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HOW SHOULD WE REACT TO INJUSTICE?
Matthew 5:38-48

In January 1956, missionary Jim Elliot was on the verge of breakthrough contact with an unreached tribe in the Ecuadorian jungle. Now the day was here, he and his four friends stood on a beach of the Curaray river awaiting the first meeting. As they stood there singing the hymn *We rest on Thee*, tribesmen appeared and savagely stabbed them to death. Jim left behind him his young wife Elisabeth and their year-old baby Valerie. American newspapers called it a tragedy. How should Elisabeth Elliot react to such injustice?

I have a friend who worked for an important organisation and did her job very well. But on several occasions she was publicly and unfairly insulted and humiliated by her boss. How should my friend react to such injustice?

We're all troubled by the injustice that we see in the news. But perhaps we feel even more acutely the injustice that exists in our day-to-day interactions with other people. We all know what it's like to feel hurt, or offended, or belittled, or mistreated, or taken advantage of, or manipulated, whether by colleagues, authority figures, non-Christian acquaintances, friends or family members, or perhaps even other church members. And it can be very, very painful, can't it. So often it's just *unfair*.

So how should we react to injustice? The good news is that Jesus takes this question very, very seriously.

We've been looking at the Sermon on the Mount for the last few weeks. Jesus has been teaching us what life looks like as a member of his Kingdom. We've seen that he wants us to please God gladly from the heart in all areas, not simply try to get away with obeying his laws in the narrowest, most external, most legalistic way. But all of us have failed abysmally at this. The only answer? To run to Jesus, who at the cross pays the price for all our sinful attitudes and who fulfilled the law on our behalf, and to live a new life that seeks to please God from the heart. Six examples flesh out what Jesus means, in the areas of anger, lust, divorce and promises. Now we come to the final two and we discover that Jesus saves perhaps the most potent punch until last. We're going to see that Jesus' words, whilst they might at first shock us, actually provide the key to liberation and joy in the face of injustice.

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How should we react to injustice? Jesus has two answers. We're going to spend longer on the first:

1. CHOOSE LOVE OVER YOUR RIGHTS

➡ **Read v38-42.**

This morning you are the privileged audience at a special edition of 1st century Israel's most popular chat show: *The Harry Pharisee Show*, taking place just a few weeks before the Sermon on the Mount. Your host: Harry Pharisee, here to solve all your relational woes the way Moses *really* intended. We're excited to have Jesus' disciples here with us in the audience today. Our subject this morning: "Eye for eye and tooth for tooth". Please welcome our first guest: Bob of Bethlehem. Bob, tell us what's happened to you.

[Bob:] "Well, so I was just walking along minding my own business, you know, when this guy comes up to me and actually slaps me across the right cheek with the back of his hand. That's like the worst insult you can get and it's totally unfair. What should I do Harry?"

[Harry:] "Well, Bob, you know what Moses would command you don't you? Eye for eye, tooth for tooth. You go right back to that guy and you wallop him across *his* right cheek. That's justice. Glad we got that sorted. Next guest: Clara of Capurnaum. Clara tell us your problem."

[Clara:] "Well, Harry, you won't believe this but one of my colleagues claims that I took his tunic from him, but I never did. He's taking me to court over it and he's got the best lawyers and everything. It's totally unfair. What should I do?"

[Harry:] "Clara, Clara, haven't you read Deuteronomy? Eye for eye, tooth for tooth. You hire the best lawyer, you go in there and you tell that guy he's not getting so much as a button off your tunic. That's justice."

And Harry proceeds to give the same sort of answer to two more guests. Of course I'm caricaturing this slightly. But that's the sort of thing that the Pharisees were teaching.

Now imagine some time later we are in the audience for *Good Morning Galilee* and we're watching Jesus, preaching live from the Mount. He says to his disciples: "*You have heard that it was said* 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' " He's referring of course to what the disciples have heard from the Pharisees. But imagine their shock when he says in an authoritative tone of voice: "But *I* say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil". What is he doing?! Is Jesus claiming he has the authority to do away with this law, a law that came from God himself?! I once had a colleague, whose name, ironically, was Justice, who was determined to prove to me that the Bible was not God's Word. She tried to use this very verse in order to prove that the New Testament contradicts the Old Testament. But Jesus has already said that he has *not* come to *abolish* the law. He's not attacking the original law but a *misuse* of that law. I think that there are two ways in which this law could be misused.

