

An Eye for an Eye

Righteousness & Relationships Part 13
Matthew 5:38-39 6-27-10

Summary: Jesus is speaking about insults, not attacks (self-defense is appropriate when there is a real attack). The Pharisees' applied the eye for an eye command to personal relationships (legalized revenge). But the law was for the courts, not personal relationships (justice). It limited harshness and leniency and eliminated personal vengeance. Elsewhere in the Law God forbids retaliation in personal relationships, which is the meaning of turn the other cheek.

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Matthew 5:38-42 "You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' 39 But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. 40 And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. 41 If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. 42 Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.

The Pharisees' Application of the Law: Revenge

The Problem of Revenge

As it started to get dark the young woman began to worry. Where was her husband? They had only been married a few weeks, but still, this was so out of character for him to be so late getting home. Finally she went out to look for him, and was horrified to find him, not far from their little cottage, lying dead in the street – murdered.

Not far from there another woman was working hard to finish up her share of the housework before her husband came home. (I say, "her share" because she was just one of her husband's two wives.) Anyway, just as she was finishing up she heard something, and looked out to see if it was him. And she was alarmed to see he was wounded. As she and Zillah ran out to meet him, they were surprised to see he was smiling – like he had just won the lottery or something. When they got out to him he broke into laughter as he announced his happy boast. Genesis 4:23-24 Lamech said to his wives, "Adah and Zillah, listen to me; wives of Lamech, hear my words. I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for injuring me. 24 If Cain is avenged seven times, then Lamech seventy-seven times." That is the very first

Bible story after Adam & Eve and Cain & Able. Human history has been a story of revenge and retaliation from the beginning until now.

When someone hurts us there is an instantaneous reflex to want to get even. Actually, that is what we claim to want. We say we are just getting even, but evenness is really the last thing on our mind. If someone slaps you across the face, what is the natural impulse of your flesh? To slap that person with the same force and then be done with it? Would you then walk away thinking, “Everything is just fine now – there has been perfect justice carried out”? No. If someone slaps you in the face you want to punch them in the mouth. We have all heard the stories of someone from one tribe injuring someone from an enemy tribe, and that second tribe comes back and murders someone, and then the first tribe goes and wipes out the entire village. Revenge has nothing to do with justice. Nobody ever murdered someone because they got murdered. The sinful human heart even takes pride in escalating revenge.

The ugliness of self-love

One kid hits another kids once, the second kid retaliates by hitting the first kid five times, and at that point he thinks, “Now we’re even.” But does the first kid think they are even? No – he feels like he owes some retribution, and so when he gets even, the other kid does not think things are even at all. We tend not to be very objective about what constitutes evenness. A teacher sees two little kids fighting and takes one of them aside and says, “What happened?” and he says, “Well, it all started when he hit me back.” That is how it feels when we are in a fight. Everything was just fine after what you did, but then they had to do and retaliate. When we have the impulse to take revenge, that is not a noble remnant of divine justice in our hearts. It is nothing more than the ugly, wicked sin of self-love.

2 Timothy 3:2 People will be lovers of themselves

And what happens when people become lovers of themselves? Just read the rest of the paragraph. They become...

lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, 3 without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, 4 treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God

Self-love is an attitude that says, “My preferences are supreme. My comfort is the greatest good. The happiness or wellbeing of other people is irrelevant. The glory of God is irrelevant. What matters is ME, and nothing else.” Think about it – when someone really hurts you, and you have that instant reaction of the flesh that says, “I just want to strike back” – how focused are you at that moment on that other person’s joy or wellbeing? It is the farthest thing from your mind. When we have the impulse to retaliate we are not thinking about what is best for the other person at all. Nor are we thinking about what would most glorify God. Someone hurts us and self-love takes over and suddenly we think we are God. Not in those terms of course. We do not literally say “I am God” – but what else is it when we behave as though our will and our desires were supreme – more important than everyone around us and more important than the Lord Himself.

Vengeance is an ugly sin. And yet, as wicked as it is, it is one of the most common sins we commit. Every one of us struggles with it at some level. Most people have enough self control to not physically attack someone when they have been hurt, but we all have our forms of revenge. What do you do when your wife is in a bad mood? Do you ever just let yourself drop into a foul mood toward her? What do you do when your husband is short with you? Is there an impulse in your heart to be short with him? You make my life a little harder, now it is my job to make your life a little harder.

