

An Eye For An Eye *Sermon on the Mount, Vol. 17*

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Matthew 5:38-42

The passage we study today has been misunderstood, misapplied and abused as much as any passage of the Bible. It has been twisted to say that Christians should be doormats. Many extrapolate from this text—completely ignoring its context—to teach military pacifism, or to justify conscientious objection to military service. It was a twisted application of this passage that provided the thesis for Leon Tolstoy's novel *War and Peace*, suggesting eliminating police, the military and other authorities would bring about a utopian society.

Let's look at it for what Jesus said, and analyze it in light of the cultural and historical context in which He said it.

I. **The Letter of the Law**

Matthew 5:38: *You have heard that it was said, 'AN EYE FOR AN EYE, AND A TOOTH FOR A TOOTH.'*

Look at the original context from which Jesus quoted:

Exodus 21:22–25: *If men struggle with each other and strike a woman with child so that she gives birth prematurely, yet there is no injury, he shall surely be fined as the woman's husband may demand of him, and he shall pay as the judges decide. But if there is any further injury, then you shall appoint as a penalty life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise.*

Here is a crucial point: ***This was a law for the civil courts of Israel.*** It is in the context of ***civil law***. The purpose is to bring about justice, with penalties suited to the crime, and to discourage private revenge. Punishment should fit the crime. Damages should be paid appropriate to the suffering caused.

One reason for this kind of law is to deter further crime.

Deuteronomy 19:20–21: ***The rest will hear and be afraid, and will never again do such an evil thing among you. Thus you shall not show pity: life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot.***

The second reason for this kind of law is to ***prevent excessive punishment*** based on personal vengeance and retaliation. The decision of the punishment was to be in the hands of impartial public judges, ***not*** the offended party. Do you see, then, that this was simultaneously a ***just law*** (it provided justice), and a ***merciful law*** (it prevented extreme punishment motivated by personal revenge).

The problem, as with each of these paragraphs in this part of the Sermon, was in the way the Pharisees misunderstood and misapplied God's word.

II. The Pharisees' Version (Background)

In this case, the Pharisees quoted this commandment in order to defeat its intended purpose. They used it to justify personal retribution and revenge. *You hurt me, so now I'm entitled to hurt you in return.* Your motive should not be personal retaliation. Jesus condemns the spirit of revenge. No passage of the word of God opposes prosecution of those guilty of robbery or violence in a court of law. But it is not morally right for individuals to take their own revenge. The rule set up here is not a rule for society in general. ***It is a rule for individuals in personal dealings.***

The Pharisees were using these words, without regard for their inspired context, as justification to ***assert personal rights.*** Instead of seeing ***eye for eye, tooth for tooth,*** etc. as a proper *limit* on punishment, they used it as a mandate for *revenge.* Incredibly, they quoted God's word to justify doing ***exactly the opposite*** of what it commanded them to do.

Jesus was confronting the attitude of ***getting even*** for yourself. He is condemning the loveless, vengeful motives the Pharisees rationalized by twisting Scripture.

III. Public Justice vs. Personal Revenge (39-42)

The Bible ***forbids personal vengeance.*** There has never been any doubt:

Leviticus 19:17-18: *'You shall not hate your fellow countryman in your heart; you may surely reprove your neighbor, but shall not incur sin because of him. 'You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the sons of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself; I am the Lord.*

Proverbs 20:22: *Do not say, "I will repay evil"; Wait for the Lord, 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."*

The ***heart*** is the issue. To ***turn the other cheek*** means to show by your attitude, your words and your deeds that you are filled with the desire to spread God's love, not to escalate hostility.

Romans 12:19-21: *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 IS 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 a great commentary on the rest of the passage before us today.

Matthew 5:39-42: *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.*

Do not resist an evil person rebuts the Pharisees' misinterpretation and *forbids personal retaliation*.

Jesus does ***not*** teach, as some mistakenly claim, that we should take no stand against evil and that it should be allowed to take its course in the world. Jesus was certainly resisting evil when he cleared the temple. He told us to resist the devil (James 4:7 and I Peter 5:9).