Firstly, the Pharisees were missing the point of the original law. That law, which appears in Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy, was a way of carefully controlling legal justice in the nation of Israel, so that criminals were treated neither too lightly, through pity, nor too heavily, through a desire for vengeance. It was proportionate to the crime. But we can see from the four situations that Jesus describes here that the Pharisees were using this law as a license for *personal retaliation*. They looked like they were obeying this law but they were actually taking a law that was meant to regulate legal justice and teaching ordinary people to take justice into their own hands when they were wronged, to retaliate, to get even, or simply to stand up for their rights. Jesus is saying: *this law was never meant to be used as a license for asserting your personal rights at someone else's expense*.

The second misuse is more subtle. You see, this law, like all the laws, were given to a particular people for a particular time: the Old Testament nation state of Israel. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is laying out the ethics for his *new* people, his *new* "Israel", and we are no longer a nation state. This of course doesn't mean that we

should chop the Old Testament laws out of the Bible, but it does mean that we can't use them in exactly the same way any more. So when we read the "eye for eye" law, we can affirm that the principle of justice is still very important, but can you imagine if we tried to apply it literally in our churches?! So if I break Esther's guitar, he goes to talk to Judge Slack, who declares that by way of punishment my guitar must also be smashed. That's fair isn't it? And yet we obviously don't behave like that as a church.

So *why* shouldn't we take this law to mean "stand up for your personal rights"? And *why* shouldn't we even take this law to mean "ensure that justice is done within the church"? Because there's another concern which trumps personal rights, which even trumps the need for justice. Love.

When Jesus says "do not resist the one who is evil", he means "do not stand up against someone treating you unjustly". Why? Well, look at the four situations he presents; in each case love for the other person trumps your right to vengeance or even justice. Slapped on the cheek for no reason? You might feel like you have the right to hit back but how much more loving to just let them slap the other cheek as well. Sued for your shirt? You might have the right to defend yourself but how much more loving to give them your coat as well.

Let's not miss just how radical this teaching is! It's not just about avoiding personal retaliation - that was never OK. But in Old Testament Israel, God did permit the use of a legal system in order to obtain justice. But as members of the new Israel, we should always choose love over obtaining personal justice, even when we have the right to it! Now I don't think Jesus is saying we should *never* stand up for our rights. There are times when it is appropriate to do so, when it's perhaps even loving to the other person to defend your rights, for example in a case of severe abuse. But the point is that love should come before rights. If it's a choice between blessing and hurting the other person, are we willing to let go of our rights for their sake?

But surely we have a right to personal justice, whatever the situation? But do you see how highly our God values love? It's not that justice doesn't matter to God.

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Justice is very high on God's agenda, as the "eye for eye" law shows. But that just shows how immensely valuable love is.

Have you ever made a gift wishlist on Amazon? You can ask Amazon to sort your items according to priority. So, for instance, "iPad" definitely comes above "pair of socks". What if you had "rights" and "love" on your wishlist. How would you prioritise them? We would definitely put "rights" as "high priority". But are you willing to put "love" as "highest priority"? God wants us to care so much about blessing other people that we should even be willing to accept injustice without retaliating, without even asserting our rights, in short, to return blessing for evil.

We all find this very hard in practice. Just think for a moment about a time when someone really hurt you. Perhaps you're in that situation at the moment. Think about how you reacted initially.

- You may have felt anger, perhaps even a desire for revenge, and you probably felt that such a reaction was *justified*.
- Perhaps you didn't succumb to anger or revenge, but you may have found it very hard to let it go, to forgive and move on. We want to take justice into our own hands. You might have felt that desire to assert your rights, perhaps to teach them a lesson. Just letting it go feels like justice has been sidelined.
- At the very least, you've probably felt that strong urge to make your point, to get the other person to admit what they've done wrong, to claim back the respect that is rightfully yours. Just letting it go feels like your honour has been violated.

All of this can swamp our compassion for the person. In our desire for personal justice, we forget to see the person the way God sees them: a precious human soul in need of compassion. So once again Jesus spears our hypocrisy and legalism. We use this law as a license for retaliation or asserting our rights at someone else's expense. It becomes an excuse to move "love" to "low priority", all the while convincing ourselves that we are doing a very good job of upholding justice.

And who has suffered more injustice than Jesus himself?. He had done no wrong and yet he was constantly sidelined, mistreated, insulted, mocked, hated, slandered, and in the end he was betrayed, falsely accused, beaten, humiliated and nailed to a cross to die. Did he ever retaliate? Did he ever even assert his rights as

the Son of God? It would have been just. And yet he was silent before his accusers. He let them mistreat him. He chose love over his rights.