So vengeance is especially wicked, it is especially common, and it is also especially damaging. It destroys friendships, destroys marriages, destroys businesses, brings countries to war.

And it is all so unnecessary. Think of two married couples. In both marriages, the husband does something that hurts the wife. Wife #1 responds with patience and love. She overlooks it, overcomes that evil with good, then talks to her husband about it and the relationship is restored. Wife #2 decides she needs to teach her husband a lesson. That makes him cool toward her, which makes her cold toward him,

which makes him angry with her, which makes her furious with him, and on it goes until both end up bruised and broken under the shattered debris of a painful divorce. Two couples, the exact same initial offense, one ends in joyful love and the other in bitter divorce.

And for what? Revenge is one of those strange temptations that does not really offer us any pleasure. When you strike back, you do not feel happiness – you feel anger. It is not fun being in a fight, and yet it is tempting to us. Satan does not always use pleasure as his bait when he tempts us. Sometimes he just does what he did with Eve – “You will be like God.”

This is a hard message in this culture because we live in a world that exalts self-esteem, self-love, pride, and even revenge as virtues. Our heroes in the movies are tough guys who will not take anything from anybody.

The Pharisees’ Application of the Law: Legalized Revenge

We have been going through the Sermon on the Mount and in this section of the Sermon Jesus is giving one example after another of how the traditions of the religious leaders were off the mark. Those traditions were the rabbis’ attempt at properly interpreting and applying the Old Testament Law of God. But Jesus is showing them that their applications of God’s Word were way off.

38 You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.'

That was another one of their bogus traditions. And once again Jesus uses language designed to throw us for a loop and force us to think. He started this whole section by saying, “I have not come to abolish the Law.” And then when He gives examples of what he is arguing against and what He is abolishing – it sounds like the Old Testament Law. And eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth is an exact quotation from Scripture. In fact, three different times in the Law God commanded, “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” So Jesus says, “Do not think I have come to abolish the Law, but when you say, “An eye for an eye” you are way off.”

So once again we see that it is possible to get the words exactly right and get the application dead wrong.

What was their application? Well, if you look at what Jesus goes on to say you see that their error was that they applied the eye for an eye command to personal relationships. If someone hurts you, get even – an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. They turned the eye for an eye command into legalized revenge.

People today are the same as the Pharisees

Now, most people today do not like the eye for an eye command. It sounds barbaric to them, so they do not use that as their excuse for taking revenge. Instead they talk about rights. “You have got to stand up for your rights!” So even though people today do not use the eye for an eye command as their excuse like the Pharisees did, still, in practice, they do exactly the same thing. Same sin – different justification, but either way it is still revenge. When you inadvertently cut too close in front of someone on the highway, and they lean on their horn even when there is no danger – what is that? It is revenge. Weather you speed past them and cut them off - or just leer at them when you drive by - or yell something - or flash your lights - or just honk your horn to let them know they did something wrong – none of it has any purpose other than vengeance.

The Law: Justice

For the law courts, not personal relationships (justice, not vengeance)

So their mistake was using the eye for an eye command as an excuse for personal revenge. But if that is not the correct application, what is? Let’s read the command and see. The first of the three times God gave this command was in Exodus 21:24.

Exodus 21:22 If men who are fighting hit a pregnant woman and she gives birth prematurely but there is no serious injury, the offender must be fined whatever the woman's husband demands and the court allows. 23 But if there is serious injury, you are to take life for life, 24 eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, 25 burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise. 26 "If a man hits a manservant or maidservant in the eye and destroys it, he must let the servant go free to compensate for the eye. 27 And if he knocks out the tooth of a manservant or maidservant, he must let the servant go free to compensate for the tooth.

So the first thing we see right away is that this was not for personal relationships. It was for the law courts. These are civil matters. Look at v.22 – it is all taking place in court.

We have a saying that means exactly the same thing as the phrase “an eye for an eye” means in Scripture. Our saying is, “The punishment should fit the crime.” And if you keep that out of personal relationships and in the law courts where it belongs, then it is a good principle. It accomplishes three things.

Limits punishment

First, it limits punishment. There are places in the world today where if you shoplift they cut off your hand. Is that effective? Sure it is. They do not have a problem with shoplifting in those cultures. I have heard they do not even have to lock things up – nobody steals. But even though it works, it is wrong. The punishment should fit the seriousness of the crime. You get some kid who has not learned how to think through the consequences of his actions and he caves into the temptation of taking a pack of gum or something, is that serious? Yes. Does it deserve decapitation? No.

