved was by a tribal missionary named John Patton. He lived in the 1800's and was a pioneer missionary to cannibal tribes. He literally would have people follow him around with weapons, threatening to murder him at any point. Over and over, through the years, he endured threats, and even before him, every other missionary that visited one particular tribe was murdered by the people. But what if he went and simply fought back? Would Christ even be proclaimed? Or, I think about Jim Elliott and his missionary team to tribal people. They decided before visiting the people that if the people came at them to murder them, they would shoot in the air to show they wouldn't hurt them. They did this because they said that they knew they would go to Heaven, and they knew the others would go to Hell.

Thinking of these examples, you might say, "Yeah, but that's different. Those are tribal people in a different country." I think there are problems with that statement. First, I think you're clinging too much to the USA as your homeland. If you'd be sacrificial in another country for someone else's salvation, why wouldn't you do that here? Aren't people in our country becoming increasingly irreligious? Yes. There are more people in our country with limited to no knowledge of Jesus than probably ever before. Where's the concern for their souls?

Jesus shows here that through radical self-denial – even denying the physical rights to our body – we can show others that we care for their souls more than we care for our bodies.

Let's now move into the second illustration regarding **our reputations.** In verse 40, Jesus says, "And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well."<sup>4</sup> Years ago, my first pastoral mentor said to me, "You take care of your character. Let God take care of your reputation." The reality is that we humans often spend too much time trying to take care of our reputation, while diminishing the need to commune with the Lord and have him develop our character. Did you know Jesus is much more

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<sup>3</sup> [\*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version\*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Mt 5:39.

<sup>4</sup> [\*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version\*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Mt 5:40.

concerned about you and your growth than he is about how people perceive you? I think that's clear even in this illustration.

The scenario is that someone sues you unjustly. I say unjustly because in the ancient world a person would not have their tunic taken from them. This is a word that refers to an undergarment. This is a piece of clothing that covers the most vulnerable parts of you. Honestly, how dare they do this! This is wicked. This is evil, right? Jesus affirms it's evil because in verse 39, he says to not resist the one who is evil. This person is evil. They've somehow done what is unthinkable! In our natural mind with our natural tendencies, we immediately think of trying to defend ourselves. What will people think of us? This person was wrong in what they did, but the court has given credence to the evil person! How dare they! We might then want to immediately fight back, protect ourselves. Jesus exhorts us to the opposite conclusion: give them your cloak as well. Hold on. If they took your undergarments and you give them your cloak, what does that mean for you? You're essentially naked.

Again, please don't hear these words to be taken as most literal in all cases. Jesus isn't commanding us to take our clothes off if someone shames us in court. But Jesus is calling us to embrace the vulnerability. Embrace the threat to our reputation. Don't run from it. Don't hide. Don't fight back just to emphasize you. Christian, remember that our lives aren't about us as individuals! Our lives are for Christ's glory! **We should care for people's eternal welfare more than we care about our reputation.** If Christ can be glorified through our public shame, then we ought to choose that rather than choosing our public defense, but Christ is unknown. Again, what good is it if someone maintains their reputation, but the sinners around them lose their souls? If we maintain our reputation at the cost of witnessing to Christ through self-denial and sacrificial love, then we have not been the merciful people Christ has set us free to be.

Let's now move to the third illustration regarding **our societal rights**. In verse 41, we read, "And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles."<sup>5</sup> For us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, this might sound like the weirdest example. Is this describing someone who forces us to go on a run with them, and if they say we have to run a mile, we need to go two? No. This is actually describing a governmental policy in the ancient Roman world. If there were resources that needed to be transported, Roman leaders could tell someone they had to transport the resources from point A to point B. Often, in the ancient world, those defeated by a government would be the ones commanded to transport these resources. So, this was a humbling act as well as an inconvenient rule. I would imagine many of us would even say this is unjust. And, rightly so because Jesus says in verse 39 that all the examples are evil.

Here I want to quote again from the 20<sup>th</sup> century British pastor, Martyn Lloyd-Jones. Sixty or so years ago, he addresses us even in our day: This passage is concerned with man's natural resentment at the demands of government upon him. It has reference to our dislike and hatred of legislation of which we do not approve, to Acts of Parliament, for example, which we do not like and which we have opposed. 'Yes', we tend to say; 'they are passed by Parliament. But why should I obey? How can I get out of this?' That is the attitude our Lord is condemning. He goes on to say that it is our business to carry out the law "though we may entirely disagree with what is being done, and though we may regard it as unjust."

We will still have questions here, and I want to emphasize that this doesn't mean that if the government says, for example, to abort a child, we do that. From Old to New Testament, protection of life is always emphasized. Also, I agree with Lloyd-Jones who also says that this doesn't mean we don't try to legally

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<sup>5</sup> [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Mt 5:41.

change things that are unjust. We, as Christians, ought to be lights in this world to seek the welfare of communities and countries in which we reside. Having stated these two qualifications, we must recognize and admit though that Jesus is stating something. What is it? **We should care for people's eternal welfare more than we care about our governmental rights.** There are many things I disagree with in our government. And, Jesus says that there are things government does that's unjust. And yet, we can still obey the unjust laws not only without sinning, but actually that obedience shows our commitment to Jesus as we die to ourselves. "But they're unjust, Pastor Timothy!" Yep. Jesus shows us here that it's unjust for the government to treat people the way they did in the first century, with the forced transportation, but Jesus says to his followers that instead of focusing on themselves and their rights – sacrifice your rights altogether and go the extra mile. Show them that you're secure in the citizen rights of the Kingdom of Jesus!

