



## Selfishness in the Heart

St. Matthew 5:38-42

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As we continue on in the Sermon on the Mount we come, today, to another hard and challenging passage. I want to look today at Matthew 5:38-42. In these verses we read the fifth of Jesus' practical, real-world examples of what it means for us to live in such a way that we fulfil the Law of God. I think that as we go through these examples, they get increasingly challenging, and because of that increasingly convict us of our own sin. Jesus picked his examples carefully, knowing full well that they would prick the consciences of those people listening to him. And his examples might be taken from Jewish society 2000 years ago, but they still prick our consciences too. The fact is that man's basic condition, his basic problem, hasn't change. We're all sinners. We all put ourselves first. We're all proud. And for that reason, even as Christians, we have a tendency to default back to our natural fallen state; to look for a way to God and to look for a way to heaven that allows us to get there on our own. We don't like to admit that we're sinners. We don't like to admit that all of our good works merit us nothing in the eyes of God.

That was the Pharisees' problem. They knew God's Law, but rather than allowing it to convict them of sin and rather than turning to the Redeemer to find redemption, they twisted and distorted God's Law so that they could lower its standard of perfection and turn it into a list of do's and don'ts that they could feel good about keeping. We tend to do the same thing. And here Jesus pulls that all down. He shows us how we tend to put ourselves first, instead of God and others. He shows us how, when the Law tells us something is a sin, we start looking for loopholes and looking for ways to justify our sin. Even after he gives us these examples of what it means to fulfil the Law and truly live as Kingdom people, we then take his examples and turn them into legalistic rules. Last week we looked at his teaching on being impeccably honest

and I mentioned how there are those who turn his teaching into a simple prohibition against taking oaths. As we look at his teaching on selflessness this week, we'll see his examples here – which have been taken by many and turned into a legalistic set of rules: "Jesus says that if you're compelled to go one mile, go two – but not an inch further." "Jesus says that if a man sues you for your tunic, give him your cloak – but nothing else." If that's what we do with Jesus' teaching, we've missed the point – we're being just like the Pharisees.

Look with me at Matthew 5:38-42:

**You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' 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. And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you.**

Jesus says, "The Pharisees have told you that if someone knocks out your eye or your tooth, you have not only the *right*, but the *duty* to exact revenge, so take his eye or take his tooth." That's how the Law had been twisted. And to the natural man that sounds pretty good. Just like the people in Jesus' day, we're concerned about our rights. We live in what's supposed to be a free country that was founded on the principle that we all have inherent rights. Do we not have the right to this or to that? If someone injures me, do I not have the right to compensation? We, here, might ask, "What are my rights – as a Christian?" As Christians do we have the right to be successful, to be wealthy, to a home or to a family, to a good name? And here in these verses Jesus confronts these questions head-on and in a way that we may find difficult, because here he answers our questions and says that there are *no* rights for the Christian. Jesus teaches us here that his followers have no right to retaliation, no right to "things," no right to our own time, and not right to our money. The bottom line for us needs to be the understanding that everything we have, all of our time, our money, our possessions, even our reputation, are held in trust from God, and that we have an obligation to use them as

Jesus did, to help others and to build the Kingdom.

You see, when the Law talked about "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth" the whole point was to curb just the kind of vigilante justice that the Pharisees wanted. Before the Law was given, one man might punch another and knock out his tooth, and the other would then respond with a club or a knife and kill the first. Family feuds would start, like the one we see in Jacob's own family. His daughter, Dinah, was raped by the prince of a nearby town, so her brothers tricked the men of the town into being circumcised, and while they were all convalescing, they sneaked in and killed all of the men there. That's the kind of thing the Law was meant to put an end to. God put justice in the hands of judges and who were to make restitution reasonable and proportionate. If a man knocked out your tooth, you weren't then entitled to kill him, or if a man killed one of your sheep, you weren't then entitled to kill his entire flock.

There's an old book, long out of print, that was written by a woman who was formerly with the China Inland Mission. Its called, *Have We No Right*," and it's full of stories that illustrate just what Jesus is talking about here – that it's hard for most Christians to give up their rights in the service of Christ. There is a story by another missionary who was with the China Inland Mission in which he tells how he learned this lesson the hard way.

