Matthew
Holding Grudges, Getting Even (Part 2)
Matthew 5:38-42
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Last week, I began a series entitled "Holding Grudges, Getting Even." I think we have all heard of the feud between the Hatfields and the McCoys–a feud that spanned twelve years and took twelve lives. But you may not know this, the longest, deadliest feud in American history actually occurred right here in Texas. The Baker-White feud started in the 1820s and ran, off and on, until 1932. It was so bad that it was, at times and has still often been, referred to as the "Clay County War." That feud all started in response to an insult. Not an insult of one of the members of the families, but an insult to one of their dogs–true story! While that's humorous at one level, tragically, this feud lasted over one-hundred years and cost one-hundred-fifty human lives. It's a tragic example of just how destructive it can become when we hold grudges and seek revenge.

Sadly, those sins are not pertaining to unbelievers only. They, tragically, are also temptations for all of us who are in Christ. Every year, Christian families feud, churches split, Christian spouses become enemy combatants. It begins by nursing a personal hurt until it grows into resentment and bitterness, and eventually, it explodes into the desire to get even. Last week, we began to study the paragraph in the Sermon on the Mount where our Lord addresses this crucial issue where He tells us that I, that you, must never seek personal retaliation, personal revenge. Let's read it again together. Matthew 5, verses 38 to 42, these are the words of our Lord.

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> "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 an evil person; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also. If anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, let him have your coat also. Whoever forces you to go one mile, go with him two. Give to him who asks of you, and do not turn away from him who wants to borrow from you."

As we noted last week, the essential message of this paragraph is that in His spiritual kingdom, Jesus forbids His disciples from holding grudges and or seeking revenge. Now, in this paragraph, He really gives us two separate instructions. Last week, we considered the first instruction, which is this, we must "Reject the Popular Misunderstanding of 'an Eye for an Eye.'" That's the message of verse 38. You can see that in verse 38, there's a quotation from the Old Testament, so we started by considering "What the Old Testament Really Taught (by that expression) 'an Eye for an Eye, and a Tooth for a Tooth.'" We went back and we looked at the passages where it occurred, and we learned that that Old Testament law is called the *lex talionis*. And the point of "an eye for an eye" is that the punishment must fit the crime. It was actually a protection against sentences that were either too lenient on the one hand or too harsh on the other. The *lex talionis* was intended to ensure legal justice and to protect against people taking the law into their own hands and seeking personal revenge. You see, God never intended the *lex talionis*, the command of "an eye for an eye," to be carried out by individuals. Instead, it was to be the sentencing standard that judges were to use in the legal system that God established. That's what the Old Testament really taught.

Then we considered "What the Scribes and Pharisees Wrongly Taught," because contrary to what the Old Testament taught, they made *lex talionis* about personal retaliation. Ironically, the very law that God intended to protect against abuses in the legal system, they twisted into

permission, even authorization, to hold grudges and to seek personal revenge. That's what those listening to Jesus preach this sermon that day had been taught about “an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.” And it's that that He is addressing in the rest of this paragraph.

Today, then, we come to the second instruction in this paragraph. We must “Follow Jesus' Revolutionary Teaching about Personal Revenge.” Not only are we called to reject the popular misunderstanding of that Old Testament law, but on the other hand, we are to follow what Jesus teaches about revenge, which is radical, revolutionary. And that's the message of verses 39 to 42.

Now, in verse 39, Jesus first lays out “The General Principle.” He's going to give some specific examples, but He starts with the general principle. Notice the beginning of verse 39, “But I say to you...” We've already seen that the other times He sets out, He gives what the scribes and Pharisees taught, and then He says, “But on the other hand, I am saying this to you; I am telling you what God really intended; I'm explaining the Old Testament as it should have been understood; I'm correcting the false teaching you've received from the scribes and Pharisees.” He says, “But I say to you, do not resist an evil person.” Jesus says, “Listen, the rabbis have taught you that it is okay to seek personal revenge, but I am telling you it's not okay (Paraphrase); “Do not resist an evil person.”

