

Sermon on the Mount

“An Eye for an Eye”

Matthew 5:38–42

This section is a turning point in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus moves from correcting misunderstood righteousness to dismantling the human instinct for retaliation.

1. The Text

“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I tell you not to 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 away your tunic, let him have your cloak also. And whoever compels you to go one mile, go with him two. Give to him who asks you, and from him who wants to borrow from you do not turn away.”

— Matthew 5:38–42

2. What “Eye for an Eye” Actually Meant

Jesus is not rebuking God’s Law — He is rebuking its misuse.

Original Law (Lex Talionis)

Exodus 21:23–25 (KJV)

And if any mischief follow, then thou shalt give life for life,
Eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot,
Burning for burning, wound for wound, stripe for stripe.

Leviticus 24:19–20 (KJV)

And if a man cause a blemish in his neighbour; as he hath done, so shall it be done to him;

Breach for breach, eye for eye, tooth for tooth: as he hath caused a blemish in a man, so shall it be done to him again.

Deuteronomy 19:21 (KJV)

And thine eye shall not pity; but life shall go for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot.

Purpose of the Law:

- To limit retaliation, not encourage revenge
- To ensure proportional justice

- To place judgment in the courts, not in personal hands

It was a ceiling, not a command.

Problem in Jesus' day:

People had turned judicial restraint into personal justification for revenge.

3. Jesus' Radical Reframe

“But I say to you...”

Jesus is not removing justice — He is removing personal vengeance.

This section is about:

- Power
- Dignity
- Freedom from retaliation

4. “Do Not Resist an Evil Person” — What It Means (and Doesn't)

The Greek word for resist (ἀντιστῆναι / antistēnai) means:

- To violently oppose
- To retaliate in kind
- To strike back in a mirrored way

Jesus is not saying:

- Endure abuse without boundaries
- Submit to violence
- Allow injustice to flourish

He is saying:

- Do not let evil define your response
- Do not become what wronged you
- Do not mirror the oppressor's spirit

the Key Clarification

This line cannot mean “never oppose evil,” because:

- Jesus opposes evil constantly
- He confronts abusers
- He rebukes hypocrisy
- He exposes lies
- He drives out exploiters
- He warns about wolves

So any reading that turns Jesus into someone who forbids opposition to evil contradicts His own life.

What Jesus Is Forbidding (Very Specifically)

Jesus is forbidding:

- revenge
- tit-for-tat escalation
- mirrored violence
- humiliation returned for humiliation
- force returned for force

He is not forbidding:

- truth
- confrontation
- withdrawal
- justice
- consequences
- refusal
- exposure of wrongdoing

This distinction is essential.

If “do not resist” means total passivity, why does Jesus immediately give active responses?

“Jesus does not forbid resisting evil — He forbids becoming evil in the act of resistance.”

Why This Matters So Much

Misreading this line is how:

- abuse gets spiritualized
- boundaries get demonized
- exploitation gets protected
- silence gets confused with holiness
- passivity gets mistaken for righteousness

And Jesus never taught any of that.

5. The Right Cheek — A Dignity Issue

A slap on the right cheek implies:

- A backhanded slap
- An insult, not an assault
- A public humiliation

Turning the other cheek:

- Refuses to escalate violence
- Forces the aggressor to confront your humanity
- Is nonviolent resistance, not weakness

This is strength under control.

Why the Right Cheek Matters

Jesus says:

“Whoever slaps you on your right cheek...”

This is not incidental detail.

In the ancient Mediterranean world:

- The right hand was used for public interaction
- The left hand was associated with unclean tasks
- Striking someone on the right cheek with the right hand requires a backhanded slap

This was not a fighting blow

It was a status insult

Cultural Meaning

A backhanded slap was used to:

- Humiliate an inferior
- Assert dominance
- Shame someone publicly

This was the slap of:

- Master to servant
- Roman to Jew
- Superior to inferior

It says: “You are beneath me.”

Turning the Other Cheek Is Not Passive Submission

When the victim turns the left cheek, something changes.

To strike the left cheek, the aggressor must either:

- Use an open-handed forehand, or
- Strike as an equal

Both were socially unacceptable in that context.
Why?

