

GRACE GIVERS

SERIES: BLESSED ARE



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Matthew 5:38–42
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Matthew 5:38–42

As a child growing up, when you see something that your parents are good at, you think that you should naturally be good at the same thing.

This thought was the case for me and negotiating with car salespeople. My dad had this uncanny ability to get the exact car he wanted for the exact price he wanted to pay. I watched it happen once or twice, and I thought I learned a few things.

When it came time for me to buy my first car, I put my inherited and accumulated knowledge and skill to work. I picked out the exact car that I wanted. I went into the dealership, pulled out all the tricks in my book, and, after some skillful negotiating, was able to buy the exact car that I wanted at the exact price that the car dealership wanted me to pay. I guess some things aren't genetic.

Something happened that I will never forget when I was signing the paperwork for this car. Once we had decided on a final price, I had done some quick and incredibly complex math in my head (or maybe used an online loan calculator) to calculate what my monthly payment would be. Still, the number in the paperwork was a bit higher.

When I asked about this, the salesman assured me that the number was accurate. "No," I said, "I really think that's a bit high."

The salesman went back to the finance office and came back a few minutes later. "You were right," he said. "It looks like we accidentally added the sales tax in twice."

You added the sales tax in twice? There is no way you added in the sales tax twice. That is not at all what happened. You were trying to cheat me. After all of our negotiation, you thought you'd pull a fast one on me. I felt demeaned, angry, and unsure of what to say.

Have you ever been in a situation like that where you've been humiliated or taken advantage of? Many of you have experienced far worse, I'm sure. When

someone comes after you with their words, or money, or even their fists, how do you respond?

This morning, we will look at some well-known words of Jesus that speak precisely to that situation: Turn the other cheek. These words of Jesus are not only well-known to church people but to just about everyone. Gandhi regularly cited these words. These words shaped Martin Luther King, Jr. These words have inspired ethicists and activists to hold some radical positions and take some radical actions.

As we look at our text for the morning, we will see that Jesus is indeed calling us to something radical, but he is not calling us to a political stance or social agenda. Rather, Jesus is calling us to become people of radical grace. He is calling us to be grace givers. But that is not all he is doing. He is also revealing his character to us and extending grace to us. This morning, Jesus is inviting us to receive his grace and to participate in his kingdom of grace-giving.

Our text for this morning is Matthew 5:38-42. We are nearing the end of a section in the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus is calling us to a righteousness (or a goodness) that is deeper than that of the scribes and Pharisees. Four times, Jesus has said, "You have heard that it was said..." and then cited an Old Testament law, followed by a corrective to the way that law was understood at the time. He continues that pattern in our passage.

Tit-for-tat

Matthew 5:38:

"You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.'"

Here, Jesus is quoting a line that appears times in the Old Testament law (Exodus 21:24; Leviticus 24:20; Deuteronomy 19:21). In each case, the line is getting at a principle called *lex talionis*, "the law of retribution." The law stipulated that when somebody hurt you, you were allowed to seek retribution in kind—tit-for-tat. If you

break my arm, I can break yours. If you knock out my tooth, I can knock out yours. If you take my life, your life will also be taken.

In our culture, this sounds a bit barbaric, but the intent of the law was actually to limit retribution, not require it. If you break my arm, I can break your arm, but I can't take your life. Neither can I cut off your hand. I am allowed to repay you in kind for the harm that you have done to me, but not more.

It is unclear how this law played out in Israel. It is likely, however, that this was not routinely practiced. Though the law allowed for tit-for-tat retribution, it likely didn't play out like that all that often. By Jesus' day, it was commonly believed that financial restitution was sufficient. If you break my arm, you owe me some sum of money that was equivalent to my broken arm—financial losses plus pain and suffering, or something similar.

The Old Testament principle of *lex talionis*, much like the Old Testament laws about divorce, were given because of the hardness of the human heart. The law gave regulations about how divorce was supposed to take place because the reality of life in a broken world is that divorce happens. Likewise, in a broken world, people want to get even with each other. So the law limited this retribution to what was reasonable.