Now, the Greek word for ‘resist’ means ‘to set oneself against, to oppose, to hold your ground, to withstand.’ It has the idea of becoming hostile toward a person who has showed hostility toward you. You become a sort of warrior against them. You become hostile like a soldier on the other side of the battle. In fact, in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament, this word is used in two primary ways. Most often, it's used of an armed military

opposition. When you take up a weapon and you are literally going to fight with someone else. My favorite example is Numbers 22:23, you remember Balaam's donkey? “The donkey saw the angel of the LORD standing in the way.” This Greek word is used in the Septuagint. He has his sword, he's standing there, he has taken up a weapon against–that's the idea of this word. ~~The other four times that this is used in the Old Testament or~~ Four ~~I should say~~ of the times it's used in the Old Testament, it's used of an opponent in court, which makes sense with one of the illustrations Jesus is going to use. So, backing up then, the beginning of verse 39, when Jesus says, “Don't resist an evil person,” Jesus means we are not to become hostile toward the evil person who wrongs us; we are not to become embattled against them. We're not to take up, as it were, our weapons, either our tongue or something else, to fight them.

Now, don't misunderstand, Jesus is not denying here that what was done to us may in fact have been evil, nor is He denying that the person who did it may very well have been evil. He's not asking us to condone either their character or their behavior. So, what does Jesus mean? Well, again, you have to take His statement in its context. In verse 38, He corrects the scribes and Pharisees' misunderstanding of “an eye for an eye” by saying, “No, it's not okay to seek personal revenge,” (Paraphrase). And then in verses 39 to 42, He gives several specific examples of how not to resist a person who does evil as opposed to seeking revenge. So, the context then of Jesus' statement in the first half of verse 39 is, “When you've been wronged, when you've been sinned against, when that happens, and it will happen; if you're a Christian, you are not to become hostile toward that person. You're not to set yourself in hostile opposition to the person who has sinned against you. At a personal level, you are not to go to war with them. You're not to hold a grudge. You're not to seek personal revenge.

Now, I have used two expressions, last week and so far this week, that I want to define for you, just so we're clear. First of all, to "***Hold a grudge***–is to maintain ongoing resentment, anger, bitterness, or hatred because of a past insult or injury either to you or to someone whose case you've taken up." Let me read that again. To "***Hold a grudge***–is to maintain ongoing resentment, anger, bitterness, or hatred because of a past insult or injury to you or to someone you care about." Let's define revenge. To "***Seek revenge***–is either to desire or to inflict harm on someone because of a past insult or injury to you or to someone else." Again, let me repeat that so we're clear. To "***Seek revenge***–is either to desire harm in your heart for someone else or to actually act on that and to inflict harm on someone because of a past insult or injury to you or to someone else." That's what we're talking about.

And beloved, Scripture does not allow you or me to hold grudges or to seek revenge. It simply doesn't allow it. It's so many places in the Scripture. Let me give you some representative examples. Leviticus 19:18, "You shall not take vengeance." There's acting out on it; there's actually producing harm. "Nor bear any grudge (That's what happens in the heart.) against the sons of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD (YAHWEH)." If He's your God, He says, "Listen, I'm YAHWEH, I'm your God; this is what I'm telling you. Don't seek revenge and don't hold a grudge." Proverbs 20, verse 22, "Do not say, 'I will repay evil;' wait for the LORD (YAHWEH), and He will save you." Proverbs 24:29, "Do not say, 'Thus I shall do to him as he has done to me;' I will render to the man according to his work." No, that's not yours to do. Remember we saw even in Romans 2:6, the Lord says that, "WHO (I) WILL RENDER TO EACH PERSON ACCORDING TO HIS DEEDS (work)." That's not your job; that's not my job. ~~Ephesians 4:31~~ How do we most often respond when we are sinned against, when we are wronged? Well, listen to this, Ephesians 4:31, "Let all bitterness and wrath and anger (That's anger of blowing

