

# **FIVE FORKS BRETHERN IN CHRIST CHURCH**

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*SCRIPTURE: Matthew 5:38-42*

*DATE: March 17, 2019*

*Place: Auditorium*

*SUBJECT: Retaliation*

*Series: Sermon on the Mount*

*THEME: Breaking the cycle of retaliation*

*SERMON: "Letting Go of Getting Even"*

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## **Introduction**

A friend stole my bank card and ran up \$800 on it. He was caught and I was asked to appear as a witness and a victim at his trial. The prosecuting attorney asked, "What do you want to do?" "Are you pressing charges?" I was in a quandary. He was my friend. But he also had a history of theft problems. And he was someone I believe God had brought into my life so both of us could grow together, to understand what it means to know, and love and follow Jesus. What should I have done? What was the right thing for a kingdom of Jesus follower to do in a situation like this? What do you think you would have done?

We're in our series from Jesus' **Sermon on the Mount**. We believe we can learn to know, love and follow Jesus, when we "**Hear his Words**" (series graphic) and put them into **practice**. Jesus is teaching about several different everyday issues that people face and how to respond as a member of his new kingdom.

Today we look at the **Law of Retribution or Retaliation. (Matthew 5:38-42)**

We believe that God is a God of justice. Part of that is, our negative behavior carries consequences, or the need for a response or punishment. It just seems inherently right, that whenever someone does something hurtful to another person, there must be some type of payback, or retaliation. Little toddlers seem to learn this early on. You push me, I'll push you. You take my toy, I'll take your toy, and so on.

People seem to be born with this:

**1. Sense of Justice** – that bad behavior must be paid for in some way.

But that begs another question. Is any form or degree of retaliation or punishment appropriate? Or does justice call for a more measured response?

In order to help the Israelites think about this and hopefully get it right, God gave them a law. It's mentioned a number of places in the bible. We can call it the:

**Law of Retribution** – stated this way in [Exodus 21:23-25](#) **The punishment must match the injury: a life for a life, <sup>24</sup> an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, a hand for a hand, a foot for a foot, <sup>25</sup> a burn for a burn, a wound for a wound, a bruise for a bruise.**

In Deuteronomy, when people are caught as a false witnesses, Moses gives this instruction:

[Deut. 19:21](#) **Show no pity for the guilty. Your rule should be life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot.**

**Justice.** Because we are created in God's image we all have a sense of justice.

What must happen to satisfy this sense of justice?

The simple and common answer is: **Retribution** or **retaliation** or **get even**.

Justice requires retribution. But also **equal** retribution. If someone has done an injustice and hurt someone – they must be hurt/punished to an equal degree in response. So you have a law in the Old Testament - eye for eye, tooth for tooth, life for life, etc. This law was as much to **keep** people from **over doing** the punishment, as it was to be sure that people were punished.

We sense this. Justice feels right. But it can get more complex. When someone steals \$800 from you, what is justice in this case? Since he already spent most of it, should he just be required to give the rest back? Or should he be required to pay back all of it and we call it even? Or should he be required to pay back all of it, **plus** a fine of some amount since he violated me by stealing from me? He needs to learn a lesson, right.

And we wrestle with these types of questions every day, don't we? And it gets complicated. One person **pushes** in line ahead of us. What is an appropriate response? The person you work with on a **project**, goofs off instead of helping? What is the appropriate

response? Your **spouse** complains about something you always do wrong? Does justice require that you point out their failure of equal severity, so you are now even in your complaints against each other? We are trying to figure out these types of issues every day, aren't we?

And are we surprised that God says to Moses: "Tell the people to '**Show no pity**'?"  
A God, full of mercy, saying, "Show no pity?"

I want to share two examples where our **sense of justice struggles** to figure out what is right or appropriate. Two extremes perhaps that confuse our sense of justice.

How many of you think stealing is wrong and the thief must be punished – and restitution made? Pay back what you stole and maybe a little bit more, so you don't do it again? We would probably agree, "The punishment must fit the crime." That seems to be just and fair.

There is an Irish folk song: **The Fields of Athenrye**

**By a lonely prison wall  
I heard a young girl call  
"Michael, they are taking you away  
For you stole Travalien's corn  
So the young might see the morn  
Now the prison ship lies waiting in the bay."**

In colonial Britain, many convicts were banished to Australia as punishment for their crimes. They were sent 10,000 miles away, with practically no chance of returning home.

So the story of the song is, the powers that be are taking a father, a thief, to Australia – banished forever from his wife and children, why? Because he stole food – a few ears of corn - from a wealthy powerful landlord, to feed his starving children.

What does that do to your sense of justice? Do you think the punishment fits the crime in this case? Should we apply, “Show no pity?” Is this eye for eye, tooth for tooth? Something doesn’t seem right, does it? Something is unfair, unjust. It bothers us. So what do we do?

