

4. Exactness and the Ethic of the Kingdom (5:38-42)

Jesus' fifth example case involves another important commandment of the Mosaic Law. Like the first two, this directive was received by Moses at Sinai, but was a part of the broader ethical instruction God provided subsequent to the Decalogue. In fact, the law of "eye for eye" wasn't a distinct commandment in itself, but addressed the understanding and approach that were to govern the execution of justice in Israel. Thus it didn't define or mandate a particular punishment; rather, it prescribed the principle that was to inform the determination of a given punishment (Exodus 21:12-25).

Considered only in terms of the Exodus passage, this law seems to be primarily concerned with insuring that the punishment fits the crime. In fact, this perspective underlies the conclusion that Jesus was here finding fault with the common Israelite practice of subjectively assigning punishments for various violations of the Law of Moses. He was rebuking this practice as a violation of the principle of "eye for eye," regardless of whether the punishment was undeservedly harsh or lenient.

Others, taking note of the parallel passage of Deuteronomy 19:15-21, have concluded that Jesus was contending against private retaliation or vigilantism. They argue that the "eye for eye" prescription placed all judgment and retribution in the hands of Israel's formal legal authority, but rabbinical and sectarian tradition had come to find in it ground for personal vengeance. William Hendriksen's comments are representative: *"This was a law for the civil courts, laid down in order that the practice of seeking private revenge might be discouraged... The Pharisees, however, appealed to this law to justify personal retribution and revenge. They quoted this commandment in order to defeat its very purpose."* (Commentary on Matthew)

In fact, the "eye for eye" prescription appears in three contexts in the Pentateuch, and, when all are examined in context, it becomes abundantly clear that the central issue in the commandment was the obligation of *exactness*. Its concern wasn't the danger of private retribution, but neither was it the human tendency toward an overly harsh punishment. This law did indeed focus on the need for punishment to fit the crime, but specifically in the sense that justice not be compromised because of leniency. *God intended the "eye for eye" ordinance to address the problem, not of going too far in punishing violators of the Law, but of not going far enough* (cf. Deuteronomy 19:15-21 with Leviticus 24:10-23).

In itself, the Leviticus passage's concern with one standard of justice – the son of an Egyptian father and Israelite mother was subject to the same capital punishment for blasphemy as would be a full-blooded Israelite – potentially points in this direction, but it is Moses' instruction in Deuteronomy 19:15ff that makes it absolutely clear. For in that context Moses explained that the ultimate goal of the "eye for eye" ordinance was the purging of evil from within Israel. The implication in the violation of the Law extended beyond the outcome for the accuser and accused; at risk was the purity of the covenant nation itself, and the preservation of that purity took precedence over everything else including the virtues of compassion and mercy: ***"Thus you shall not show pity: life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot"*** (19:21).

- a. At the heart of the Israelite theocracy was the principle that God's kingdom was to be preserved free of all impurity, and that demanded that justice be *exact*. It is obviously true that an unduly severe punishment would violate this principle in one direction, but the fact that this exactness was preoccupied with maintaining Israel's purity shows that leniency, not severity, was the matter of concern. An excessively harsh penalty does violate the strict demand of justice, but it actually benefits the goal of purging evil from the covenant nation. It is leniency – “showing pity” – that strengthens the will and hands of evildoers.

Moreover, this principle of exactness highlighted the fact that God alone assigned just punishment in Israel. Judges were to simply determine guilt.

- From the vantage point of the human sense of justice, many would find God's punishments as going far beyond what is proper. This is especially the case with many of the Law's capital crimes. While perhaps a majority of people would agree that willfully taking an innocent life justly calls for the death of the offender, few would regard death as an appropriate punishment for cursing a parent or collecting firewood on the Sabbath. In these and other such instances, capital punishment appears to be a gross violation of the just principle of “an eye for an eye.” Neither is it merely postmodern, relativistic man that finds such “justice” incomprehensible and abhorrent; Israel itself struggled with it (cf. Numbers 15:32-41).
- God recognized that the sons of Israel would perceive an apparent disparity between certain crimes and their decreed punishments, but it was precisely that dissonance that provoked their constant awareness that both the terms of the covenant and the sanctions for its violation belonged solely to their covenant Lord and Father (ref. again Numbers 5:37-41).

