

## An Eye for an Eye, and a Tooth for a Tooth

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Matthew 5:38-42

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This is the fifth time that Jesus takes the Scribes and Pharisees to task concerning their misunderstanding and misapplication of the Law of God.

1. Anger and Murder
2. Lust and Adultery
3. Moses and Divorce
4. Truth and Oaths
5. Retaliation and Love

*“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 the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you. Matthew 5:38–42*

### THE INTENT OF THE LAW

The statement, “An eye for and eye, and a tooth for a tooth is found in three Old Testament texts:

*But if there is harm, then you shall pay life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe. Exodus 21:23–25*

*“Whoever takes a human life shall surely be put to death. Whoever takes an animal’s life shall make it good, life for life. If anyone injures his neighbor, as he has done it shall be done to him, fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth; whatever injury he has given a person shall be given to him. Whoever kills an animal shall make it good, and whoever kills a person shall be put to death. Leviticus 24:17–21*

*Your eye shall not pity. It shall be life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot. Deuteronomy 19:21*

What was the intention of this Old Testament Mosaic legislation? God's intention was to set boundaries on how justice was carried out. In its simplest form, it was to control excess. The objective of this law was in no way to urge men to take an eye for an eye or a tooth for a tooth – to insist upon it every time. It was meant to avoid the terrible excess, the spirit of revenge and demand for retribution that runs deep within the human heart and to keep it in check and hold it within bounds.

As He always does, Jesus has our sinful hearts in view here in Matthew 5:38-42. The text, though it has been widely misapplied throughout church history, really has less to do with justice and more to do with our sinful and inordinate concern for our perceived rights. An inflated concern for our rights comes from an inflated view of ourselves and always leads to increased lawlessness. When our supreme concern is getting and keeping what we think is rightfully ours, then whoever or whatever gets in our way—including the law—becomes expendable.<sup>1</sup> Jesus puts his finger on some very sensitive areas in our lives: our pride and honor, our possessions, all that we really love in this world. Only people who have denied themselves, taken up their cross daily, and are able to apply Jesus' teaching here (Luke 9:23).

## **WHO IS JESUS NOT TALKING TO**

### 1. The Lost

No one will earn heaven by trying to obey Jesus' counsel here. This text would actually condemn us. We need to let it drive us to an understanding of our need for a Savior and forgiveness.

### 2. The Nations

Christ isn't teaching pacifism here. As long as there is evil in the world, nations will need armies and police to protect the people and uphold the law.

### 3. Governments

God ordained government to execute His wrath on evildoers.

*Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an*

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<sup>1</sup> John MacArthur, *Matthew 1–7. The MacArthur New Testament Commentary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1985).

*avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer. Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience. Romans 13:1–5*

## **WHO IS JESUS TALKING TO**

### 1. God's People

He is addressing the people He's been describing in the beatitudes: poor, gentle, merciful. People who are salt and light in this world to glorify God. People seeking to please God by applying His truth on the heart level – anger, lust, divorce, truthfulness. But how do God's people respond to evil in this world?

## **TWISTING THE LAW FOR PERSONAL REVENGE**

Matthew 5:38-48 reflects the principle of *lex talionis* (a law of equal and direct retribution), and was one of the most ancient law codes. Simply put, it required that punishment match the crime. The same idea is carried in the expressions tit for tat and quid pro quo. This is an old code of law. The earliest record of *lex talionis* is in the Code of Hammurabi, the great Babylonian king who lived a hundred years before Moses. It is also likely that the principle was in wide use long before that time.