Or how about this scenario, on another extreme? The recent news of **Robert Kraft** – billionaire owner of the New England Patriots – caught paying for sex at a massage parlor involved in sex trafficking. Girls and boys kidnapped and sold as sex slaves. He was apparently only “charged with a misdemeanor.” And the punishment could be as light as 100 hours of community service and he has to attend a class on the detriments of sex trafficking.

How does that affect your sense of justice? I hope it is bothered by it. Don’t we want to scream, “Show no pity?” Justice is complicated isn’t it?

Apparently, in Jesus day, the Law and the sense of justice were also troubling and often justice was meted out unfairly. How should justice play out in the Kingdom of God that Jesus is ushering in? Jesus is talking about our sense of justice and the way do deal with it, in our section of His sermon today. And:

**2. Jesus reveals a new ethic** – a new way of behaving or responding.

**Matthew 5:38-42 “You have heard the law that says the punishment must match the injury: ‘An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.’ <sup>39</sup> But I say, do not resist an evil person! If someone slaps you on the right cheek, offer the other cheek also. <sup>40</sup> If you are sued in court and your shirt is taken from you, give your coat, too. <sup>41</sup> If a soldier demands that you carry his gear for a mile, carry it two miles. <sup>42</sup> Give to those who ask, and don’t turn away from those who want to borrow.**

We might be comfortable with the ideas that punishment is necessary, retribution can be at least as bad as the offense – but it should not go too far beyond that. That seems fair. That seems just. So let’s behave that way.

But Jesus blows these ideas out of the water. He says something ridiculous, “**But I say, do not resist an evil person.**”

And everything inside of me wants to scream, “No, you can’t mean that, literally.” That is impractical. That is unfair. That is unsafe. That is just wrong. And we jump to a scenario like:

Do you mean to tell me that if someone breaks into my house and starts harming my wife and children, I am not supposed to resist? Just let them do whatever they want? You are crazy. No way am I doing that. “Sorry, Jesus, I just can’t do it.”

That is a good scenario to consider. But not yet. I think that scenario is complex and such a shock to our thinking, we skip over all these words of Jesus and don’t even hear him anymore. Let alone try and put them into practice.

I personally do **not** think we are to take Jesus words so literally that we do nothing when someone is harming our family members or anyone else. This is a complicated scenario for me. But I also believe these radical words of Jesus are a turning point, a threshold if you will, in Jesus’ teaching about what it means to Love God and Love others.

So let’s stay with Jesus a bit longer.

Remember, Jesus steps into history, in the middle of a powerful Roman Empire, staying in power by force and fear, and a rule of law that says, “We will punish any law breaker, to the full extent of the law – and show no pity.”

Into such a world steps Jesus and he says, there is a different, better, ‘other’ way to live together. “**Instead of the requirement of retribution, Jesus reveals that grace, love, and forgiveness can reverse the dangers of retribution, and even more, create an alternative society,” (McKight)**

In other words, **don’t use violence to resist evil**. There is another way.

Jesus reveals a vision of **non-resistant love**. He blatantly ends Moses’ command to “show no pity” and calls his followers to be merciful. Followers of Jesus can offer **grace, forgiveness** and **mercy** as an alternative to getting even.

He will give us some examples, specific to the Roman world he lived in, that show when he says, “do not resist,” he is not talking about **doing nothing**. Jesus is not saying, “Look guys, there is nothing you can do about it, so just be passive.”

In his examples, which we will explore in a moment, Jesus seems to be showing, that **“loving God and loving others, means that those who love will love even those who dish out injustice. A person who lives by that [Jesus] Creed will respond to injustice, not with retaliation and vengeance, but with grace, compassion, and abundant mercy in such a way that it reverses the injustice.”** (McKnight)

When I see someone **bullying** another person, my reflex action is to bully them back. When someone attacks me **verbally**. I want to attack them verbally. In other words I want to treat them the way they were treating me or bullying the other person, so they will feel what it is like. I want to hurt them back, to even the score, or make them afraid to continue. This is a common scenario in many marriage arguments, or between siblings, or co-workers, even people discussing things on a committee. We typically want to **retaliate** or **get even**.

But Jesus’ new ethic or response to evil is **non-resistant love**, because he knows, love is more powerful than injustice, and other evils, and it produces a completely **different result**.

Retaliation **escalates** a conflict. Love will promote a possibility of peace and harmony.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German theologian, who was put to death by Adolf Hitler for his protests and for plotting to overthrow Hitler’s regime said:

**“Evil will become powerless, when it finds no opposing object, no resistance, but instead, is willingly borne and suffered. (In this scenario) Evil meets an opponent for which it is not a match.”**

I must say this before we go any further. I am not advocating, and I don’t believe Jesus is calling for anyone to stay in an **abusive situation**. If you are in an abusive situation and the abuser will not stop, or will not acknowledge their abuse – seek outside help immediately.