And have we not also treated him unjustly time and time again, not to mention other people? Do we not also deserve to be treated justly, that is, to be condemned for how we have treated God and our fellow men? But as Jesus died there, he was paying the price for all the times when we have failed to love other people and claimed to be upholding justice. Justice was indeed upheld that day as the penalty for our sins fell on him, and yet he did not claim justice for himself. He loved us though we deserved only condemnation, and gave no thought to asserting his rights. Oh how we need Jesus. We need to mourn our hypocrisy. We need to lift up our shameful heads and see all our failures nailed to the cross, see that he has fulfilled the law on our behalf. We need to be inspired to imitate his example of love in the face of injustice. We need to breathe the sweet air of freedom that he has bought us - freedom from the need to retaliate, to stand up for our rights, to see justice done. Those are heavy and painful burdens to carry. But we can let them go. We who have been loved and forgiven despite all our unjust deeds are now free to love and forgive others, no matter how they wrong us. We who are now infinitely blessed in Christ can now say “what does it matter if people wrong us? Why do we need to defend our honour? What do our rights matter compared with the joy of bringing this blessing to other people?”. And we who have seen justice accomplished at the cross can leave all matters of injustice in God’s hands. It is not for us to ensure justice is done. That’s God’s job. And he will one day ensure all justice is done. Our job is simply to love. How beautiful and liberating!

Let’s return to the four examples Jesus gives in this passage and imagine what it might look like for us to choose love over our rights in similar situations.

Look at the first example. A back-handed slap on the right cheek was a serious insult in those days. If a colleague or friend or even your husband or wife says something insulting or critical or thoughtless, tempers flare up and it’s very tempting to reply with some stinging remark. Do you need to defend your honour? Do you feel it’s OK to hit back? Or are you a member of God’s Kingdom now, free to not fight for your honour, free to love?

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What about the next example? There was an Old Testament law that forbid you from taking another man's coat. How to react when someone sues you for your *shirt*? Surrender your *coat* as well, the one thing you unquestionably have the legal right to keep! Astonishing! If someone smashed into your car then took legal action against you, would you fight them for every last centime? Or are you a member of God's Kingdom now, free to renounce your rights, free to love?

In the third example, the idea probably refers to Roman soldiers forcing local Jews to carry their baggage some distance for them. What do you do when your boss makes an unreasonable demand? Do you stand up for your rights, complain to your colleagues, try and do the minimum required? Or are you a member of God's Kingdom now, free to turn the injustice into a blessing? Wouldn't you like to see your boss' face when you even "go the extra mile", when you go beyond what was asked?

And the last example speaks of people who ask us for a gift or a loan. Now obviously we have to be selective about who we give to, depending on how they'll use the gift, and careful about how much we give, otherwise we'll quickly become bankrupt and be able to help no one! But the general principle is clear: friends asking for financial help, homeless people asking for food, churches or missions in need of donations; Do you weigh up whether they deserve your help? Do you reason that you are within your rights to keep what belongs to you? Or are we members of God's Kingdom now, free to surrender our money, possessions and time in order to bless others, whether or not they deserve it?

Let's have a brief look at the other part of our passage. We'll find that it makes a very similar point:

2. CHOOSE LOVE OVER HATRED

➡ **Read v43-47.**

Let's return to the studio of *The Harry Pharisee Show*. It's now a week after the Sermon on the Mount and Harry has a new guest: Dave of the Decapolis. Dave has

been a victim of terrible persecution at the hands of the local Roman governor, who has whipped him and imprisoned him and even taken away his wife and family. In tears of anguish, Dave turns to Harry and says “what should I do?”

Harry replies: “well Dave, you know the law “love your neighbour as yourself”, right?”

“Yes...” says Dave.

“Well this guy’s not your neighbour is he. So you should feel free to let loose the full force of your hatred.”

As before, here we have a law that can easily be misused in the same two ways. Firstly, the Pharisees were again applying the law in a way it was never intended to be applied. “Love your neighbour” is a quotation of Leviticus 19:18, but “hate your enemy” is not a quotation from anywhere. In fact, there are even laws that tell you to treat your enemy well. So they were taking “love your neighbour” and drawing an inference that isn’t there. “If God wants us to love our neighbours, he must want us to hate our enemies, right?” Once again they look like they are obeying the law whilst in reality using it as a license for hatred.

And secondly, like before, Jesus is laying down a new ethic for his new people. Treating your enemy badly was never OK in the Old Testament, but a sort of “hatred” was permitted in the sense that enemies were definitely to be treated with more dislike and hostility than your own people. This was acceptable for the Old Testament nation state of Israel. But we live in different times. We still have enemies, but we are no longer a physical nation. We are no longer permitted to hate in any sense, neither in external action, nor in heart attitude. Jesus brings us back again to a higher concern: love.

