

BUILD YOUR HOUSE ON THAT!

Sermon-Based Study Guide
Good Shepherd Presbyterian Church

Matthew 5.38-48
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I. Connecting With One Another

Have you ever heard the phrase “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth”? How do you understand this phrase?

How about “turn the other cheek” or “go the extra mile”? Spend some time reflecting personally – then share with your group – how you’ve heard these phrases used by friends or family, in popular culture and in the church.

Before continuing in this study, spend some time in prayer:

- a. For Pastor Jim and Connie, who are returning from vacation this week: Thank God for Jim’s leadership, and pray that he would return refreshed and rejuvenated to continue his ministry with us.
- b. For the upcoming week of Vacation Bible School: That the Holy Spirit would draw many children from our community to learn about Jesus, as well as empower the staff and members of our church family who are serving these children.
- c. For this weekend’s gatherings: That we dive deeply into God’s Word, heeding Jesus’ instructions on how to be his disciple, that we might be salt and light to those around us, to the glory of God.

II. Introduction to this Study

This study is the third of three in which we see Jesus specifically engaging the law in what are commonly called the “antitheses.” Remember that this title can foster a misunderstanding of Jesus’ perspective, as he is not opposing the teaching to the law, but rather how it was being interpreted in the first century. As such, Jesus was trying to get the law back to its original intent. In the past two weeks we have studied anger, lust, marriage and making promises, turning our attention this week to retributive violence, giving and how we are to treat our enemies. Truly, this is the stuff of life! And Jesus invites us to follow him in every area.

In Matthew 5.38-48, Jesus centers on two phrases from the Hebrew Scriptures. The first, “Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth,” as we will see in studying those passages, was meant – through court proceedings – to *limit* retributive violence. In Jesus’ day, however, it had been taken from its original context and used to encourage personal revenge. Second, Jesus engages “Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.” Though the Hebrew Scriptures command us to love our neighbor, nowhere do they assert the second half, “hate your enemy.” This had been added on to justify sinful behavior. Jesus, instead, invites us into a new way.

III. Study the Text

- a. “Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth” is referred to as the law of *lex talionis* (meaning, literally, law of retaliation). It is found in Exodus 21:22-25, Leviticus 24:17-22 and Deuteronomy 19:15-21. Spend some time reading those passages and reflecting on them with your small group. The first describes a sentence for accidental injury, the second reveals how the community should seek justice in the case of blasphemy and the third applies punishment to someone who lied during a trial.

In their original context, do you think these were fair? What similarities does *lex talionis* have with our judicial system today?

- b. Jesus invites us to live our personal lives based not on justice, but instead love. In doing so, he gives four examples of Christian non-retaliation. Jesus’ phrase “turn the other cheek” is widely used in our culture, though the specifics of his statement may be lost on us. For instance, this phrase can sometimes be used to encourage someone to be a “doormat,” allowing other people to continue treating them poorly. This was not Jesus’ intention.

In Jesus' culture, to be slapped on the right cheek meant the other party was using either the left hand (which was used for unclean things) or the back of the right hand (which revealed that the slapper believed the slappee was inferior). Try acting this out – albeit without slapping! – in your small group. For a disciple to turn the other cheek, then, was to demand being treated as an equal, though in an expressly nonviolent manner.

How does this change your understanding of the phrase “turn the other cheek” – as Jesus intended it?

- c. The second example, “if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic...” envisions a court scene in which someone is being sued for the shirt on their back, because they are unable to repay a debt. It was illegal to sue someone for their coat, or if held as a sort of collateral, to be kept overnight, since the other person would have nothing with which to keep warm (see Deuteronomy 24.12-13).

Jesus' instruction, then, is to take off both garments and stand before the court, without clothes! As one commentator notes, “In Jesus' culture, that would be enormously embarrassing. It would reveal *the plaintiff's* greed in all *its* nakedness.” (emphasis mine)

How does this context change your understanding of someone “taking the shirt off your back”?

- d. The third example, “If someone forces you to go one mile...” recalls the law that in occupied, first century Israel, a Roman soldier could demand a Jew to carry his pack one mile (literally: one thousand paces). While probably all of God's people resented this, some Jews even advocated violence in response. Jesus offers a different alternative: carry the pack a second mile. In this third example, then, there is again an element of surprise, as well as the possibility for humble service, for an enemy, no less!

How does this context change your understanding of “going the extra mile”? Try acting this out in your small group with one person as a Roman soldier and another as a Jewish disciple of Jesus. What gets talked about when a disciple does this sort of thing? Especially in that second mile? Who's the more powerful one in this scene?

- e. The fourth example is much simpler. “Give... and do not turn away...” is Jesus' invitation – again – not to be people focused on justice, but rather love and generosity, believing that there is plenty in God's kingdom. How have you benefitted from others generosity? How have you sought to give to others?
- f. Verses 43-48 contain – in my opinion – among the most radical, countercultural things Jesus ever said. Those in Jesus' day had wrongly assumed that since the law required them to love their neighbors, and since their neighbors at the time of the law's writing were all Israelites, then, they could justifiably hate their enemies.

Our Lord, however, invites us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. He reminds us that God sends sunshine and rain (both considered *good* things in the Ancient Near East) to all people. And we, then, should be like God!

Have you ever known someone who personally lived this out? How about someone from history? How do you think they did it? Or was it something *they did* at all?

IV. Reflect and Respond

- a. Have you ever applied *lex talionis* in your personal life? Did you keep your retaliation equal – or take it up a notch? How did it all work out? Would an apology be in order?
- b. What would Jesus' “turning the other cheek” look like in today's culture?

How about “If someone wants to sue you...”?

How about people who've gone “the second mile”?

Think of some examples to share with your small group. Discuss the end result of these people's actions. How has the world changed because of them?

- c. Who or what cause have you felt called to give to? Why? Have you ever regretted giving to someone in need? Why or why not?
- d. Who are your enemies? Be honest. Who else? Okay. Who else?

Have you ever prayed for them? If not, try it, alone or in your small group gathering. Be honest with God, too. Tell Him why you consider them enemies. Ask him to give you love that you can extend to them.