up and anger in clamming up.) and clamor (That's yelling out of anger.) and slander (That's name calling, cursing, abusing people with your words. Let all of this, Paul says.) be put away from you, along with all malice (Malice is a desire to hurt somebody; they hurt me, I want to hurt them.).” Paul says, “Let it all be put away from you.” 1 Thessalonians 5:15, “See that no one repays another with evil for evil, but always seek after that which is good for one another and for all people (For both believers and unbelievers).” This is how you are to respond. Listen, when people sin against you, and they will, when they treat you badly, to hold a grudge in your heart or to seek revenge is sin. It's a sin against them, and it's a sin against the God who says, “Don't do this.” Now, that's the general principle.

But to help us see what this principle looks like, Jesus goes on in this paragraph to illustrate what He's demanding of us in several real-life situations when someone sins against us. So, He follows then the general principle in the first half of verse 39 with “Four Specific Examples,” beginning in the middle of verse 39, and running down through verse 42. Now, Jesus takes these four examples from everyday first-century life, alright? There's the first example, it is a formal Jewish insult. The second example has to do with a lawsuit intended to take the long robe that a man wore next to his body under his outer garment. His third example has to do with a Roman soldier conscripting a Jewish male to carry his load. And the final example is a borrower trying to take advantage of the generous lending requirements that are commanded in the Old Testament.

Now, you can look at those examples, and you can be tempted to say, “Well, good, this passage doesn't apply to me.” Not so fast! Although the examples are from the first century, the categories of personal offenses Jesus uses here are absolutely timeless. They translate perfectly into the 21st century, into your life and my life. Let me give you the categories. The four

categories of personal offenses that we're going to see in these examples are these. First of all, when there is "An intentional attack on our dignity." That's the second half of verse 39. Secondly, when there is "An intentional attack on our property," that's verse 40. When there is "A governmental attack on our liberty," that's verse 41. And then when there is "An intentional attack on our generosity," that's verse 42. And trust me, by the time we're done, you will see that every one of these applies profoundly to your life as well as to mine.

Now, in the time remaining today, before we celebrate the Lord's Table together, I want us to look at just Jesus' first specific example. What does it mean "not to resist an evil person" when that evil person initiates an intentional attack on our dignity? Or we could say our self-respect, our honor, when they're undermining the respect that we believe we deserve. What do we do? Well, look at the example Jesus uses in verse 39. After He gives the general principle, "I say to you, do not resist an evil person; (Here's the first example.) but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also."

Now, the whole idea of turning the other cheek has been so terribly abused and misinterpreted that we have to start by sort of clearing away the rubble of a lot of bad thinking. So, let's begin by making sure we know "What This Does Not Teach." First of all, it does not teach "Complete nonresistance or nonviolence." In other words, it doesn't teach the idea that "*physical violence is always wrong in every circumstance*." Some well-meaning Christians, have taken this terribly far. Martin Luther describes a man who let lice nibble at him and refused to kill any of them on account of this text because he thought he had to suffer; he couldn't resist evil. That's an extreme example, but there are Christians who believe that our Lord's words here preclude all use of force, including in war and even in self-defense. This, by the way, is the traditional view of the Quakers and the Mennonites. Some even go so far as to say that it is wrong for government to

use force against criminals, to arrest them, or certainly to incarcerate them, even to put them to death. Leo Tolstoy, the Russian novelist, he looked at this passage and concluded that no Christian could serve in the army, the police, or even in a court of law. Sadly, his writings heavily influenced another major figure in the 20th century, a name you're familiar with, Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhi, influenced wrongly in a wrong interpretation of this passage, said this, "an eye for an eye" makes the whole world blind. And in light of his misinterpretation, in 1940, now you can remember that was during the time of the Second World War in 1940, Gandhi said this to the British people"

> I would like you to lay down the arms you have as being useless for saving you or humanity. You will invite Herr Hitler and Senior Mussolini to take what they want of the countries you call your possessions. If these gentlemen choose to occupy your homes, you will vacate them. If they do not give you free passage out, you will allow yourselves, man, woman, and child to be slaughtered.