It is true that harsh penalties deter crime. And so if a society wants to solve the problem of crime, harsh penalties definitely work. But God has compassion even for criminals. He has compassion on them the same way He has compassion on you and me for our besetting sins. We all know what it is like to be enslaved to some sin. But most of us are considered good citizens because the particular evil we struggle with is not illegal. They do not put you in jail for being prideful or for gossip or grumbling or worry or lacking a compassion for the lost or covetousness – even though those are all very wicked and serious sins in God’s sight. We struggle with those things and fail time after time, and God is patient with us and has compassion and shows us mercy. And there are people just like us who struggle in the same way, and the only difference is the thing they struggle with happens to be illegal in the United States. And so they are considered criminals while we are called good citizens even though there is no real difference between us in the heart.¹

So it should not come as any surprise to us that when God gave Moses His Law, He built into it mercy for criminals. While the surrounding cultures were extremely harsh on criminals, God limited the leaders of His people and said, “The punishment must fit the crime.” You do not cut off someone’s head because he put out someone’s eye. You do not decapitate him because he swiped a pack of gum. An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth – keep the punishment commensurate with the seriousness of the crime.

So it was a law of mercy. And in most cases it was not even carried out in a literal physical way. We just saw that in Exodus 21. And eye for an eye does not mean you gouge out the guy’s eye – it means the slave gets to go free. So it did not always have to be a physical punishment, and in most cases it wasn’t.

Limits leniency

So it was a law that limited the governing authorities in their punishments. But it not only limited harsh governments. It also has a lot to say to governments like ours, which is overly lenient with criminals. In this country we would rather let ten criminals go free than to have one innocent person be convicted unjustly. And so we make it hard to prosecute, and as a result we get lots of crime.

¹ In fact, in some cases the non-criminal is a worse sinner. You might have one man who loves the Lord, but gets overwhelmed in a financial crisis and ends up writing a bad check and goes to prison – even though he is immediately repentant for that sin. And you can have another man who blasphemes God or leads people astray with false doctrine and is completely unrepentant. The first guy is called a criminal and the second guy is a good citizen in the eyes of the world. But it is the exact opposite in reality.

In the 20th Century more Americans were murdered by fellow Americans than died in both World Wars, the Korean War and the Vietnam War all combined. Crime increases or decreases in proportion to how likely it is that you will get caught and punished and how severe your punishment will be.² In the 60's and 70's, as standards were relaxed, crime rates skyrocketed until they reached an all time high during the 80's. During that time the crime rate increased 400%. Then in 1992 came the three strike law and other crackdowns on criminals. And from that year on there is a sharp, steady drop in crime, so that from '92 to '05 the crime rate dropped about 40%. You increase the likelihood of being punished for crime and you cut crime almost in half – just like that.

In my judgment our society is till way too lenient on criminals for the most part – especially murderers and people who commit violent crimes. If we had a system where if you murder someone, it is pretty much a sure thing that you will be put to death in a matter of weeks – that would save the lives of thousands of murder victims.³

And beyond all that, it should be done simply because it is just. There is something to be said for justice. Man is in the image of God, and so when someone murders a human being it is serious. When we fail to execute a murderer we are treating the murder victim like an animal. We are saying their life was not so important that justice calls for the murderer to be put to death.

Genesis 9:6 Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made man.

You see, Our society has it completely backwards. God calls for justice in the law courts and mercy in personal relationships. But they want mercy in the courts and vengeance in relationships. They want to forgive the criminals, and yet carry out their vendettas and retaliate when they are wronged. That is why if you irritate a peace protester he is likely to punch you in the mouth.

So the principle of an eye for an eye is an important principle for justice in a society. The punishment should fit the crime. The government should not be too harsh, nor should it be too lenient. And there is no place for pity in the courts.

Deuteronomy 19:21 Show no pity: life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot.

The court is not the place for pity. There was a judge in California who felt sorry for a murderer so he let him go free, and that guy promptly went and raped and murdered a nine year old girl. I suppose the judge then felt sorry for the little girl. When you are too lenient on criminals it is not loving – it is cruel. It is cruel to the future victims of that criminal, and it is cruel to the victims of future criminals who commit crimes because of the general climate of permissiveness. There are women who are raped who would not have to go through that if we dealt more decisively with rapists. We get really uptight over cruel and unusual punishment of a criminal, but what about cruel and unusual punishment of innocent victims at the hands of the criminals we keep setting free? The blood of many crime victims is on the heads of overly lenient judges and lawmakers.

