

# Sermons on Matthew

*Matthew 5:38-42*

Turn the Other Cheek

*With Study Questions*

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# Turn the Other Cheek

*Matthew 5:38-42*

**You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’<sup>39</sup> But I tell you not to resist an evil person. But whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also.<sup>40</sup> If anyone wants to sue you and take away your tunic, let him have *your* cloak also.<sup>41</sup> And whoever compels you to go one mile, go with him two.<sup>42</sup> Give to him who asks you, and from him who wants to borrow from you do not turn away (Matthew 5:38-42).**

## **Introduction**

First, we will review a righteousness that exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees. Second, we will seek to reconcile a conundrum—is it an eye for an eye, or turn the other cheek? Third, what is the biblical method of retaliation? Fourth, how should the Christian respond to evil?

## **An Exceeding Righteousness**

In this portion of the Sermon on the Mount (verses 21-48), Jesus is presenting six examples of a righteousness that exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees—a righteousness necessary for entrance into the kingdom of heaven.

**For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds *the righteousness* of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 5:20).**

How does one evaluate whether their righteousness sufficiently exceeds the righteousness of these high profile clergymen (scribes and Pharisees) who strained to display every outward appearance of good behavior? Clearly we are not called to play a game of one-ups-man-ship. We aren't to look at the Pharisees and try to be a percent or two better than they.

One needn't search too far to discover that Jesus was utterly unimpressed with their outward displays of piety. We must, therefore, also assume that He would be utterly unimpressed with those who merely ape their behavior, even if in imitating their behavior they were able to bring it to a higher level.

### **A Qualitative Difference**

The problem is remedied when one's behavior proceeds from a faithful heart (Hebrews 11:6). We cannot remove the words of Jesus from the context of the Christian faith. When one rejects Jesus (as the Pharisees did) no amount of good works is acceptable to God. Their righteousness is as a filthy rag (Isaiah 64:6).

In order for someone's works to be acceptable before God, *they* must be acceptable before God. If President Bush were dining and a bottle of wine was sent to his table from Osama Bin Laden, it would likely be rejected. The gift is rejected because the person offering the gift is unacceptable. Because men, by nature, are enemies of God (Romans 8:7), no one is acceptable before God but through Christ (John 14:6, Acts 4:11).

### **A New Disposition**

When that broken relationship is reconciled by the grace of God, it brings forth a new disposition in those who it touches. It is this disposition that Jesus is seeking to bring forth in the current portion of His message.

The six examples that Jesus gives will reveal that when a person, by the grace of God, truly calls upon the name of the Lord, they will evidence that faith by seeking to live a life of faithfulness, both inwardly and outwardly. In short, if Christ is your genuine Savior, He will also be your genuine Lord—not merely Lord of your actions but of your thoughts as well.

### **Previous Examples**

In His first example Jesus taught that malicious thoughts are to be constrained and are sufficient to hold one culpable for damnation (Matthew 5:21-26). He proceeded to make the same point regarding lust

(Matthew 5:27-30). Jesus then moved from impure thoughts to the impure actions which flow from those thoughts. These actions included a capricious disposition toward divorce (Matthew 5:31, 32) and then trifling with vows in general (Matthew 5:33-37).

In this fifth example Jesus will address the *lex talionis*—the law of retaliation.

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### Reconciling a Conundrum

There are very few passages in the Bible more mistreated than the one before us. And generally the mistreatments are a result of categorical fallacies—when a statement is assigned to a category to which it doesn’t belong. People will boldly quote ‘an eye for an eye’ in their quest for personal revenge, while others softly render ‘turn the other cheek’ as an argument against the death penalty.

### An Unchanging Law

Jesus is addressing what had become a common misuse of the law of retaliation<sup>1</sup>, i.e. “eye for eye, tooth for tooth,” (Exodus 21:24; Leviticus 24:20; Deuteronomy 19:21). Contrary to popular opinion Jesus is not repealing this law. In the Old Testament (at a time when everyone agrees that the law of retaliation was in full effect) God calls His people to avoid personal retaliation.

**Do not say, “I will recompense evil”; Wait for the Lord, and He will save you (Proverbs 20:22).**

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<sup>1</sup> This law also protected those who committed a crime from undo punishment. It would be eye for eye not head for eye.

**Do not say, "I will do to him just as he has done to me; I will render to the man according to his work" (Proverbs 24:29).**

The law was and is 'Do not recompense evil; wait for the Lord'. Peter tells us to follow the example of Jesus,

**...who, when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed *Himself* to Him who judges righteously (1 Peter 2:23).**

This conundrum is reconciled when we realize that 'eye for eye' is civil, and 'turn the other cheek' is personal.

## **Retaliation**

### **Retaliation is God's Business**

How should retaliation be exacted? The law of retaliation does not allow, nor did it ever allow, personal unrestrained vengeance. Retaliation is God's business. And in the present context it is something that God does through civil government. This was the clear teaching of the Old Testament (Leviticus 24:17-23; Numbers 35:31). It is also the clear teaching of the New Testament.