Romans 12:9: . . . *Abhor what is evil; cling to what is good.*

1 Thessalonians 5:22: *Abstain from every form of evil.*

Galatians 2:11: *But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned.*

What you must understand, is that all these references have to do with the ***public application of justice*** and righteousness, ***not with personally getting even*** for a wrong done to you. It has to do with justice in civil matters and holiness in the church.

If anyone wants to sue you has to do with your attitude toward someone who wants to deprive you of possessions. Rather than resentfully contesting his claim, submit yourself to the court, but don't be fighting for your personal rights. Let God take care of it.

The ***shirt*** referred to is the tunic worn next to the body, which someone might have tried to take in payment for an alleged debt. This robe was considered so indispensable that when it was taken as a pledge for a debt, it had to be returned before sunset since it also served as a cover. For a poor man, it could be his only cover at night.

What is Jesus teaching? We have no right to hate the person who tries to deprive us of our possessions. ***Let God be your defender.*** Love, even toward a scoundrel, should control our hearts and how we act. If you love someone, you want God's will for them.

Force you to go one mile is a reference to the authority of a government official to press a person into service. The concept was gradually broadened to mean ***compelling any kind of service***. This word ***force*** was used to describe Simon of Cyrene being compelled to carry Jesus' cross. Jesus is saying that rather than reveal a spirit of bitterness or annoyance toward being pressed into service, do it with a smile and give more than asked. ***That's not natural! It's supernatural.***

Give to him who asks of you, and do not turn away from him who wants to borrow from you is another application of the same principle. There doesn't have to be anything in it for you. Serve other people ***as if it is God you are serving***.

If you are harmed, it is perfectly acceptable to pursue legally whatever remedies are available to you. ***But don't take your own revenge!*** This principle of non-resistance is limited to ***personal relationships***. It does not apply to governmental authorities, and that's clear from a number of New Testament passages. Civil government is ***a minister of God to you for good***, says Paul. He goes on to say:

Romans 13:4: *for it [government] is a minister of God to you for good. But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil.*

Peter says the same thing:

1 Peter 2:13–14: *Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether to a king as the one in authority, or to governors as sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and the praise of those who do right.*

For the sake of God's righteousness as well as the sake of human justice, believers are obligated to uphold the law, and to be on the side of seeing that others do so as well. To report crime is compassionate, righteous, and obedient to God. To excuse or hide wrongdoing is not loving; it is wickedness, because it undermines God's order on earth.

Consider Biblical illustrations of the spirit Jesus is calling us to:

Abraham rushed to rescue his nephew Lot, despite Lot's propensity for repeatedly causing trouble.

Joseph, who generously forgave his brothers, even when God allowed the situation in which he was in a position to bring them to their knees. Twenty years after they sold him into slavery and lied about his death, Joseph said: Genesis 50:19–20: *But Joseph said to them, "Do not be afraid, for am I in God's place? And as for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive."*

David twice spared the life of his pursuer, King Saul. Humanly speaking he could have scored instant victory, but he refused to take his own vengeance when God had promised to do it in His time. In 1 Samuel 24 David had Saul helpless in a dark cave, and he let him go. His conscience was even pricked over the incident of cutting off the corner of Saul's robe. In chapter 26 he tiptoed right up to the sleeping Saul, but refused to harm him.

Elisha provided bread and water to the invading Syrians. After allowing God to take them captive according to His plan, Elisha led them to the king.

Stephen's last words as the stones rained down on him in a horrible miscarriage of justice as he died: Acts 7:60: *Then falling on his knees, he cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them!" Having said this, he fell asleep.*

Paul, the former murderer wrote Romans 12:21, all of I Corinthians 13 (the love chapter) and: 1 Corinthians 4:12: *. . . when we are reviled, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure;*

Ultimately, **Jesus**, who as He **bore our sins** prayed over the thud of the cross falling into its place *Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing* (Luke 23:34).