

Matthew 5:38-42 *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 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.*

“An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth” sounds like something out of a pirate movie. It comes across to us as savage and bloodthirsty – certainly not the way of our loving and merciful God. And we don’t just encounter this principle once in the Old Testament – it is repeated three times – in Exodus 21:23-25, Leviticus 24:17-20 and Deuteronomy 19:17-21. So it is clearly something that God considered important to communicate.

We often hear “an eye for an eye” out of context. But as we examine the context we find that it is not at all a statement of vicious retaliation, but quite the opposite – it was the beginning of mercy and an equalizer of justice.

THE LAW

In Exodus 21, Moses is relating God’s law regarding personal injuries. Then, like now, those who were caused a personal injustice – like being punched in the face, were prone to want to punch back harder. I can relate. My first “human” inclination to being wronged is to “get even” or even to go beyond getting even. The golden rule is often turned into “Do unto others first, before they do unto you.” These are natural inclinations, but Jesus is calling us to live a supernatural life with supernatural inclinations.

Jesus is asking me to FORGO MY OWN “RIGHTS”. Because the truth is, I have no rights. When I became a disciple of Jesus I “died to self.” (Matt 16:24–27; Mark 8:34–38; and Luke 9:23–27)

When we look at the Law given in Exodus 21 with regard to personal injuries, there could not possibly be a law given for every possible scenario, so Moses gives a blanket law restricting the punishment to match the injury, lest the injured party try to retaliate beyond the offense.

Exodus 21:23-25 *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.*

While many see this as a brutal, unforgiving punishment from a vengeful, bloodthirsty God, really it was a gracious restriction to keep judicial punishments fair and equal, not letting the penalty exceed the action. This was never meant to be interpreted as to how to personally retaliate. Rather, this was the divine guideline for the maximum of judicial punishment after a trial had been held.

Deuteronomy 19:18 *The judges shall investigate thoroughly, and if the witness is a false witness and he has accused his brother falsely, then you shall do to him just as he had intended to do to his brother. Thus you shall purge the evil from among you. 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.*

Notice a few important things about “eye for eye”:

1. It was a principle of JUDICIAL RULING, not of personal retaliation
2. It was the MAXIMUM ruling when the case so dictated
3. It was a RESTRICTION so as not to allow the punishment to exceed the wrongdoing

In short, it was a merciful ruling. The point was, the punishment was not to exceed the offense. This is good advice for parents, employers or anyone tasked with dealing out punishment for wrong doing. In essence, God was saying “my punishments are always just, and yours should be as well.”

Never imagine that eyes were gouged out, teeth were extracted or limbs were cut off to follow the gruesome guidelines of an angry God. This was a PRINCIPLE, not a PRACTICE. The point was that the punishment should always match the severity of the injury done, and no more. God was protecting his people from viciousness, not promoting it.

THE MISINTERPRETATION

But the Rabbis who came along after, interpreted this as always giving the maximum penalty for an injury, and as a guide for personal retaliation as well as judicial ruling. And by the time of Jesus, the Scribes and Pharisees - diligent interpreters and keepers of the Law – were promoting punishments that often exceeded that of the wrong, believing they were keeping God’s Law even more fastidiously. And the punishment was often not done judiciously, but maliciously. An example of this can be seen in the apostle John’s relating of the Pharisees bringing a woman caught in the act of adultery and bringing her roughly and undoubtedly indecently before Jesus for pronouncement of judgment. (John 8).

John 8:3-6a *The scribes and the Pharisees brought a woman caught in adultery, and having set her in the center of the court, they said to [Jesus], “Teacher, this woman has been caught in adultery, in the very act. Now in the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women; what then do You say?” They were saying this, testing Him, so that they might have grounds for accusing Him.*

The general principle, then, is that God does not want His kingdom citizens to have a retaliatory attitude when wronged.

We are to FORGO any rights we might think we have, for the greater right of showing “love without limits.” For when we show this kind of love we are acting like God.

THE FULFILLMENT: A NON-RETALIATORY SPIRIT

This principle is taught beautifully by the apostle Paul:

Romans 12:17-21 *Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men. If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men. 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.*

This passage written by Paul quotes from Deuteronomy 32:35.

This is the heart of what Jesus is trying to convey:

1. A wrong repaid never makes a “right”
2. Take your cue from what is universally considered “right”
3. Make extra effort to be at peace with as many as possible
4. Know that God will ultimately right all wrongs and His judgment will prevail
5. Surprise your opponent with love and compassion – it just might bring conviction
6. Don’t let evil treatment sour you – rather overwhelm your opponent with goodness

This illustration dealing with revenge and retaliation seems to be a commentary on the final beatitude, which teaches *“blessed are those who have been persecuted for righteousness sake.”* (Matt. 5:10). It shows how persecution can have a “happy” or godly ending.

- (1) Possibly changing the heart of the opponent
- (2) Possibly resulting in a negotiated peace
- (3) Knowing that you have reacted in a godly manner
- (4) Knowing that God will righteously avenge all wrong

FOUR PRACTICAL EXAMPLES

So how does Jesus “fulfill” or “complete” this Law and refute the false interpretation of it?

Answer: He uses 4 practical examples or “visual aids” to make his point. As the “master teacher” He knew that examples from “real life” were great ways to make a point.

Pastor David will expound on these 4 examples in greater detail next week.

1. “Turning the other cheek”
2. “Letting him have your coat also”
3. “Going the extra mile”
4. “Giving to him who asks of you”

But for now, let us simply notice a few points to ponder and consider for next week.

1. These examples are not meant to be taken literally for every situation
2. These are examples that teach the principle of LOVE WITHOUT LIMITS
3. “Not resisting an evil person” is not a call for ...
 - a. Pacifism
 - b. No police force or military
 - c. No personal protection or defense

CONCLUSION

Jesus wants us to get to the heart of the “an eye for an eye” command.

- √ He taught that the heart of murder was anger
- √ He taught that the heart of adultery was lust
- √ He taught that the heart of divorce was not regarding the sanctity of marriage
- √ He taught that the heart of making oaths was not being faithful to my word

So what is the “heart” of “an eye for an eye”?

Is it not that we wrongly want our “right” to retaliation?

Is it not our need to “get even” or go beyond “even”?

Do we not see this in being prone to sue for every possible reason?

And do we not sue to get above and beyond the wrong – suing for “personal injury” or “pain and suffering” incurred?

GOD WANTS HIS KINGDOM CITIZENS TO HAVE A NON-RELATIATORY SPIRIT
GOD WANTS HIS KINGDOM CITIZENS TO SHOW LOVE WITHOUT LIMITS

2 Timothy 2:24 The Lord's bond-servant must not be quarrelsome,
but be kind to all ... patient when wronged.