He says, "You know, there's a great deal of difference between *eating bitterness* [which is a Chinese colloquialism for "suffering hardship"] and *eating loss* [another Chinese colloquialism for "suffering the infringement of one's rights"]. 'Eating bitterness' is easy enough. To go out with the preaching band, walk twenty or thirty miles to the place where you are to work, help set up the tent, placard the town, and spend several weeks in a strenuous campaign of meetings and visitation—why, that's a thrill! Your bed may be made of a couple of planks laid on sawhorses, and you may have to eat boiled rice, greens, and bean-curd three times a day. But that's just the beauty of it! Why, it's good for anyone to go back to the simple life! A little healthy 'bitterness' is good for anybody!

"When it came to China," he goes on, "I was all ready to 'eat bitterness' and like it.... It takes a little while to get your

palate and your digestion used to Chinese food, of course, but that was not harder than I had expected. Another thing, however”—and he paused significantly—“*another thing* that I had never thought about came up to make trouble. I had to ‘eat loss’! I found that I couldn’t stand up for my rights—that I couldn’t even *have* any rights. I found that I had to give them up, every one, and that was the hardest thing of all.”

This is what Jesus is talking about. I think every missionary probably understands this principle, but it’s not just for people who go to preach the Gospel in the interior of China – it’s for every Christian who is called to live out the Gospel in his daily life and work. St. Paul sums this up well in writing to the Corinthian Church:

**Do we not have the right to eat and drink? Do we not have the right to take along a believing wife, as do the other apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Cephas? Or is it only Barnabas and I who have no right to refrain from working for a living?.... If others share this rightful claim on you, do not we even more? Nevertheless, we have not made use of this right, but we endure anything rather than put an obstacle in the way of the gospel of Christ. ... For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. (1 Corinthians 9:4-6, 12, 19)**

Just as Christ who didn’t count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but humbled himself to become one of us, the Apostle Paul was willing to set aside his rights for the sake of spreading that message of what Jesus had done. Every one of us is called to do the same!

Jesus gives four examples of how we are to give up our rights. And in the first one he tells us that as his people we no longer have the right to retaliate. “Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.” In Jesus’ day this kind of slap was intended more than anything else as an insult, but even so, whether someone injures you physically or insults you, our natural response is to strike back – to give the other guy what he “deserves.”

But Jesus says, no, that’s not what the Christian is supposed to do. Instead of

insisting on our rights, we are called to give them up, in order that the preaching of the Gospel not be hindered. He warned us back in the Beatitudes that just as he was persecuted, we would be also. So that he could fulfil his mission of redemption, Jesus chose not to retaliate. And so that his mission of redemption can be proclaimed to the world, he calls us not to retaliate either. St. Paul writes:

**Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” To the contrary, “if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.” Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. (Romans 12:19-21)**

As much as we might be tempted to say, “That’s too hard! I could never do that.” The history of the Church is full of stories of people who came to Christ as the result of the witness of another in just this kind of situation. This past week I was reading about Hudson Taylor, one of the early missionaries to China. He comments on this passage and tells about a time when he had summoned a ferry so he could cross a river. As the ferry was docking, another man came along and shoved him into the mud and rushed to get on the ferry himself. The ferryman, having seen what happened, refused to let the other man on the ferry, but Hudson Taylor got up and treated the man with kindness and invited him to join him on the ferry. He could have retaliated. By the rule of “an eye for an eye” he could have pushed the man into the mud, hopped on the boat, and waved sarcastically at the man. But he chose not to and instead had the opportunity to share the Gospel with this man and lead him to Christ. The man was impressed by Taylor’s Christlike attitude. So don’t say that this is too hard. If you are a Christian, you can do it. Christ lives in you, he expects you to live to his standard, and he himself will enable you to do it.

Jesus gets a little less abstract with his second example. In verse 40 he tells us, “If anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well.” Jesus was drawing on the Jewish law that limited what you could be sued for. A man could be sued for just about anything he wore, but he could never be sued for

his cloak or outer coat. It was sacrosanct. It was not only what kept him warm, but for many – especially the poor or for working men – it also served as their bedding. Even if it were taken as a pledge, the law said it had to be returned by nightfall. Jesus is making the same point: “If you find yourself being wronged or persecuted, don’t stand on your rights. When the sin of others abounds, our obligation is to show an even greater measure of grace. Again, we need to be like our master. He didn’t worry about his rights. He was God incarnate. He didn’t deserve any kind of punishment let alone violent treatment, and yet he gave up his own life.