The intention of this legislation was never to give a man license to avenge himself, yet that is exactly what rabbinic tradition had done. Each man was permitted, in effect, to become his own judge, jury, and executioner. God's law was turned to individual license, and civil justice was perverted to personal vengeance. Instead of properly acknowledging the law of an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth as a limit on punishment, they conveniently used it as a mandate for vengeance. What God gave as a restriction on civil courts, Jewish tradition had turned into personal license for revenge. Here again we see the self-centered and self-asserted "righteousness" of the scribes and Pharisees making a shamble of God's holy Law.<sup>2</sup>

## **JESUS GETS AT THE HEART OF OUR "SELF-NERVES"**

Evil people bring out our self-love. Here Christ calls us to refuse to fight the evil person with his own weapons. But we are not to go limp or passive in the face of evil. Rather, we are to aggressively overcome evil with good, which is precisely what Christ Himself did. Christ steps on five of our "self-nerves".

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

## 1. Our Pride

*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 the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. Matthew 5:38–39*

When someone slaps you with the back of his hand, what do you naturally want to do? What does Christ tell us to do? Look at Mark 14:6 and Romans 12:17,21.

*And some began to spit on him and to cover his face and to strike him, saying to him, "Prophecy!" And the guards received him with blows. Mark 14:65*

*Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. Romans 12:17, 21*

## 2. Our Prized Possessions

*And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. Matthew 5:40*

When someone threatens a law suit against you, what do you naturally want to do? Look at Mark 15:2 and Hebrews 10:34.

*And they crucified him and divided his garments among them, casting lots for them, to decide what each should take. Mark 15:24*

*For you had compassion on those in prison, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one. Hebrews 10:34*

## 3. Our Personal Time

*And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Matthew 5:41*

Roman soldiers had the right to do this. When someone presumes on your time and demands you do something that isn't in your job description, what do you naturally want to do or say?

#### 4. Our Money

*Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you. Matthew 5:42*

When someone asks us for money, what's your first reaction? What does Christ say? What does He mean? See Ephesians 4:28 and Deuteronomy 15:11.

#### 5. Our Self Love

*You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect. Matthew 5:43–48*

How do we naturally desire to respond to people who betray us, slander us, hurt us in some way? What does Christ say we are to do? Why?

What does Jesus mean by His call to “be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” in verse 48?

The sum of all that Jesus teaches in the Sermon on the Mount—in fact, the sum of all He teaches in Scripture—is in those words. The great purpose of salvation, the goal of the gospel, and the great yearning of the heart of God is for all men to become like Him – to be perfect. But we know that perfection is utterly impossible in man's own power. To those who wonder how Jesus can demand the impossible, He later says, “With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible” Matthew 19:26. Jesus' point in all these illustrations and in the Sermon on the Mount is to lead His audience to an overpowering sense of spiritual bankruptcy, to a “beatitude attitude” that shows them their need of a Savior, an enabler who alone can empower them to meet God's standard of perfection.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid

## LET'S GET PERSONAL

Are you a “cheek-turner” or a bitter, resentful, self-pitying person who refuses to forgive?

Are you a “coat giver” or clutching your possessions as if they are actually yours?

Are you a “second mile” person or do you get irritated when God allows someone to interfere with your personal time?

Are you a “open-handed giver” or tight fisted and resent any request for you to give, as if your money was actually yours?

Are you an “enemy-lover” or do you react in anger against all personal attacks?

## CONCLUDING TRUTHS

This passage is teaching that believers have died to their “self-life” and now are alive in Christ. We are called to follow Him as new creations (2 Corinthians 5:17). Let's conclude with a handful of truths to help us apply all this:

1. We are not victims.

Once we are in Christ, we are undefeatable. We died, rose, ascended with Christ, are seated with Him in heavenly places, and now God has left us here as stewards to live for Him. We must remember that it's not our cheek, coat, time, or money. Verses?

2. God is sovereign.

God only allows into your door what He knows will help you grow and become like Christ. Verses?

3. We are called to trust God.

God will have the final say. Vengeance is Mine, says God. That's His parking space. Verses?

4. Actively look for ways to overcome evil with good.

Keep your goal laser sharp – to please God. Verse?

5. Keep the example of Christ squarely in your vision.

Instead of demanding His rights, He laid them aside to hang naked on a cross to please the Father and bring about our salvation.