Now, non-resistant love, as a response to evil, is not a new idea from Jesus. Proverbs states:

**“A gentle answer will turn away anger.” 15:1**

**Love is stronger than evil.** I have experienced more than a few times, that when I have addressed someone with an angry tone, and they reply calmly and gently, my own anger is overpowered and disarmed. So:

Let’s look at the **4 Examples from Jesus** that illustrate what he means when he says, “Do not resist an evil person.”

We will notice that he **always advocates grace beyond retribution**. He doesn’t ask us to be passive. He calls instead for **active generosity** that breaks down a system of getting revenge or retaliating. **1<sup>st</sup> one:**

**If someone slaps you on the right cheek, offer the other cheek also.**

Being slapped on the cheek was one of the most disrespectful things you could do to a person. Jesus says, “If someone disrespects you, rather than disrespecting them, let them do it again” McKnight calls this “an almost **laughable scene of grace**.” Does Jesus really mean it? Let me take us to:

**Isaiah 50:6-8** a prophecy describing Jesus’ suffering:

**I have not rebelled or turned away.**

**<sup>6</sup> I offered my back to those who beat me**

**and my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard.**

**I did not hide my face**

**from mockery and spitting.**

**Because the Sovereign Lord helps me,**

**I will not be disgraced.**

**<sup>8</sup> He who gives me justice is near.**

Not coincidentally for Matthew, he records this about Jesus as he faced the cross:

**Matthew 26:67 Then they began to spit in Jesus’ face and beat him with their fists. And some slapped him, <sup>68</sup> jeering, “Prophecy to us, you Messiah! Who hit you that time?”**

Does Jesus really mean for us to turn the other cheek? It is how he responded – **trusting** that God, the one who delivers faultless justice, was near in all of it.

This is similar to **“taking the high road.”** Someone insults you. Someone blames you unfairly or ridicules you. Instead of getting even you can choose to be silent, or respond with a compliment and grace. That is turning the other cheek. We do not have to set the record straight. God will do that at the right time if necessary.

Yes but how often, how long do I have to turn the other cheek? The headline in a recent article of Christianity Today read:

**No Cheeks Left to Turn: Double persecution of Africa’s largest Church as Christians in Nigeria ask how long they’re supposed to “count (their suffering) all joy.”**

The article describes the persecution of Christians in Nigeria by two different factions. This is a short excerpt.

“Sunday morning worship opens with the din of a drumroll. Inside a long, one-room building with a sheet-metal roof supported by handmade trusses, the choir takes turns singing and dancing. A young drummer bears a dramatic scar across her left cheek. It is a reminder of the day, eight years ago, that the church and surrounding homes in this community of Christian farmers were destroyed by extremists.

Other markers are less subtle. Beyond the rebuilt houses sprawls an enormous concrete slab with a thin, rusty metal cross on top. Entombed there are 483 victims from the attack, stacked in three rows. A plaque on the mass grave cites **Revelation 6:10–11**:

**“They shouted in a loud voice, ‘Almighty Lord, holy and true, how long will it be until you judge them on earth and punish them for killing us?’**

**Each of them was given a white robe, and they were told to rest a little while longer, until the complete number of their fellow servants and fellow Christians had been killed as they had been.”**

Turning the other cheek is not easy. It does not always end comfortably – but we believe Jesus calls us to this – grace instead of getting even.

## A 2<sup>nd</sup> illustration

**If you are sued in court and your shirt is taken from you, give your coat, too.**

In Jesus' day males wore two layers of clothing – a coat and a shirt. The shirt was equivalent to their underwear. The coat was also used as a blanket at night to stay warm. So the law did not allow you to take someone's coat for overnight – only their shirt.

But Jesus is urging his followers to essentially **strip** in front of the person suing them – in public court as a means of showing that you are part of another kingdom. You don't retaliate and get even. Instead you are willing to **give up your rights**, including your right to **dignity** in response to someone who wants to do an injustice towards you.

Really? "You can't be serious, Jesus." Look at:

**Matthew 27:35 Some of the governor's soldiers took Jesus into their headquarters and called out the entire regiment. <sup>28</sup> They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him. After they had nailed him to the cross, the soldiers gambled for his clothes by throwing dice.**

When Jesus stood before Pilate and could have salvaged some of his dignity by claiming his rights as a king, he simply said, "My kingdom is of another world." And he allowed himself to be stripped and humiliated. Jesus experienced what he is calling his followers to do.

Giving up even His own dignity, as a response to evil – such a radical response.