*This is not to say that God's punishments under the Law were either arbitrary or determined by His intention to produce a particular effect on Israel's thinking. Some have argued that, because God is God, justice is what He says it is. As the undisputed sovereign of the universe, He can assign any penalty to any crime, and, having made that assignment, it is *de facto* a “just” punishment. If He chooses to determine a penalty based only on the cognitive or psychological effect it has on His human creatures, then that is His just prerogative.*

God alone is God and He is sovereign over all things, but this doesn't mean that no absolute standard of justice or righteousness exists. If this were the case, then the concepts of good and evil, truth and falsehood, would have no objective meaning. They would mean only what God wants them to mean. In that instance, immutable, infinite and infallible wisdom would be replaced by divine caprice. The fact is that God's sanctions under the Law did express the true demands of justice; *the disparity between crime and punishment was only apparent, and resulted from the failure of the sons of Israel (and all mankind by extension) to see the true nature of those crimes.*

- b. The “eye for eye” ordinance prescribed exacting justice and forbid any mercy or deference whatsoever. The Hebrew expression in Deuteronomy 19:21 is “*your eye shall not spare,*” and it sharply punctuated the fact that, where violation had occurred, righteousness made no allowance for compassion or compromise. It is precisely at this point that Jesus’ response becomes problematic:
- If the “eye for eye” commandment really was forbidding private retribution as so many assert, then Jesus’ directive (“but I say to you...”) can be reconciled with it without much difficulty. His demand that His followers not resist or retaliate against personal injustice becomes simply a call to defer to the civil authority.
 - But when this Mosaic ordinance is rightly understood as forbidding any and all deference, Jesus’ demand appears to set Him squarely against the Law and the God who instituted it.
- c. Consistent with all of the Lord’s example cases, the key to resolving this dilemma is to recognize that what He was demanding of His hearers constitutes (in some way) the fulfillment of the “eye for eye” commandment. Jesus wasn’t clarifying the historical meaning of this particular law, but rather was revealing what it has become in the light of His own transforming fulfillment of the entire Law. Once again, Carson’s observation is very helpful: “*The contrast between what the people had heard and what Jesus taught is not based on distinctions like casuistry versus love, outer legalism versus inner commitment, or even false interpretation versus true interpretation... Rather, in every case Jesus contrasts the people’s misunderstanding of the law with the true direction in which the law points, according to his own authority as the law’s ‘fulfiller.’*”

In order to understand the “eye for eye” commandment’s christological fulfillment and place in the kingdom of heaven, one must first understand its function in the preparatory Israelite kingdom. This process is inherent in every promise-fulfillment relationship: *The only way to recognize the fulfillment of a particular promise and discern the meaning of that fulfillment is to first understand the promise in its own right.* The obvious reason is that, while a promise’s fulfillment must be distinguished from the promise itself, the two are inseparable and mutually referential. To fail to rightly discern a promise is to fail to discern its fulfillment. This is precisely why the nation of Israel – the people to whom the promise of the kingdom had come – failed to recognize the kingdom and its King when they appeared.

As to its role in the Israelite theocracy, it has been seen that the “eye for eye” ordinance emphasized the principles of righteousness and purity as fundamental and essential to that kingdom. God’s kingdom is the realm of His own presence and dominion, and so it cannot abide any deviation from the exactness of perfect justice and righteousness. It can no more tolerate the violation of strict justice through leniency than the abuse found in excessive severity.

And because this law of exactness provided the philosophical and ethical frame of reference for administering every command and ordinance of the Law of Moses, it insured that the sons of Israel would never lose sight of the fact that God's kingdom was to be one of impeccability and absolute justness. At the same time, the kingdom of Israel was not ultimate; it was merely a preliminary and prophetic expression of the final kingdom of God.

- Thus it followed that the same purity and exacting righteousness would define the coming eschatological kingdom of heaven, a fact repeatedly reinforced by Israel's prophets.
- The profoundly important difference, however, is that the righteousness and spotlessness of that promised kingdom would not be the product of the strictness of the sons of the kingdom, but of the King Himself: *In that great day, Yahweh's own visitation and intervention in His Servant would purge all unrighteousness and impurity from His kingdom forever* (Isaiah 9:1-7, 11:1-10, 35:1-10; cf. Jeremiah 31:31-34; Ezekiel 36:22-37:28; Hosea 2:1-3:5; etc.). That day was now dawning, and the messianic Servant was preparing for His work of purgation through His self-offering.