Now we move to the final example with Jesus pinpointing our **resources**. Let's read verse 42 again: Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you.<sup>6</sup> Some may interpret this as giving financially to everyone who begs of you. Honestly, I don't even know how this could practically happen. When I was in Chicago this past summer, I think I wouldn't have any money left if I lived in Chicago and paid even a dollar or two to every person who asked. What's Jesus' emphasis? Showing mercy and caring for souls more than ourselves. In other words, **we should care for people's eternal welfare more than we care about our own resources.**

I think we would all acknowledge and admit that the Bible commands us to care for the poor and needy. I think we would also all acknowledge and admit that we are in a highly consumeristic culture. Would you also admit that there's a potential that many of us Christians might have a blindspot when it comes to hoarding our resources? I don't think I can number the times when I've heard people justify *not* giving to the poor and needy. And, often the justification is that they'll probably use it for drugs. Or, they may say, "They're not really poor." They make judgments and then excuse their sacrificial giving. I can't help but wonder if we were to honestly evaluate ourselves if we'd actually find our judgmentalism points to our self-protection and love for our stuff. By the way, I think Jesus is also emphasizing here that the people asking for money may be asking with sinful intents. Yet, we're still to have an attitude of sacrifice. Yet, instead of trusting God to provide for us, and instead of trusting that God could use earthly green currency to lead a soul to himself, we keep the stuff for us.

As I think about this point, I'm reminded of a very godly man from over 100 years ago. His name was B.B. Warfield, and this quote hits me square between the eyes. It's one of those statements that hurts so good because while it's convicting, Warfield points me to Christ. I hope it does the same for you. He says this: **Now dear Christians, some of you pray night and day to be branches of the true Vine; you pray to be made all over in the image of Christ. If so, you must be like him in giving . . . Objection 1. "My money is my own." Answer: Christ might have said, "My blood is my own, my life is my own" . . . then where should we have been? Objection 2. "The poor are undeserving." Answer: Christ might have said, "They are wicked rebels . . . shall I lay down my life for these? I will give to the good angels." But no, he left the ninety-nine, and came after the lost. He gave his blood for the undeserving. Objection 3. "The poor may abuse it." Answer: Christ might have said the same; yea, with far greater truth. Christ knew that thousands would trample his blood under their feet; that most would despise it; that many would make it an excuse for sinning more; yet he gave his own blood. Oh, my dear Christians! If you would be like Christ, give much, give often, give freely, to the vile and poor, the thankless and the undeserving. Christ is glorious and happy and so will you be. It is**

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<sup>6</sup> [\*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version\*](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Mt 5:42.

**not your money I want, but your happiness. Remember his own word, “It is more blessed to give than to receive.”<sup>7</sup>**

Ventura, how Warfield talks about this final point is ultimately how we should be thinking about all of these points. Jesus is calling his disciples to imitate him. And, I want you to genuinely think about how Jesus responded to us in this world? Did he not lay down his body for us? What about his reputation in the religious courts of the Jews? Was he wrong? No. He is God! Yet, he was treated as blasphemous. What about in the court system of Rome? Was he wronged? Yes. He did not get “eye for eye” justice. He did no wrong and should not have experienced any penalty. Yet, he was given the most extreme penalty. All of his clothes were taken. He was naked and vulnerable and was beaten severely, finally tortured on the cross. And then we can also see the resources of Christ were all taken. They cast lost for what remained. But even more than that, I want you to see how Jesus, God in the flesh, possessed all in Heaven – experiencing the fullness of worship of all in Heaven. Yet, he gave up the riches of Heaven to come to this earth.

Why? He cared more for your soul than he did for his physical body. He cared more for your soul than for that temporal reputation. He cared more for your soul than the rights that Rome gave him. He cared more for your soul than maintaining Heaven’s resources. Why? Was it because you and I are so wonderful? No. We’ve been and done evil. Why then? For God’s glory! God is glorified in all of his character – all of himself – being made known to people. God is glorified in rescuing sinners and for mercy to triumph.

Oh, Christians, if we understand God’s great love for us. If we understand the solidity of God’s Kingdom and the fact that we *are* citizens of God’s Kingdom, then let’s hear Jesus’ call in these words. **Let us heed Jesus’ words to deny ourselves, take up our crosses and follow Jesus. There is a judgment to come at which we would have been condemned if not for Christ laying down his life, his reputation, his riches for us. Now we too can show Christ’s love to sinners so that the whole world might know there’s a Savior. May we, as kingdom citizens, die to self and sacrificially love others even in the face of injustice.**

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<sup>7</sup> Piper, John. *Don’t Waste Your Life*. P. 166 (quote of B.B. Warfield)