In verses 41 Jesus says, “If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles.” The “anyone” Jesus has in mind would be a Roman soldier. It was a common thing in the ancient world for a conquering people to force their new subjects to submit to their authority and serve them. The Romans wanted everyone to know who the bosses were. And so they had a law that said that locals could be conscripted by the army to help carry their baggage and gear. This is what happened to Simon of Cyrene when he was pulled from the crowd and compelled to carry Jesus’ cross. There wasn’t much that was worse for the Jews than being forced to see their own defeat and subjugation this way. This was probably a pretty common occurrence and you can imagine the attitude that a Jew would have had if forced to carry a Roman soldier’s baggage for a mile. And yet Jesus says, if you’re compelled to go one mile, when you’ve done so – carry the soldier’s gear another mile. Do what it takes to show him that you don’t resent him – that you’ve forgiven the insult. Do what he asks and do it cheerfully. Give him a reason to ask why you’re different. *Show* him what it means – or better, what it looks like – to be a follower of Christ. Jesus came to earth as one of us and died carrying the baggage of our sins against him. Our time is not our own.

And neither is our money. That’s Jesus fourth example, and it happens to be the one that struck me this week. He says, “Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you.” We signed the paperwork for our house this week and had to hand over a very big cheque to pay for it. And in

paying for the house we paid enough between GST and the provincial Land Transfer Tax that we easily could have bought a really nice, new car with that money. Veronica and I both did quite a bit of grumbling over that. And yet here Jesus reminds us that we have no claim on either our possessions or our money.

For that reason, when we see someone in legitimate need, we're not to grab our wallets closer with a "what's mine is mine" attitude. We're to give freely. St. John gives us this same instruction when he writes, "If anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth" (1 John 3:17-18). Jesus knew that there's nothing better to show where our heart is than what we do with our money. Are we willing to let God have control of it? Are we willing to loosen our grip and let him have it?

As I said before, this is a hard teaching of Jesus. We really do tend to get hung up on our "rights." Each of us needs to ask, "Am I stuck on my rights, or have I learned to live the kind of life that was lived for me by the Lord Jesus?"

Watchman Nee sums up Jesus' teaching here very well. In conclusion let me read a bit to you from one of his books. "Since the day that Adam took the fruit of the tree of knowledge, man has been engaged in deciding what is good and what is evil. The natural man has worked out his own standards of right and wrong, justice and injustice, and striven to live by them. Of course, as Christians we are different. Yes, but in what way are we different? Since we were converted a new sense of righteousness has been developed in us, with the result that we too are, quite rightly, occupied with the question of good and evil. But have we realised that for us the starting point is a different one? Christ is for us the Tree of Life. We do not begin from the matter of ethical right and wrong. We do not start from that other tree. We begin from *him*; and the whole question for us is one of Life.

"Nothing has done greater damage to our Christian testimony than our trying to be right and demanding right of others. We become preoccupied with what is and what is not right. We ask ourselves, have

we been justly or unjustly treated? And we think thus to vindicate our actions. But that is not our standard. The whole question for us is one of cross-bearing. You ask me, 'Is it right for someone to strike my cheek?' I reply, 'Of course not!' But the question is, Do you only want to be right? As Christians our standard of living can never be 'right or wrong,' but the Cross. The principle of the Cross is our principle of conduct... 'Right or wrong' is the principle of the Gentiles and tax gatherers. My life is to be governed by the principle of the Cross and of the perfection of the Father."

Do we learn anything from the lesson of the Way of the Cross? If we've learned anything at all, it's the understanding that Jesus' followers do not stand on their rights. The second mile is only typical of the third and the fourth. The cloak is only typical of all of our other possessions. Neither our time nor our money is our own. When Jesus died on the cross as the penalty for sin, he didn't do it to defend either our right or his. It was grace that took him there. As his followers, as sons and daughters of God, we are called to live as Jesus did – to live as examples and witnesses of his self-sacrifice.

Please pray with me: Our Father, we give you thanks that in your great mercy you sent your Son to become one of us, to live perfectly, and to die, taking the penalty for *our* sins on himself. And yet still he harp about our "rights." We assert our rights when instead we should assert the gospel of grace. Forgive us, Father, and put the cross of Christ always before us to remind us to show others the same grace, mercy, and love that we have been shown. We ask this through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.