But when Jesus comes, he offers a better way—deeper goodness. The reality of the presence of the kingdom among us means that hard hearts are being transformed and tit-for-tat retaliation is being transcended by something far more beautiful.

A beautiful alternative?

Matthew 5:39-41:

“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.”

As has been his pattern now five times in a row, Jesus follows up his Old Testament citation with his own new and authoritative instruction. In contrast to the tit-for-tat retaliation, Jesus says, “Do not resist the one who is evil.”

When someone intends to do evil to you, do not resist them. Don't stop them. Let them perform their evil acts without protest.

This sounds a bit counter-intuitive, doesn't it? An eye for an eye might seem a bit brutal, but not resisting when someone intends to hurt you just seems foolish, doesn't it? What is Jesus really saying here?

Well, he fleshes out this somewhat obscure command with three very concrete examples.

First, he says, “if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.” What is described here is a right-handed person slapping someone on the right cheek with the back of their hand. A backhanded slap like this was an extreme form of insult in the first century. So Jesus is not just thinking of a case of physical assault but of stinging insult as well.

In response to this act of insult and injury, Jesus says we are to offer them the other cheek as well. Make yourself even more vulnerable. Don't strike back and don't even defend yourself from further insult or injury. Instead, give them an opportunity to strike you on the other cheek as well.

In the second example, Jesus says, “If anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well.” In order to understand what Jesus is saying, we need a bit of context on first-century fashion. I'm no expert, but I do know the distinction between a tunic and a cloak. A tunic was basically a long robe that was worn as an undergarment, and a cloak was a long robe that was worn as an outer garment. These were the only two garments that a person would wear.

The scenario that Jesus has in mind here is of a debtors court. In Jesus' day, if someone you owed someone money and they could not pay, they could take you to debtors court, where they would be permitted to take your tunic (your undergarment) as collateral for whatever you owed them.

When that happens, Jesus says, don't resist. In fact, give them your tunic if they just intend to take you to court. But do more than that—give them your cloak as well. If you remember our extensive discussion of first-century fashion, you may be concerned about the state that this would leave you in. Yes, it would seem that after you have given both your tunic and your cloak to your creditor, you are left standing naked. And yet this is what Jesus says we are to do. Interesting.

In the third case, Jesus says, “If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles.” This refers to a Roman law that allowed a soldier to force anyone to carry their gear for one mile. But Jesus says to go beyond.

Volunteer your time and energy to carry this load twice as far as any would expect.

In each of these three cases, Jesus is giving some pretty radical instructions. He is moving people from tit-for-tat retribution, not just to passive nonresistance, but to active and extreme vulnerability and generosity. Willingly make yourself vulnerable to additional insult and injury. Willingly make yourself vulnerable by standing naked before someone. Willingly give your clothing, your possessions, your time and your energy, beyond what is required or even requested of you.

On one level, this might seem like a beautiful alternative to tit-for-tat retribution, but is it really? What would it actually look like if we followed these commands?

If your manager refuses to promote you because of the color of your skin or your gender, do you sit by, pretending like it never happened, as person after person around you gets promoted?

If someone threatens to sue you, do you “settle” with them by giving them twice the amount they are asking, even when this will leave you and your family without a roof over your heads, clothes on your back, or food on the table?

When a landlord raises your rent by 10% to “catch up with the market” while your roof is leaking and the toilet won’t flush, do you say, “Let’s make it 20% and don’t worry about the roof and toilet”?

The power of grace

What is Jesus calling us to with these commands? On the surface, it seems like Jesus is calling us to be doormats—holy doormats, but doormats nonetheless—simply letting people walk all over us if they choose to.

But Jesus is not calling us to be doormats. *He is calling us to be people of radical grace.* He is calling us to be grace givers. Grace, simply put, is giving somebody something that they don’t deserve. Jesus is calling us to look for opportunities to give people what that they don’t deserve—another shot at you, the shirt off your back, your time and energy; the list goes on.