Friends, that is not what Jesus is teaching here, absolutely not!

It also doesn't teach "Passivism–*the idea that a Christian must never engage in killing of any kind, especially in war.*" That was the view of this passage of the Anabaptists during the time of the Reformation, and it's still a view of some Christians today. I think that's a growing thought among particularly those who are younger.

So how do we know that this passage and what Jesus is saying here is not teaching "Non-resistance" or Passivism?" How do we know that? The reason we know that is it starts with our doctrine of Scripture. We know that all Scripture is breathed out by God, the Holy Spirit. In other words, while there are many human authors of Scripture, there's only one divine author,

and that author has one mind. The Spirit is never confused. He never contradicts Himself. When a passage appears to contradict another, either we have misunderstood one or both of them in their context, or we have failed to understand how that passage fits and connects with the context of the rest of Scripture. It's our problem, not the Scripture's problem. We can rule out both non-resistance and passivism as what Jesus means here because both of them contradict other Scriptures!

Let me just make this clear to you. I'm going to take a moment and make this clear, okay? Let's step away for a moment and let me make the point that Scripture explicitly teaches that "Christians can be soldiers and can engage in war." You see that, obviously, in the Old Testament. God often commanded His people to do so. But even in the New Testament, in Luke, chapter 3, verse 14, you remember it says this, "*Some* soldiers were questioning him (John the Baptist)." You remember John was preaching a baptism of repentance. He was saying, "The Messiah is coming; you need to prepare for Him, and here's how you need to prepare, and he was explaining the fruit of repentance in the lives of those who said they were interested in embracing the Messiah." Well, these soldiers questioned John the Baptist saying, "What *about* us, what shall we do?" Now listen to what John says and doesn't say to these soldiers. He said to them, "Do not take money from anyone by force or accuse *anyone* falsely, and be content with your wages." Do you hear what he doesn't say? He doesn't say, "Listen, if you're really going to prepare for the Messiah, if you're going to be a follower of Jesus who is coming, you've got to get out of the military; you can't be in the military; that's violent." No, he says "Don't abuse your position; don't abuse the authority you've been granted; don't take advantage of people because of the authority you have," (Paraphrase).

Historically, most Christians have agreed with Augustine's concept of a “Just war,” that Christians can be soldiers and fight in a “Just war.” You say, “What is a just war?” Well, that's a different message for a different time, but I'll give you the summary. The “Just war” is the idea that a nation can defend itself and its people or other innocents from sinful aggression, just like an individual can defend himself or herself. That's the idea behind a “Just war.” So Christians can be soldiers. They can engage in war.

Secondly, Scripture also explicitly teaches that “Christians can engage in self-defense.” Now, the obvious way to do that, and a way that's often an option for us, is “By fleeing.” In other words, there's nothing wrong, if you're at risk physically, to flee. That keeps you from having to take another life. You see this in 1 Samuel 19:10. Saul tried to pin David to the wall with a spear, but David fled and escaped that night. Did David flee because he was frightened? Did he flee because he wasn't a soldier who could handle himself? No, of course not; he fled to protect his life! In Luke 4:29, Jesus miraculously escaped from the crowd in Nazareth when they tried to throw Him over a cliff. In 2 Corinthians 11, verse 32, to escape with his life, Paul was let down in a basket from a window in the wall of the city of Damascus. So there's nothing wrong with practicing self-defense by fleeing if you're able to do that. That may be the best response.