Eliminates revenge

So, what was the point of the eye for an eye standard in the Old Testament? It limited harshness, it limited leniency, and it did one other thing. It took revenge out of the hands of the individual. If someone put out your eye God wanted the courts to determine the penalty – not you. If you have individuals in charge of punishing each other for offenses, those who have the power to do so will always over-punish and start a snowballing cycle of revenge, and those without the power to do anything will just be victims

² Some people have suggested that crime was caused mainly by poverty and lack of education. But we are one of the wealthiest and best educated societies in the history of the world, and yet we have a terrible problem with crime.

³ Some argue that the death penalty is not a deterrent because murder is a crime of passion – people do not even think about the consequences. Murder isn't always done without premeditation. The definition of first degree murder is that it is premeditated, and there are still plenty of first degree murders. And besides that, one thing I can say with absolute certainty is that no one who was executed ever murdered again. So even if it doesn't deter all first time murders, it definitely prevents repeat offences.

of injustice. And so God gave us government to take care of punishing crime to protect the weak and to eliminate personal revenge.

Allows for both forgiveness and justice

And that is a wonderful system, because it allows for both forgiveness and justice. If someone burns down my house or murders my family I can forgive him and show kindness to him, and the government can take care of meeting out justice and protect society from him.

The difference between the individual and the government

That is why it is not a contradiction when Deuteronomy 19:21 says **Show no pity** and a passage like Zechariah 7:9 says **show mercy and compassion to one another**. The first one is talking to the law court and the second one is talking to the individual. The Old Testament standard is for there to be love and mercy and compassion and patience and forgiveness in personal relationships; and justice in the law courts. The standard of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth was a good standard. Jesus is not abolishing that law. All He is doing is showing the Pharisees that they were wrong to try to apply it to personal relationships. There are lots of differences between what the government should do and what individuals should do. For example, it is appropriate for the government to require the payment of taxes, and to enforce that so if you do not pay your taxes you go to jail. That is appropriate. But it is not appropriate for you to do that in personal relationships. You cannot go next door and say to your neighbor, "I just passed a law this morning at the breakfast table that requires you to pay me \$100/week. If you do not comply I will lock you up in my basement." There are all kinds of things that are appropriate and good for the government that are not appropriate for individual relationships. And retribution is one of them.

In order to be merciful and loving to society a government must be unmerciful to criminals. If every time a criminal stood before a judge that judge said, "We forgive you. No hard feelings. We just want to love you and serve you. And if you commit this crime again we will forgive you again. And if you do it again after that and again – 70 times 7 times we will continue to forgive you" – you would have an absolute holocaust of crime. It would be anarchy.

"What if someone commits a crime against me but the legal system is set up such that he is not automatically punished if I do not pursue it? Should I press charges or just forgive and forget?" Both. Forgive him – do not hold a grudge, do not bear animosity, if he is thirsty give him a cup of cold water, if he is lost give him the gospel, show him kindness, do not hold on to anger, and do not retaliate in any way. But if he is a danger to other people then you should press charges. If there is vengeance in your heart as you do it then confess that sin and repent of it. But do not let your personal forgiveness short-circuit justice for society either.

When someone sins they sin in three directions – against you, against society and against God. You only have the power to forgive the first one. You can forgive the part that was against you, but you do not have the right to forgive the part that was against society or God. If a burglar goes free because I wanted to be forgiving, then he comes and robs your house, you are not going to be too happy with me. My forgiveness can only go as far as my relationship with that person, but it is not an excuse to short circuit justice for society.

The Old Testament teaching on vengeance

So, what was the purpose of the eye for an eye law? Legal justice, not personal vengeance. In fact, personal revenge was strictly prohibited in the Old Testament.

Proverbs 24:29 Do not say, "I'll do to him as he has done to me; I'll pay that man back for what he did."

The only thing we need to pay to one another is love.

Leviticus 19:18 Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbor as yourself.

If you feel like you need to teach someone a lesson teach them a lesson on how to humble yourself and forgive.