Because:

- A forehand strike implied mutual dignity
- You do not strike an inferior that way
- You do not strike an equal publicly without consequences

Turning the other cheek forces a decision:

- Will you recognize my humanity?
- Or will you expose your cruelty further?

This is nonviolent resistance, not surrender.

6. The Tunic and the Cloak — Exposing Injustice

- Tunic: inner garment
- Cloak: outer garment, protected by law (Exodus 22:26–27)

Giving both:

- Exposes the injustice of the system
- Shames the oppressor without striking them
- Says: “Look at what you are taking from me.”

Then (legal/economic meaning):

This is courtroom language—“sue you.” Clothing was a major asset for the poor. And in Israel’s law, a cloak used as a pledge had special protection: if taken, it had to be returned by sundown because it might be the person’s only covering at night.

So what Jesus is really doing:

He’s describing a situation where the system can strip a person—and He’s teaching a response that exposes the injustice and refuses to be driven by fear or vengeance.

“When your rights are threatened, Jesus shows a way to respond that unmasks greed without becoming greedy back.”

This Is a Courtroom Scene, Not a Street Scene

The verb “to sue” places this in legal proceedings, not random theft.

- The person is already using the system
- The system favors the one with power
- The poor person's last protections are being stripped away

Jesus chooses a scenario where:

- The law technically allows the suit
- But the outcome is morally obscene

This matters.

Why the Cloak Changes Everything

In Torah law, the cloak was untouchable overnight:

“If you ever take your neighbor's cloak as a pledge, you shall return it to him before the sun goes down...”(Exod. 22:26–27)

Why?

Because:

- It doubled as bedding
- Taking it threatened survival
- God explicitly defends the poor here

So when Jesus says “give your cloak also”, He is not saying:

“Let them crush you.”

He is saying:

“Let their injustice be seen.”

Nakedness Was Not the Shame You Think It Was

This is the part modern readers miss.

In ancient Jewish culture:

- The shame of nakedness fell on the viewer, not the naked
- Especially in public
- Especially in legal or religious space

This is crucial.

You see this logic elsewhere:

- Noah's sons (Gen 9): the shame is on the one who looks
- Isaiah's prophetic sign-acts
- Ezekiel's enacted judgments

Nakedness is prophetic exposure, not self-humiliation.

What Jesus Is Actually Teaching

By giving both garments, the poor man stands exposed in court.

And the message becomes unmistakable:

“Look at what your system has done.

Look at what you are willing to take.

Look at the righteousness you claim.”

The aggressor is now:

- Publicly revealed
- Morally naked
- Standing in the light of their own cruelty

This is not weakness.

This is truth without violence.

This Is a Prophetic Act, Not Passive Suffering

Jesus is using the language of Hebrew prophetic sign-acts:

- Dramatized truth
- Enacted critique
- Moral shock

It's the same logic as:

- Nathan telling David a story
- Jeremiah wearing a yoke
- Ezekiel lying on his side

The oppressed person regains agency by refusing to play the silent victim.

Why This Would Have Been Electrifying

Jesus' listeners would not think:

“What a poor, pathetic man.”

They would think:

“That lawsuit just became a public indictment.”

This flips the power dynamic:

- The system is on trial
- The oppressor is exposed
- The poor man speaks without speaking

7. The Second Mile – Breaking Power Systems

Roman soldiers could legally force a civilian to carry gear one mile.

Going two:

- Reclaims agency
- Removes the soldier's power to command
- Transforms coercion into voluntary action

This is spiritual defiance without violence.

Then (Roman occupation meaning):

The verb (often discussed as a technical term) relates to the practice of forced requisition—authorities could compel locals to carry loads / serve as porters or guides.

This isn't hypothetical—Matthew uses the same concept later when Simon of Cyrene is compelled to carry Jesus' cross.

So what Jesus is really saying: "When the empire flexes on you, you can respond in a way that keeps your agency. You are not only acted upon—you can choose a response that breaks the humiliation cycle."

This Fits a Known Pattern of Jewish Resistance

Jesus' teaching aligns with a broader Jewish resistance ethic that avoided armed revolt while refusing humiliation.

