March 13, 2016

“The Path of No Resistance”

Matthew 5:38-42

**FCF**: Our terrible tendency to retaliate

**PROPOSITION**: (anchor) Christ came to fulfill the Law.

(magnet) We need to heed what He teaches – including on retaliation.

**SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:**

Coaches often implore their players – at all levels of competition, whether on a court or a field – “*Do not retaliate. It’s always the second player the referee sees and calls. Just walk away. It’s not worth it.*” But that’s not just a practical concern in athletics with the fate of your team in mind. It transfers over elsewhere into the real world. Between family members, friends, nations – the feuds are traced back to this point, where we could have walked away. But didn’t.

After the dust settles, we ask ourselves, “*Isn’t there another way?*” And, indeed, there is.

**SCRIPTURE READING**: Matthew 5:38-42

**PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION**

**SERMON INTRODUCTION:**

*Star Wars* entered our cultural consciousness again with *The Force Awakens*. I grew up on the original three, the ones now called *Episodes IV-VI*. The thing is that, without *Episodes I-III*, you might think the story is all about the struggle between the Rebellion and the Empire. But it’s not. The story arc is about the rise, fall, and redemption of Anakin Skywalker. Granted, the three prequels could have been done better. But they do set the stage for the second act.

Here’s why I bring that up. The Old Testament, rich as it is in its imagery, history, and theology, is actually intended to set the stage for the second act, for the coming of Christ. He came to fulfill it, to complete it as the ultimate Prophet, Priest, and King. For Jesus is the answer to every prophecy, the end of all the sacrifices, the reality behind all the key figures and events in Israel’s history. And, with His teaching, the full meaning and intent of the commands is brought out. Jesus is no ordinary rabbi, sage, or guru. For He has come to fulfill the Law.

Here in this section of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is setting forth a series of six contrasts. He is pressing in on six points of tension. This is the fifth of the six. And, despite how foreign some of this may initially sound to our ears, we need to hear Him at every point. Jesus came to fulfill the Law. We need to heed what He teaches – including on retaliation.

To get at this, we need to look at three things. First, the command itself. Second, the correction Jesus gives regarding the command. And, third, some needed cautions to consider.

1. **THE COMMAND**

So, first the command (READ Matthew 5:38). Jesus is going to set forth a contrast here – not between the Law and His teaching but between the Law and how it was being taught.

1. *What Was Said*

To get at that, we need to then distinguish between what was said and how it was read.

1. In Moses’ time

This is the *lex talonis* – the ancient law of retribution. It sounds harsh to our ears. But we need to understand that it was meant not to sanction revenge but to restrain it, to prevent blood feuds, and to guide judges in their sentencing. The idea being that the punishment should fit the crime.

1. In Jesus’ time

Now, by Jesus’ time, the physical penalties had given way to financial damages. So Jesus is not really addressing the subject of physical brutality so much as just retribution in general.

1. *What Was Read*

That’s the commandment, what was said. How then was it read? How was it applied?

1. Warped purpose

The purpose had been terribly warped by a “how far can we go” mentality. It was no longer read so much as a limit but as a command. There was not a view towards a restraint but a pursuit.

1. Expanded sphere

Compounding this warped purpose was an expanded sphere. It was no longer just a guideline for judges in a court of law. Now it applied to individuals in their personal conflicts. And so it was actually being used to excuse the very thing it had been originally intended to prevent.

So this command clearly needed to be addressed, the point needed to be pressed.

*Application:*

We need to move on but I want to say this. Be careful. We must be wary of dismissing this. How often do we tend to re-read things in our favor, in a way that benefits what we want? What ways do we not quite break the rules but bend them beyond recognition, as we see here?

1. **THE CORRECTION**

Moving then from the commands, that brings us to the correction Jesus makes clear.

1. *Clarifications*

Which requires a few clarifications, some pulling of weeds to make our study fruitful.

1. On resistance

First, on resistance. Jesus is not saying, “*Do not resist the evil one*” as if to say lay down against the devil and his deceptions, accusations, and temptations. We are commanded to resist him.

Nor does Jesus say “*Do not resist evil*” as if others suffering from poverty, injustice, and racism were somehow okay. Again, we are commanded to stand up against these things for others.

1. On pacifism

Then, there is pacifism. Jesus is not ruling out the use of military or police force. He is speaking here to how individuals are to respond to one another. The state is a divine institution. See Romans 13 and 1 Peter 2. And so there is a legitimate role for police force and military power.

1. *Intensifications*

That’s what Jesus is not saying. But what is He saying? Here we have an intensification.

1. The basic principle

(READ Matthew 5:38-39a) What does this mean? It is hard. The response of Jesus’ disciples to those who wrong them is not to be one of retaliation but one of accepting and absorbing it. Not that retribution doesn’t matter but that we are to leave it in God’s hands. We are not to take things into our hands. Nor are we to be embittered in our hearts. Yes, this is hard.