Kingdom dwellers are not those who think primarily about their own needs. They are not concerned with their own welfare. Rather, they are looking for every opportunity to extend grace to others.

But a grace giver is not the same thing as a doormat. A doormat is a passive victim, one who sits back while bad things happen and feels powerless to do anything about it.

A grace giver is never a victim. A grace giver does not sit back passively while bad things happen to them. Rather, a grace giver recognizes their own agency—their own power to choose. They *choose* to be vulnerable. They *choose* to be generous. They *choose* to lay down their life for their enemy. Choosing to respond with grace instead of being a victim is incredibly empowering.

In order to be a grace giver, you must look past the evil action that is being done to you and see on the other side of that action, not as an enemy, but a fellow image-bearer of God—a human being who themselves has become a victim of their sinful nature. Then the grace giver chooses not to respond out of their own sinful desires but with a grace that only comes from God.

Think about what would happen if we actually responded to threats, insults, and violence with grace instead of retribution.

On May 17, 2019, a school student walked into his high school with a loaded shotgun. Though he didn’t start shooting, panic broke out. In the midst of the panic, football coach and security guard Keonon Lowe saw what was happening and made a split-second decision. Instead of running and instead of fighting, he quickly and calmly moved toward this student. He grabbed the gun and wrestled it from the student’s grip, and then he hugged him. He wouldn’t let him go, and the student began to weep.

When asked why he did what he did, coach Lowe replied:

“I felt compassion for the kid, to be honest... I had a real-life conversation. Obviously, he broke down and I just wanted to let him know that I was there for him. I told him I was there to save him—I was there for a reason and that this is a life worth living.”¹

The police discovered later that the shotgun only had one round in it. This student had not come to campus to hurt anyone else, but to take his own life. But because of the radical grace of this coach, no one was hurt at all.

Coach Lowe didn’t just look at this student as a gunman that needed to be stopped at whatever cost. Rather, he saw a fellow human being who needed to be

loved. When we see our enemies as fellow image-bearers of God, deeply broken by their sin, the door to grace is opened. And grace is powerful.

Burning coals

The writer of Proverbs understood this as well.

Proverbs 25:21-22:

If your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat, and if he is thirsty, give him water to drink, for you will heap burning coals on his head, and the Lord will reward you.

When you respond to an insult, injury, and violence with grace, you disarm the person coming after you. You cause them to stop in their tracks. Your grace highlights their sin, and if may even move them to repentance.

Think about what would happen if, say, a coworker sabotaged a deal that you were about to close so that they could swoop in, save the day, and walk away with the credit. Imagine if you responded by congratulating them on a job well done and sending them on vacation to Hawaii so that they could celebrate, and not sarcastically, but because you were genuinely happy for them. What would they do?

They would be shocked. Likely, they would feel terrible for what they had just done. They would be confronted with radical grace that would give them pause, and it might even open the door for them to receive the grace of God. Wouldn't the whole thing be worth it if they did?

Grace has incredible power. It has the power to disarm, to convict, and even to lead people to repentance. Grace is not about being a doormat. It is about living in the power of the kingdom of God.

Healthy tree, healthy fruit

When we hear Jesus talk about turning the other cheek and going the extra mile, it can become easy to feel overwhelmed by the degree to which Jesus expects us to show grace. How could anyone live up to these words of Jesus? It sounds as if Jesus takes what was a difficult requirement in the Old Testament and raises the bar to a level that is virtually unattainable.

But I don't think that Jesus is raising the bar. The kingdom of heaven among us does not bring a new set of

laws. The kingdom of heaven among us is an invitation to a new kind of life. It is the promise of the indwelling Spirit of God, making the life of Christ a reality in our lives, changing us to be more and more like Jesus every day.

Jesus is not giving us a new set of laws. He is giving us illustrations of the kind of things that kingdom dwellers naturally do.