In the twelfth chapter of Romans Paul instructs Christians to avoid their own personal vengeance (instead they should be gracious to their antagonists) and give place for God's vengeance.

**Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but *rather* give place to wrath; for it is written, "*Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,*" says the Lord. <sup>20</sup> Therefore "*If your enemy is hungry, feed him; If he is thirsty, give him a drink; For in so doing you will heap coals of fire on his head.*" <sup>21</sup> Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good (Romans 12:19-21).**

Then, in the very next verse, Paul reveals the instrument of God's vengeance.

**Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God. <sup>2</sup> Therefore whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves. <sup>3</sup> For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil. Do you want to be unafraid of the authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same. <sup>4</sup> For he is God's minister to you for good. But if you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God's minister, an avenger to *execute* wrath on him who practices evil. <sup>5</sup> Therefore *you* must be subject, not only because of wrath but also for conscience' sake. <sup>6</sup> For because of this you also pay taxes, for they are God's ministers attending continually to this very thing. <sup>7</sup> Render therefore to all their due: taxes to whom taxes *are due*, customs to whom customs, fear to whom fear, honor to whom honor (Romans 13:1-7).**

The civil magistrates (presidents, legislators, judges, policemen *et al.*) should view themselves as God's ministers<sup>2</sup> of vengeance. They are to ensure that there is a proper retaliation—a just punishment—for crimes. And when they fail they fail to exact proper punishments, they are tempting civilians to take matters into their own hands.

## **A Christian Response to Evil**

### **Other Categorical Fallacies**

In light of Christ's words, how should Christians respond to evil? Because these questions plague us, let us head other categorical fallacies off at the pass. Jesus is not saying we should never resist any evil person under any circumstances. Remember, Jesus' words do not repeal the Old Testament Law (Matthew 5:17) which teaches the following:

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<sup>2</sup> The term 'minister' is still often used, e.g. Prime Minister or Minister of Defense. People who hold these offices should take heed as to who they are ministering for.

**If the thief is caught while breaking in, and is struck so that he dies, there will be no bloodguiltiness on his account” (Exodus 22:2).**

The necessary implication of the above passage is that people have the right and responsibility to protect their families and possessions.

When He teaches to give away our cloaks He is not teaching that there is no private property (Exodus 20:15). When He teaches to go the extra mile or lend to those who ask, He is not teaching us to be fool-hardy or negligent of our duties and possessions. Lending has its own criteria.

**A good man deals graciously and lends; He will guide his affairs with discretion (Psalm 112:5).**

Nor are we to be a contributor to someone else’s poor behavior. Calvin, I believe, properly clarifies,

**Unquestionably, Christ did not intend to exhort his people to whet the malice of those, whose propensity to injure others is sufficiently strong.<sup>3</sup>**

Paul writes,

**Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another (Galatians 5:26).**

Christians are not to sit idly while poor behavior surrounds them unchecked. In so doing we are actually tempting others to sin.

### **The Example of Jesus**

We aren’t to encourage or tempt others to slap, steal, abuse or be irresponsible with money—even our own. Jesus is not saying evil should not be confronted. Though Jesus was the scapegoat (Leviticus 16) for fallen

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<sup>3</sup>Calvin, J. (1998). *Calvin's Commentaries: The Harmony of the Gospels : Calvin's Commentary on Matthew, Mark, and Luke* (electronic ed.). Logos Library System;Calvin's Commentaries. Albany, OR: Ages Software.

humanity, it should never be thought that He was a foolish doormat. He didn't ignore or countenance his detractors.

**And when He had said these things, one of the officers who stood by struck Jesus with the palm of his hand, saying, "Do You answer the high priest like that?"<sup>23</sup> Jesus answered him, "If I have spoken evil, bear witness of the evil; but if well, why do you strike Me?" (John 18:22, 23).**

Jesus didn't fail to warn those who took rank against Him (Luke 23:28-31).

### **No Grudge-Bearing—Peacemakers**

Simply put, Jesus is teaching that at a personal level we are not to nurture a temperament of grudge-bearing and reprisal. The sincere citizen of Christ's kingdom will recognize such an attitude as sinful and one of which we must repent.

Let us be reminded that the Kingdom of God is inhabited by peacemakers (Matthew 5:9). We are not to look for reasons to justify our own malicious attitudes toward others—even those who have genuinely wronged us. But we are to have a perennial extended hand of reconciliation.

Perhaps I have spent more time correcting false conclusions drawn from this passage. But let us not miss the point—we are not to meet a conflict with an eye to further conflict but rather peacefulness and resolution. Christians aren't to be vindictive or retaliatory. Christians are to be acutely and continually aware of their own sin before God and God's continual gracious disposition toward them. It is our great comfort and peace. We should seek to extend that peace toward others.



## Questions for Study

1. What are some of the characteristics of a righteousness that exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees (pages 2-4)?
2. Is the counsel 'turn the other cheek' contradictory to 'an eye for an eye'? Explain (pages 4, 5).
3. In the present context, how does God exact retaliation (pages 5, 6)?
4. Is Jesus teaching that Christians should never resist evil at any time (pages 6-8)?
5. What is the proper Christian response to evil (page 8)?