## 3<sup>rd</sup> illustration

**If a soldier demands that you carry his gear for a mile, carry it two miles.**

The Roman law of the land was that ordinary people were required to help the occupying Roman forces, if asked to do so, by carrying the soldier's bags. Oh how this irked the Jews. Jesus introduces a radical, "go beyond what people expect", **loving** response.

The **Zealots** of Jesus day – were a group of Jews who tried to use violence to

counteract this type of political injustice of the Romans. They were unsuccessful. Jesus advocates for peaceful, unexpected, helpful - in other words - loving ways of bringing in a new community. That would have caught the attention of everyone.

How do we respond to the injustice of a political system in a way that exemplifies our commitment to a new community – the kingdom of Jesus?

Is **peace really more powerful** than threats and the use of force – even in the face of political injustice?

Many of us may have heard of **Desmond Tutu**, a black South African priest who worked tirelessly, but peacefully, to end Apartheid in South Africa. Apartheid was the legal discrimination against all non-white citizens in South Africa, simply because they were not white. Non-whites were prohibited by law, from using certain bathrooms, seats on the train, owning houses in certain neighborhoods and so much more. Those were the laws of the country. Desmond Tutu worked peacefully to end these injustices.

But few of us know who **Trevor Huddleston** is. Yet without Trevor Huddleston there may have been no anti-apartheid leader named Tutu.

Tutu was asked by the BBC to identify a defining moment in his life. He spoke of the day he and his mother were walking down the street. Tutu was nine years old. A tall white man dressed in a black suit came towards them. In the days of apartheid, when a black person and a white person met while walking on a narrow path, the black person was expected to step into the gutter to allow the white person to pass and nod their head as a gesture of respect.

But this day, before a young Tutu and his mother could step off the sidewalk, the white man stepped off the sidewalk and, Tutu said, “As my mother and I passed, he tipped his hat in a gesture of respect to her!” **Going against the injustice of a political system – in a loving way.**

The white man was Trevor Huddleston, an Anglican priest who was bitterly opposed to apartheid. His actions changed Tutu’s life. When his mother told him that Trevor Huddleston had stepped off the sidewalk because he was a man of God, (and as such was willing to go against the legal and cultural injustice of his day) Tutu said he found his calling. “When she told me that he was an Anglican priest I decided there and then that I wanted to be an Anglican

priest too. And what is more, I wanted to be a man of God” said Tutu.

Followers of Jesus, while encouraged, to obey governments, will actively work against injustices in society, because they are called to a different sense of justice.

**One more** illustration from Jesus.

**Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.**

We are not as familiar with beggars in our community as some are. Beggars make us uncomfortable. So we outlaw their presence. Or we try to ignore them and pretend we don't see them when we drive by them near the interstate entrance ramp. How are we to respond to the injustice of someone not having enough, or when people want to borrow from us? I don't know about you but I am always torn when I see or hear of someone in need. Do I help or don't I?

Jesus does not allow us to be passive – do nothing and forget about it. Rather, he calls his followers to seek to create **a culture of active generosity**. He wants us to be characterized by a response of grace, compassion and love.

90-year-old World War II veteran **Arnold Abbott** made headlines when he was arrested by police in Florida—for giving out food to homeless people. Abbott runs a nonprofit group that regularly distributes food in city parks. Because of an ordinance the city had passed recently, that restricts feeding the homeless in public, his charity work is now potentially illegal.

Three days after the first violation he was arrested in a different city park and was facing up to 60 days in jail or a \$500 fine. What would you do if you were Arnold Abbot? **How do you create a culture of active generosity, when it might be against the law?**

I answer a lot of phone calls from people calling the church asking for help. When we help, the word quickly gets around and we get a lot more calls. Can I say yes to some, but no to others? What if I help someone who was scamming me, and then refuse to help someone in real need? I struggle with knowing what to do. How can we be actively generous without

creating **unhealthy dependence**? There is not an easy answer for me.

**So we have 4 scenarios from Jesus on how to overcome evil with good. Applying non-resistant love.**

All of the responses Jesus calls for almost seem impractical, impossible, even foolish at times. We might say there is no way we can respond as he commands. Bonhoeffer agrees to a point. He says:

**“Only those, who in the cross of Jesus, find faith in the victory [of love] over evil, can obey His command.”**

It is not until we fully embrace what Jesus did for us on the cross when he let go of getting even. He responded in love and compassion to **our own injustices towards him**. It is not until we get that, that we can really attempt to live according to what he calls for in replacing retaliation and vengeance with love and compassion.

I believe it takes the **power** of the Holy Spirit. The **discernment** of the whole faith community, meaning wrestle with it together. **Humility** of each one of us, and **trusting** that God is near and will ultimately do the right thing.

May God continue to shape us into a community of active generosity.

## **PRAY**

**May God who lovingly gave himself for us, help you to let go of getting even this week as you learn to respond in every situation with active generosity.**