But it's also okay, if necessary, in self-defense of yourself or another innocent, “By using a weapon,” and to actually take a life if necessary. Exodus 22, verses 2 and 3, talk about what you're allowed to do if it's at night, and someone breaks in your home, and you truly feel threatened, that your life or the life of those you love could be at risk, then you can actually do whatever's required up to taking their life in order to defend your own and those you love. Now, if it's daytime, and you can discern that you're not immediately at risk, then you don't do that. In other words, this isn't like, “Hey, they come in my home day or night, I'm shooting them!” No,

that may be Texas, but that's not Christian. Okay? It is, “If you're required to, if you have to, to preserve your life or the lives of others, you do what is required." Jesus Himself defended the right to self-defense with a weapon. Turn over to Luke; Luke, chapter 22, verse 36. In verse 35, He says, you know, “When I sent you out the first time, I gave you certain requirements,” (Paraphrase), “But now (Verse 36), “whoever has a money belt is to take it along, likewise also a bag, and whoever has no sword is to sell his coat and buy one.” Some see this as metaphorical. Well, the bag isn't metaphorical; the money bag isn't metaphorical; the sandals aren't metaphorical. So no, this is a real sword. “For I tell you that which is written must be fulfilled in Me.” Listen, “I'm going to be arrested. I'm going to be attacked. You're going to be at risk. So get a sword” (Paraphrase). Verse 38, “They said, ‘Lord, look, here are two swords.’ And He said to them, ‘(Okay) It is (good) enough (That's enough.).’” So Jesus here authorizes, I believe, and many commentators believe, He authorizes the use of force to defend oneself.

A third thing that Scripture explicitly teaches, contrary to these views, is that “Christians must respect and submit to the use of force by government.” Romans 13:1-4 says, “God has initiated human government, and He has given government the authority to use the sword,” (Paraphrase). Now, you don't use a sword to slap someone's hand; you use a sword to kill, to execute. In other words, God has given government authority to use force to arrest and to punish criminals, including the death penalty, if necessary.

So back to our text then. The command to turn the other cheek is not a command to embrace non-resistance or pacifism. In fact, this passage has nothing to do with those things. This passage, remember the context, is about a misunderstanding of “an eye for an eye” and seeking personal revenge. That's what it's about; that's what Jesus is addressing.

So now, let's consider “What This Does Teach.” Look again at Matthew, chapter 5, verse 39, “But whoever slaps you on your right cheek.” Now, the Greek word ‘slaps’ means ‘to strike with an open hand.’ It can mean to slap with the palm of your hand, or it can mean to slap with the back of your hand. We know here it has to be the back of your hand. You say, “How do you know that?” Well, look, Jesus says this person strikes you on your “right cheek.” Ninety percent plus of the people in the world are right-handed. That means if they're striking you on your right cheek, they're striking you with the back of their right hand. Now, why is that important? Because in the Jewish culture of the first century, to slap someone with the back of your hand was an extreme personal insult. In fact, it was such a serious insult that the Jewish *Mishnah* said you could take a person who backhanded you to court, and if they were found guilty, they would owe damages of more than a year's wages–twice what they would owe you if they slapped you with the palm of their hand. So to be backhanded on your right cheek in that culture was to be grossly and intentionally insulted. It meant someone intentionally assaulted your dignity and treated you with extreme disrespect.

Now, obviously, that can happen in our culture, but slapping someone with the back of your hand is not the main way physically we express insults to others. In our culture, there are similar physical insults. They would be things like spitting on someone, giving them the middle finger, throwing food or drink on them, getting in their face with humiliation and intimidation as the purpose, turning their back and leaving while you're talking, or if they're in their car, tailgating you or shooting around you and putting on their brakes and stopping in front of you, physically trying to insult you. Those are the 21st century parallels to slapping with the back of the hand.

There are also verbal insults in our culture that are demeaning. There are racial or ethnic slurs. There are religious slurs. There are insults directed at your family, profanity, cursing, used to

demean you, mocking a person in their appearance or their disabilities or even their personal tragedies. Those are all the kinds of insults that surround us, and, frankly, that all of us in this room have experienced. ~~Some of us have experienced those things. I'm sorry~~. Some of us have experienced all of those things, and all of us have experienced some of those things.