Other examples in the passage confirm this:

a) The Cloak

- Taking someone's cloak overnight was illegal (Exod. 22:26–27)
- Giving both garments publicly exposed the injustice

b) The Second Mile

- Roman law allowed forced labor for one mile
- Going two removed the soldier's power and put him at risk of discipline

Each example:

- Refuses retaliation
- Refuses submission
- Exposes injustice
- Preserves dignity

Why This Fits the Whole Paragraph

Each example Jesus gives does the same thing:

- Cheek → exposes humiliation
- Cloak → exposes exploitation
- Second mile → exposes coercion

Every one of them:

- Refuses revenge
- Refuses silence
- Refuses to surrender dignity

8. Give to him who asks you,

Then (community meaning):

In a world without modern safety nets, this is covenant-community generosity—especially toward the vulnerable. It flows naturally from the earlier line about not treating the poor like prey (the cloak-as-pledge laws sit in that same ethical stream).

So what Jesus is really saying:

“Let your life be so free from retaliation and fear that you can live open-handed.”

This doesn't mean enabling harm or funding evil. It means a heart posture of non-hardened mercy, paired with wisdom.

Preach line:

“Retaliation closes the hand into a fist. The Kingdom opens the hand.”

Jesus Is Not Teaching You to Become a Resource for Predators

Not people who:

- Seek out givers intentionally
 - Mock those who help them
 - Weaponize victim language
 - Blame others for their refusal to grow
- that is not the situation Jesus is addressing in Matthew 5.

Jesus is confronting:

- Oppression
- Humiliation
- Coercive power

- Systemic exploitation

He is not endorsing:

- Enabling immaturity
- Funding irresponsibility
- Rewarding contempt for goodness

The Key Discernment Principle

Are my actions helping someone stand — or helping them stay down?

If generosity:

- Strengthens irresponsibility
- Feeds contempt
- Removes accountability

Then it is no longer generosity — it is misplaced compassion.

And Scripture warns about that too.

Why This Matters

Many:

- Have been spiritually bullied with verses like this
- Have been drained dry and told it was holiness
- Are carrying guilt for finally saying “enough”

Clarity here sets captives free — not from generosity, but from false guilt.

The Anchor Truth (This Holds Everything Together)

Jesus never asked anyone to protect evil in His name.

Not once.

He confronted deception, even when it was wrapped in religious language.

And He set people free — not by demanding endless giving, but by restoring truth, dignity, and agency.

Apply the Fruit Test

Which interpretation produces outcomes consistent with Jesus’ ministry?

Interpretation A produces:

- Enabled exploitation
- Protected deception
- Refusal to repent
- Moral stagnation
- False victimhood

- Guilt-based control
- Suppression of truth

But Jesus:

- Confronts exploiters
- Calls for repentance
- Exposes hypocrisy
- Warns about wolves
- Withdraws from manipulators
- Refuses false peace

9. The Heart of the Teaching

Jesus is teaching:

- Justice belongs to God
- Vengeance enslaves the soul
- Freedom comes through refusing retaliation

Paul later echoes this:

“Do not avenge yourselves... for it is written, ‘Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,’ says the Lord.”

— Romans 12:19

Why This Was So Radical

Jesus’ listeners expected:

- “Don’t hit back” → weakness
- “Fight back” → rebellion

Jesus offers a third way:

- Courage without violence
- Resistance without corruption
- Strength without domination

This is why:

- Rome found Him dangerous
- Zealots found Him frustrating
- The poor found Him liberating

What Jesus Is Not Saying

These passages has often been misused to silence victims. That is not its intent.

Jesus is not commanding:

- Endurance of abuse
- Staying in violent situations
- Submission to exploitation

He is addressing:

- Insult
- Oppression
- Power imbalance
- Public humiliation

And He is restoring agency, not removing it.

Why Modern Speculation Misses the Point

Modern readings often ask:

“Is Jesus telling us to be doormats?”

Ancient listeners heard:

“He is teaching us how to stand without becoming like them.”

That distinction changes everything.

Connecting This to Today

This teaching speaks to:

- Online retaliation
- Relational wounds
- Church conflicts
- Family disputes
- Cultural outrage cycles

The trap:

Retaliation feels powerful — but it hands control to the offender.

Jesus’ way:

You remain free, grounded, and uncorrupted.

10. The Flow Into What Comes Next

This passage directly leads into: “Love your enemies...” (Matthew 5:43)

You cannot love your enemies until you are free from the need to strike back.