And by love Jesus doesn’t just mean an absence of hatred, or even just a benevolent feeling towards your enemies. This is *active* love, love that gets down on its knees and actually prays for its persecutors. Love that seeks to bless. Love that even seeks to win our enemies with the love of God.

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Jesus seeks to motivate us by telling us that when we love our enemies we become sons of our Father in heaven. When people see my six-month old son sitting there looking all cute and charming, I doubt anyone would recognise that he's my son. But the moment his face crumples up in one of his grumpy frowns, I imagine you'd instantly say "wow, he's his father's son, isn't he!" Now he was already my son, but in the moments when he resembles me, then he's *really* my son! Now Christians are sons of God from the moment of conversion, but when we love our enemies we're *really* God's children because we resemble him. For God is a God who loves his enemies. As Jesus points out, we see this in the way God allows all people to continue to live and enjoy his creation, people who hate him just as much as people who love him. And nowhere do we see God's love for his enemies more clearly than at the cross. At the very moment when Jesus was suffering the worst injustice ever committed, he chose love over hatred. He even did exactly what he commands in this passage. As they nailed him to the cross he *prayed:* "Father forgive them". Do we not wish that we could be like that?

Jesus gives a second motivation: if we love our neighbours but hate our enemies we are no better than the world. Jesus picks two categories of people that would have been considered the lowest of the low, tax collectors and Gentiles, and he points out that even they love people who they like, who love them back, who they get something from. It can be quite enjoyable to be nice to people we're close to. But that's like Migros Budget love. It doesn't cost us anything and it's inferior quality. But if we want to be different, we need top-of-the-range Manor love, costly but superior. Love given freely and gladly to those who do not deserve it, to those who hate us and treat us unjustly. Do we not wish that we could be like that?

Again this is radical teaching. We might not think that we have a problem with hatred, but it can appear in subtle ways. We'll all have to face enemies at some point, especially people who hate us because we're Christians. Think of someone you know who doesn't like you or who treats you badly. How do you instinctively react?

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- Perhaps you've experienced a feeling of full-on hatred for the person, maybe even a desire to hurt them back. It can feel justified, and you would not be alone.
- But perhaps more subtly, as Christians we probably know that *hatred* is wrong, but we might still harbour a strong dislike or distaste of certain people or certain types of people and we might even feel that this is justified. We might therefore (perhaps subconsciously) shun or malign or mistreat or neglect or avoid or sideline those people.
- Or perhaps we find that we are eager to show love to those who seem loveable or who we get something from, but it is much harder to do the same for people who are difficult or annoying or unlovely. We could all think of people in this category. But then we are doing nothing better than what the non-Christian world does.

Once again, Jesus spears our legalistic kind of love. We want to look like we love people whilst trying to get away with loving as few people as possible. So once again we need to go back to the cross and trust in the one who showed us such astonishing love, even though we were his enemies and he had every right to hate us. We need to let the cross free us from feelings of animosity towards others. How liberating when we are treated badly to simply show that same kind of beautiful, undeserved love that we've received. How wonderful to be able to turn injustice into blessing.

Let's go back to the story of Jim and Elisabeth Elliot that we started with. You could say that she would have been within her rights to call for military intervention against this savage tribe, to inform the world of their horrific, disgusting behaviour, at the very least to pack it in and go home to America. This would not have been wrong. Even a reaction of bitter hatred would not have been surprising. But instead she decided to complete her husband's mission and went and lived among them and brought them the gospel. Through her work, some of the tribe gave their lives to Christ and will be with us in God's Kingdom forever. In the face of terrible injustice, she chose love over her rights and over hatred.

And what about my friend who was humiliated at work? You could say that she would have been within her rights to report her boss, to slander her behind her

back, or deliberately do a shoddy job. Although she did wisely decide to privately question her boss about her behaviour, my friend chose not to report her or slander her. She determined to work hard for her and asked other friends to pray for the situation. In the face of injustice, she chose love over her rights and over hatred.

By way of conclusion, look at v48 with me. This verse summarises not only our two passages, but all six examples that Jesus has given. What Jesus has been saying about anger, lust, divorce, promises, rights and hatred is encapsulated in this one astounding verse. We do not belong to this world anymore but to the Kingdom of our heavenly Father, who is perfect. Gone are the days of trying to obey God in the narrowest, most external, legalistic way. God cares about our hearts, and he wants them to be spotless in each of these areas. We desperately need the only perfect one, Jesus, to take our dismal failures on himself and fulfill God's demands perfectly in our place. What a privilege now to be able to freely and joyfully strive towards the perfect heart attitude that God desires, safe in his grace, and motivated to imitate the beauty of our heavenly Father.