With this in mind, Dallas Willard says:

"In every concrete situation we have to ask ourselves, not "Did I do the specific things in Jesus' illustrations?" but "Am I being the kind of person Jesus' illustrations are illustrations of?"²

If Jesus were giving us new laws, then the proper question would be, "Am I doing the specific things that Jesus is commanding." But if these are illustrations of the life of a kingdom dweller, then the question changes. Instead of focusing on our behaviors, we focus on our hearts. Am I becoming the kind of person that Jesus is calling me to be?

How do we know if we are becoming this kind of person? As Jesus says later in the Sermon on the Mount, "A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit... Thus you will recognize them by their fruits" (Matthew 7:18, 20).

Are you the kind of person Jesus' illustrations are illustrations of? Do you have examples from your own life where you have responded to insult, injury, and violence with grace? Do you have examples where you have chosen to be vulnerable? Do you have examples where you had given more than was required or expected, even when someone was taking advantage of you? This is the kind of fruit that grows from trees that are rooted in Christ.

Being gracious like God

After Jesus gives these three concrete illustrations of the way that kingdom dwellers might choose to be grace givers, he gives two more much more general, though equally jarring, instructions.

Matthew 5:42:

"Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you."

It is tempting to hear these words as laws, but again Jesus is not giving us new laws. Rather, he is giving us illustrations of kingdom actions.

How, then, do we know when actually to give to someone who begs? We all have a sense that it is not always right to give something to someone who asks you, right? We don't want to enable. We don't want to be taken advantage of. And we want to be able to keep a roof over our heads and food on our tables. How, then, do we know when to give to someone who asks?

We can start by taking our lead from God himself. He is well acquainted with people asking him for things. And he welcomes our requests!

Matthew 7:7-11:

“Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. 8 For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. 9 Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? 10 Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? 11 If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!”

There are so many parallels between this passage and ours. The word used here for “ask” is the same as the word for “beg” in chapter 5. In chapter 5, Jesus says, “Give to the one who asks.” Here in chapter 7, he says, “Ask, and it will be given to you.”

Does that mean that God will give us whatever we ask for? Certainly not! God is a good Father who gives good gifts to his children. Anyone knows that a Father who gives his children whatever they ask for is irresponsible because kids don't know what is really good for them. In the same way, God doesn't give us everything we ask for, because what we ask for is not always good for us! Rather, he gives us what he knows is best.

When we encounter a person who asks something of us, we are to act like our heavenly Father—not giving everyone everything that they ask for but, in prayerful conversation with our heavenly Father, who does know

what they truly need, we assess the situation and give them, to the best of our ability, what is really best for them.

Sometimes this will look like giving them exactly what they ask for. Sometimes this will look like giving them nothing at all. Other times, this will look like giving them far more than they ever imagined. Sometimes grace is costly.

Costly grace

No one knows how costly grace can be better than Jesus himself. Jesus suffered more injustice and violence than anyone else ever could, and yet he responded with incredible grace.

He was slapped and mocked, and he turned the other cheek. He carried his own cross until he could walk no further. His clothes were taken, and he was hung naked on the cross, left to die, yet he did not protest. At every turn, Jesus responded with grace, and it cost him his life.

But his death was not for nothing. His death accomplished everything! His death opened the floodgates of God's grace to us. Even though it was our sin that put him on the cross, still he loves us. When we put our trust in him, he no longer holds our sin against us. Instead, he bore the punishment for that sin in his body on the cross. He washed us with his blood so that we stand before God clean. Righteous. Not on account of our own works or merit, but solely because of the grace of Jesus Christ.

Grace is indeed powerful.

Today, Jesus is inviting us into his kingdom of grace-giving. He invites us first to receive his grace. Then he invites us to root ourselves in him and become radical givers of grace.

Endnotes

- 1 Madeleine Carlisle, “Recently Released Video Shows Football Coach Wrestling Gun Away From Student, Then Hugging Him,” Time, October 20, 2019, video, 0:38, <https://time.com/5705756/video-coach-shooter-hug-portland/>, accessed 10/30/19.
- 2 Dallas Willard, The Divine Conspiracy (New York, NY:HarperOne, 2009), Kindle Edition, 201.