David's Example

And the fact that the Old Testament demands an eye for an eye in the law courts and absolutely forbids revenge in personal relationships shows how different personal interactions are from legal ones. David is a great example of that. In 1 Samuel 25 David received a huge insult. After David had shown great kindness to Nabal's house for months and months, when David asked for a favor Nabal was rude and belligerent. And David had a very sinful response. He wanted to get revenge. But by God's grace Abigail stopped him, and saved him from bringing guilt on his head. It would have been sin for David to take revenge. But then after he became king it was righteous for him to punish people like Nabal, because as the head of the government he was in charge of justice.

Jesus' Application of the Law: Mercy

Responding to an insult

39 But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.

This word translated **strikes** is a word that means "to slap" with an open hand. There was one Greek word for punching with a fist and another word for a slap,⁴ and this is the word for a slap. It is important to understand that Jesus is not talking here about a situation where you are being attacked or are at risk of some injury. It is just a slap. So the issue here is not about a physical attack that would cause injury – but rather an insult. It was an act of contempt and insult that was so severe that both Roman and Jewish law allowed you to press charges against someone for a slap in the face. The Jews said that the most demeaning, contemptuous act was to slap someone in the face – especially with the back of the hand. A Roman slave by the name of Epitetus wrote, "A slave would rather be thrashed with a whip than slapped with the back of his master's hand." Why? Because pain is to be preferred over humiliation. And it is interesting that Jesus specifies the **right cheek**. Most people are right handed, and so to be slapped on your right cheek means it is a backhanded swat. The other possibility would be that the person is slapping you with his left hand, and that was also seen as especially insulting.⁵ And the person found guilty of slapping you in the face would have to pay you financial damages. And if it was a backhanded slap or a left-handed slap they had to pay double.

Everyone knows that you have to be able to just overlook an insult at some level. But there is a tipping point beyond which most people say, "That is going too far – I am not going to stand for that." And whatever that tipping point is, Jesus goes way beyond it to describe an insult so extreme that it was illegal.

And so the principle is not limited here to a physical slap in the face. What Jesus says here applies to any situation where you are insulted or dishonored or demeaned. In fact we use that today as a figure of speech. We say, "That was such a slap in the face." That does not mean there was any actual physical contact – it is just a way of describing any extreme insult.

Turn the other cheek

And when something like that happens, Jesus says "Turn the other cheek." You are in a dispute with someone, it escalates to the point where he says does something especially insulting and hurtful and humiliating, and suddenly you realize, "This is wrong," and you stop trying to win, you humble yourself

⁴ Both words are used in **Matthew 26:67 Then they spit in his face and struck him with their fists. Others slapped him**

⁵ France NICNT 220.

and you do not try to get in one last stab. You do not have to have the last word. Just stop fighting, and just absorb the insult and return kindness.

“But then he’ll think he won!” So what? Which is more important – to think you won or to actually win? And the first one to humble himself and rise above the argument wins. But as long as you keep going with the counter punches (even if they are just verbal), nobody wins.

Galatians 5:15 If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other.

Do not resist

And so Jesus says, **Do not resist an evil person.** The word **resist** means to fight against. Do not be drawn in to fights. And do not draw other people into fights.

Why not rather be wronged?

The people in the church of Corinth were fighting with each other and even taking each other to court, and Paul said, “Wouldn’t it be better for you to just be wronged than to fight against each other?”

1 Corinthians 6:7 The very fact that you have lawsuits among you means you have been completely defeated already. Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be cheated?

If I get wronged or cheated or offended or slandered – so what? What harm does that do? None, because God will make it all right someday. But if I turn it into a fight – that really does do some harm. And so Paul says as soon as I do that I have been completely defeated.

That was a lesson Paul had to learn the hard way. When the High Priest ordered someone to smack him in the face he said, “God smack you, you whitewashed wall.”⁶ He ended up having to apologize for that. Contrast that with Jesus. They slapped Him and punched Him and spit on Him and beat Him and what did He say? “Father forgive them.”

1 Peter 2:23 When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly.

You can trust God for justice.

Deuteronomy 32:35 It is Mine to avenge, and I will repay

Proverbs 20:22 Do not say, "I'll pay you back for this wrong!" Wait for the LORD, and he will deliver you.

When you trust in the justice of God, and you believe His promise to make all the wrongs right, you are free to respond in a gracious way. When we get revenge it is because we do not think God can be trusted to take care of it.