Jesus had declared at the outset that He hadn't come to abolish the Law, but to fulfill it. So it was with the defining kingdom principle of exactness; it remained intact. Yahweh had demanded absolute justice in the Israelite kingdom, and this hadn't changed with the coming of the messianic kingdom it anticipated. But now, rather than the sons of the kingdom having to precisely and fully punish all unrighteousness, He would take that task upon Himself.

The absolute demand of perfect justice – expressed most powerfully in the non-commutable sentence of death – would not be set aside, neither out of love nor compassion nor a heart of forgiveness. The kingdom's essential righteousness had bound God's covenant sons to uncompromising justice, and so it bound God Himself: The Lord had commanded the sons of Israel not to spare, and neither would He (Romans 8:32; cf. 3:21-26, 5:6-10, 8:1-4).

But once He had satisfied the kingdom's demand of justice and purity (at the cost of the death of the vicarious offender), **exactness would be able to embrace deference**. *Yielding under injustice no longer violates the obligation of exactness; rather, it presupposes and points toward its satisfaction*. In His Son, God was about to satisfy all justice absolutely and forever, without compromise or sparing. Thus the fulfilled kingdom of heaven cannot impose the obligation of exactness on its citizens – not because it has been abolished, but because it has been fully met. Not strictness, but readiness to yield is the kingdom's demand and delight.

- d. Jesus demonstrated this profound truth with four examples, each of which involves a clear violation of strict justice. But more than that, He chose situations that would naturally and rightly provoke outrage on the part of the violated party.

The first example presents an injustice whose sting is the most immediate and pronounced (v. 39). Most likely Jesus was referring to a back-handed slap to the face, which in itself provokes instantaneous anger and the desire to strike back. But hitting someone like this is also a way to degrade and humiliate him (cf. Matthew 27:29-30; John 18:19-23, 19:1-3). In such incidents, surprise, pain and insult combine to produce immediate and often uncontrollable outrage. If anything deserves just retribution, an undeserved slap to the face does. And yet Jesus called for more than mere restraint; His kingdom's ethic demands a spirit of quiet yieldedness.

The second involves the circumstance of a lawsuit (v. 40). Here one individual is bringing an unjust suit against another and seeking to take from him what he has no right to. Instead of the explosive outrage that accompanies a blow to the head, this type of injustice provokes a seething and festering indignation.

But again Jesus insisted that the sons of the kingdom don't demand justice but are willing to yield to injustice. In this regard, it is important to note that, under the Law, a person had an inalienable right to his outer garment ("coat"). The reason is that it was essential for his protection from the elements (ref. Exodus 22:26-27; Deuteronomy 24:10-13). Thus the power of Jesus' exhortation: *Willingness to yield goes so far beyond demanding absolute justice that it will not only relinquish what it cannot hold onto, it will offer up what cannot be taken away.*

Jesus' third example further expands the offense of injustice by drawing upon the practice known as impressment (v. 41). Under Roman law, a Roman soldier could press into service (commandeer) any non-Roman to carry his equipment or supplies the distance of one Roman mile. To the Jews, it was bad enough that unholy pagan Gentiles were ruling over the kingdom of Israel and occupying God's holy land; being forced to assist that tyrannical occupation only added further insult to injury. But in harmony with the previous illustration, Jesus didn't respond to this injustice by calling for quiet submission to that which cannot be avoided; like handing over their coat, the sons of the kingdom ought to bear their oppressor's burden for two miles rather than the required one.

The final example is the most general and yet is arguably the most effective in pinpointing the issue at the heart of all four (v. 42). The natural human response to injustice is retribution, and men rationalize this response by regarding it as zeal for what is right. For the Jews, they could justify their retributive spirit by insisting that they were simply upholding God's demand for exacting justice. But Jesus was showing them that they could hide behind that veil no longer; His Father was about to satisfy the obligation of exactness and, for that reason, it was no longer their own. But much more than that, God would meet the Law's demand as an act of uncompelled, condescending mercy. *Even in fulfilling the exacting requirement of absolute justice, God's infinite love and compassion toward the undeserving would shine in refugent splendor.* As offspring of the embrace of justice and mercy, the Father's sons are to reflect His radiant love.