So, how does Jesus say you and I are to respond when we are insulted like that? Verse 39, "Whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also." Again, Jesus doesn't mean that you shouldn't defend yourself or others from physical harm or death. That's not what this is about. This "*How to respond when you're insulted*," when your personal dignity is attacked. How should you respond? Jesus says, "Don't slap him back, turn the other cheek." In other words, "Don't return insult for insult; don't pay back a tax on your dignity or honor by returning equal or escalating insults to the one who insulted you. Don't defend your honor by responding in kind." That's what Jesus is saying. Jesus' point in this first example is crystal clear, "If somebody insults you grossly with either in a physical way or verbally, don't harbor a grudge against them, and don't determine that you're going to get even." Hendrickson says, "To turn the other cheek means to show an attitude, word and deed, that one is filled with the Spirit, not of rancor but of love." You know what Jesus is saying here? He's saying when someone insults you, we should be willing to be insulted again as opposed to returning that insult. That's what He's saying.

John Stott writes, in each of the four situations here, "Jesus said our Christian duty is to so completely forbear or swear off revenge that we even allow the evil person to double the injury. Let them insult you again as opposed to responding in kind." That's what Jesus is saying. That's what Paul says. Turn over to Romans, chapter 12; Romans 12, verse 14,

> Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. (They curse you, don't curse them. They mistreat you, don't strike out. Verse 17.) Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. (Verse 19) Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath *of God*, for it is written, "VENGEANCE IS MINE, I WILL REPAY," says the Lord. "BUT IF YOUR ENEMY IS HUNGRY, FEED HIM, AND IF HE'S THIRSTY, GIVE HIM A DRINK; FOR IN SO DOING YOU WILL HEAP BURNING COALS ON HIS HEAD." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

That's how we're to respond. And let's be honest, that's a very tall order because that is not what we are tempted to do when we are grossly insulted. But when we are insulted by anyone, we must refuse to harbor a grudge, we must refuse to respond in kind, not in our thoughts by holding on to resentment, anger, bitterness, or hatred, not in our words with verbal insults, not in our actions by getting even. We have to give up the desire to defend our dignity and reputation, to avenge ourselves when others undermine the respect that we think we deserve. Instead, we must love them. Leviticus 19:18, "You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge...but you shall love your neighbor as yourself; I am the LORD (YAHWEH). If He is your God, He says, "This is how you have to respond."

Now you say, "Tom, how can that even be done?' And the answer is, "By following our Lord's example." Turn over to 1 Peter; 1 Peter, chapter 2, verse 21, "For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps, WHO COMMITTED NO SIN, NOR WAS ANY DECEIT FOUND IN HIS MOUTH; and (Verse 23, watch this.) while being reviled, He did not revile in return." Think about what they said to Jesus on the cross. What did he do? He said, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." So (Back to 1 Peter 2:23.),

> He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting *Himself* to Him who judges righteously; and He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed.

Jesus is the example. If you want to know how to respond when people insult you, look at how He responded on the cross and respond like that. That's what we are called to do. That's what He calls us to do. And it is the fact that He endured all of that for us that we celebrate in the Lord's Table. Take a moment and prepare your heart as the men come.

Our Father, thank You for our Lord's teaching this morning. Lord, we confess to You that this is really hard for us. When people strike out at us, when they insult us physically or with words, Lord, we want, we are tempted in our hearts to hold grudges and even to get even, to respond in kind. Father, help us to be like our Lord. And when we are reviled, not to revile in response. Father, I pray that You would also forgive us not only for that sin, but for the many other sins in our lives as we come to take of the Lord's Table. We come confessing our sins freely to You. Lord, confessing sins of thought, attitude, sinful words that we have spoken, actions that we know are contrary to Your will and purpose. Father, bring those to our minds right now, individually and specifically, that we need to confess to You and help us to open the dark corners of our hearts to You, seeking Your forgiveness and resolving to walk in obedience. Father, prepare us who know and love You to take of the Lord's Table by cleansing us of our sin.

Lord, I pray for those here this morning who are not in Christ. This isn't for them, but I pray, Father, that as they watch, they would see the Gospel, that their only hope of being right with

You is the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Lord, open their eyes to repent and believe in Him, even as they witness our worship. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.