Use your rights for the sake of the kingdom, rather than demanding them for the sake of your comfort or dignity

“But what about my rights?” Do you have the right to be treated well? Yeah, you do. You bear the image of God, and you should therefore be treated with respect and honor. You have all kinds of rights. Every freedom God allows us in Scripture you have the right to enjoy.

So do you have rights? Sure, but that is not the most important question. The question is not do you have rights; the question is what should you do with them? Should you selfishly demand them or strategically use them? The world tells us to just blindly demand all our rights. Will it harm other people?

⁶ Acts 23:1-5.

Will it do damage to the cause of Christ? “Doesn’t matter – they are your rights, so demand them.” That’s the world’s approach.

And that would make perfect sense if I were God and my desires were supreme - if I bought in to this world’s religion of self-love, where self is on the throne to be served above all. But I have died to self. Jesus called me to take up my cross and follow Him. The place for self is not on the throne but on the cross. My desires are not supremely important – Christ’s kingdom is. And so rights are tools for me to make strategic use of in serving Him.

A good example of that is Paul. When he was put in chains without a trial in Acts 23 he invokes his legal rights as a Roman citizen. But back in ch.16 when they put him in stocks in Philippi he did not mention anything about his citizenship. When it was beneficial for the sake of the kingdom of God to claim his rights, he did so. And when it was beneficial to the kingdom of God for him to be in stocks, he set his rights aside.

And he did the same thing in Corinth. In 1 Corinthians 9 he says, “I have the right to take a wife and I have the right to take a salary but I have set both those rights aside for the sake of the ministry.”

Jesus told Peter that the Son of God had the right to be exempt from the Temple tax. But since it was more advantageous not to offend, He went ahead and paid it.

Our rights are tools to be used or set aside for the benefit of others and the sake of the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ. That is why when it was not time for Jesus to die yet, He did not allow them to arrest Him.

But then when the time came

Isaiah 50:6 I offered my back to those who beat me, my cheeks to those who pulled out my beard; I did not hide my face from mocking and spitting.

Pacifism?

Now, does this mean we are to be pacifists? Some people have argued from this text that Christians should not serve in the military or be police officers, and that we should not ever be involved in any kind of violence whatsoever. If someone attacks you, just turn the other cheek and let him beat you to a pulp. If he attacks your family just stand there and watch. I heard this week of a man who watched someone attack his daughter and wife and did not lift a finger to resist because of this verse. A couple verses later Jesus says, “**Give to those who ask of you.**” So if someone breaks into your home and steals some things you just catch him on the way out the door and say, “Would you like anything else?” Is that what Jesus is saying here? No, I believe that is a misapplication of this text. Jesus is talking about insults, not attacks.

Self Defense

Self-defense is another issue. The reason retaliation is wrong is because it is a violation of love, which is the supreme law. But the law of love does not forbid self-defense. In fact, just the opposite. It is not loving to allow someone to commit a crime against you or your family. It is not loving to the criminal. The farther he progresses into the crime the more damage he does to himself spiritually, so it is not loving to let him continue.

That’s why the Old Testament Law does not penalize a person for defending his home from a thief.

Exodus 22:2,3 If a thief is caught breaking in and is struck so that he dies, the defender is not guilty of bloodshed; 3 but if it happens after sunrise, he is guilty of bloodshed.

If it is a situation in which the person can be safely apprehended, it is wrong for you to kill him. However if it is uncertain whether he can be safely apprehended, and he is presenting a threat, you bear no guilt if you kill him. God was providing for self-defense and defense of one’s family by means of lethal force if necessary.

And lest you think that is just part of the Old Testament, do not forget what Jesus said to the 70 when He sent them out in Lk.22.

Luke 22:35-38 Then Jesus asked them, "When I sent you without purse, bag or sandals, did you lack anything?" "Nothing," they answered. 36 He said to them, "But now if you have a purse, take it, and also a bag; and if you do not have a sword, sell your cloak and buy one. ... 38 The disciples said, "See, Lord, here are two swords." "That is enough," he replied.⁷

"Last time when I sent you out I promised I would take care of you and I did. Everything went smoothly. But this time it will not be like that. This time you are going to need to bring some money, some supplies, and most importantly, a sword.⁸ It is going to get rough out there."

So I do not believe Jesus is teaching pacifism or forbidding self-defense here. He is simply saying when you are insulted, do not respond in kind.