1. Four examples

But that’s the basic principle. Jesus then gives four examples to unpack what He means. (READ Matthew 5:39) This is not ruling out self-defense. We need to understand that the back-handed slap was not so much a physical assault as a grievous insult. So Jesus is saying, “*Don’t return it. Don’t escalate things. Endure it. Take it. Turn the other cheek*.” (READ Matthew 5:40) Jesus does not intend for His disciples to be cold and naked. So what is this about? The tunic was the inner garment. The cloak was the outer covering, so basic a need that it was illegal to take it. So what is Jesus saying? “*Be ready to yield what is rightfully yours*.” (READ Matthew 5:41) Judea was a Roman occupied territory. The sight of soldiers was hardly uncommon. Nor was the practice of impressment, of commandeering the property or labor of the locals. So what is Jesus saying? “*Don’t stop at the first mile. Show kindness, even in this. Volunteer for yet more. Go the extra mile*.” (READ Matthew 5:42) This was not to encourage someone else’s laziness or irresponsibility. But it is to encourage our generosity. What is Jesus saying? “*Give sacrificially to those in need. Give at a level that is inconvenient for you*.”

This is how Jesus sets out to clarify the command and to give the corrections.

*Application:*

Now where might we need to apply this? How might we be tempted to retaliate – to respond in kind to others? We can certainly think of hypotheticals, of dramatically transposing ourselves into some news story or historical event and ask ourselves, “*What would I have done?*”

Thinking of the “far thing” might be helpful at some level. But we must not overlook the more pressing “near thing” for that “far thing”. What do I mean? Just a couple of examples. You’re driving down Wilma Rudolph. Someone cuts you off. Will you return the favor?

That’s hardly an impossible scenario. But here’s one that cuts a little closer. You’re accused of taking something, of breaking something. Or it’s implied that you’ve stirred things up and it’s your selfish agenda that’s at fault. And it isn’t true, any of it. But it stings. Now, the circumstances may be such that you do need to set the record straight. But how will you do it? With what spirit? With what in mind? With anger, with vengeance, with a desire to retaliate?

Christ came to fulfill the Law. We need to heed what He teaches – even on retaliation.

1. **THE CAUTIONS**

Finally, some cautions for us to weigh and consider – why we can’t just ignore this.

1. *The Results*

First, the results. What inevitably happens if we do what comes naturally? We know.

1. Escalations

Escalations – our arguments become increasingly heated. Our positions become more deeply hardened. Our divisions become tragically marked. And our trajectories clearly set.

1. Casualties

And the escalations then lead to casualties. Our relationships at school, at work, at church, in the kitchen suffer. And opportunities we had to model or demonstrate something rare are lost.

1. *The Reasons*

Those are the results, what we’re left with. What of the reasons, the things behind it?

1. Insistence on our rights

Driving all this is often an insistence on our rights. We want what we want or feel we deserve. We feel like we have to hold onto what we want, to protect it. And so we’ll go to war over it.

1. Preoccupation with our needs

An insistence on our rights. Or perhaps a preoccupation with our needs. Which is often such a godless perspective – meaning that God is not in the picture or, if He is, He’s too far off to be part of the equation. So the wrong is then up to us to right. The need is then up to us to meet.

And so we rationalize. And so we retaliate. And the cycle just continues.

*Illustration:*

We live like Jimmy Malone, Sean Connery’s character from *The Untouchables*. The agents are trying to bring down the gangster, Al Capone. Do you know the line? (READ quote):

*You wanna get Capone? Here’s how you get him. He pulls a knife, you pull a gun. He sends one of yours to the hospital, you send one of his to the morgue!  That’s the Chicago way, and that’s how you get Capone!*

*Application:*

That’s great entertainment. And a lousy way to live. The cycle will kill you. But what if there was a way to break it? What if there was a way to go against our inclinations? There is. For, my friends, the One who is speaking these words marked the path (READ 1 Peter 2:21-25).

Christ came to fulfill the Law. We need to heed what He teaches – even on retaliation.

**CONCLUSION:**

Consider this and let it settle into your heart. The One who is speaking here to us also came for us. He came for us. When He was reviled and rejected, when He was injured and insulted, He turned the cheek, yielded His rights, went the extra mile, and gave His all. For us. Upon Him was poured out the “lex talonis” due to us in full. Ah, my friends. The full measure of justice has been done. We are now forgiven. And we have been set free. He has come to fulfill the Law – not just in what He taught. But also in how He lived and in what He did for us.

Let me ask you. How can we then not heed Him? Yes, these words are hard. But clearly everything He says is for our good. He is calling us, you and I, to walk in His steps, assuring us that He is with us on the path. Is this not what this world needs, pitted as it is against itself? Christ came to fulfill the Law. We need to heed what He teaches – including on retaliation.

**PROPOSITION**: (anchor) Christ came to fulfill the Law.

(magnet) We need to heed what He teaches – including on retaliation.