Conclusion: Look to God for Your Dignity

When we fight for our dignity it is because we care more about man's opinion than about God's. There are two ways to get honor. You can get it from man or from God. If we disobey Christ to defend our honor before men, we forfeit honor from God. But in order to be honored by God we must be willing to be despised by men – you have to pick one or the other. Either be willing to be the loser in fights with men, or be a loser in a war against God.

Is it hard for you to deal with being dishonored in the eyes of people? Are there people out there who, if they are disappointed in you or look down on you, it bothers you so much that you are driven to compromise in your walk with the Lord rather than have them look down on you? What your soul is craving is honor and dignity. And that is not wrong. The solution is not to become a worthless worm. The solution is to seek real honor and real dignity – the honor and dignity that comes when God points to you and says to all your enemies, "She is pleasing in my sight!"

And it is not wrong to seek that kind of honor. In fact, if you do not seek honor from God you cannot go to heaven.

Romans 2:7 To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor and immortality, he will give eternal life.

You get eternal life if and only if you seek immortality, honor, and glory from God.

There are a lot of wonderful things about the God we serve – an infinite number of reasons to love Him and rejoice in Him and desire Him and delight in Him. We call those reasons to rejoice in Him His attributes. One of them is the fact that He is a God who bestows honor on His people. If you take just a couple minutes to think about how awesome and great He is, and how puny and sinful we are, it is an astonishing thought that He would honor us.

⁷ This passage has been variously interpreted. I looked at 10 commentaries, and all 10 come to the conclusion that Jesus was not instructing His disciples to get actually acquire and use swords. Many of the older commentators suggested Jesus was talking about spiritual swords (evidently those are expensive enough to where you have to sell your cloak to buy one). I do not think that's a possibility, because in v.35 Jesus establishes that He is discussing literal purses, bags, sandals and swords.

The most common pacifist interpretation is that Jesus wanted them to buy swords in order that they might appear to be outlaws. Those people point to v.37 and say Jesus was trying to get a group of disciples that appeared to be presenting an armed resistance to Rome, so Jesus can die as a companion of transgressors. They say Jesus couldn't have been talking about self-defense, because two swords is hardly enough to defend themselves.

I see that argument as working the other way. It seems to me that two swords is plenty for self-defense. If you were a mugger along the road and here came 12 men, at least two of whom are armed, would you mess with them? On the other hand, do we really think that the Roman Empire would regard 2 swords as a serious uprising against the government?

I do not think the reference to Jesus being numbered with the transgressors probably means He and His followers will be treated like common criminals. Even though it is a minority view, I really think the best way to interpret this passage is as a straightforward statement. He doesn't say "Do this in order to fulfill this prophecy." He says, "Do this because this prophecy is reaching its fulfillment." Almost all the commentaries say that the reason they are seeking alternate interpretations is because Jesus rebuked Peter for using his sword at Jesus' arrest. Therefore Jesus was against swords. But Jesus always rebuked Peter when Peter tried to prevent Jesus from going to the cross. Jesus isn't talking here about fighting Rome and preventing Jesus' arrest. (Two swords really would be inadequate for that!) Jesus tells them to get 4 things: a sword, a purse, a bag and some sandals. He's not talking about war with Rome. He's talking about basic provisions for life in a rough world.

⁸ The cloak was important for keeping warm at night, but as important as it was Jesus says, "If you can't afford a sword then sell your cloak and buy one." Obviously it is better to be cold than dead.

And another marvelous attribute is the fact that the honor He bestows is honor that is worth seeking. It is not like human honor. You could become so popular that this whole world is clamoring at your feet - millions of fans – screaming your name when you walk out on a stage, and what would it mean? It would puff up your ego for a little while and then be gone. In the day of trouble – when you lose a child or get diagnosed with cancer – it would mean *nothing*. But the honor that is from God – oh how worthy that is of our desire. Hearing “Well done, good and faithful servant” – that will bring joy that will last for all eternity.

Seeking honor from men is selfish. Seeking honor from God is not selfish – it is worship. It glorifies God because it shows Him to be the one whose favor is to be desired.

Have you been insulted? Slighted? Ignored? Marginalized? Has someone in this church or in your home or somewhere else been short with you, or insensitive or harsh? Turn the other cheek. You do not need to get the last word in or teach them a lesson. It is OK if they think they won and you lost. You do not need to win – let Christ win. Let’s love one another, and seek all our honor from Him.

Benediction: Eph.3:20,21 Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, 21 to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever