

Authentic Christians

Lesson 16 – Matthew 5:38-42

1. OT Background

- The “You have heard that it was said ...” formula points again to the perverted teaching of the religious leaders in Jesus’ day and their misunderstanding of the OT Law.
- This is the 4th out of 5 times this formula is used in Matt. 5.
- See Mark 7:9-13 for another example of the Pharisee’s perversion of the OT Law.
- In this case, the Law stated “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth” meaning that the punishment cannot exceed the crime.

*“The words eye for eye, and tooth for tooth come from several Old Testament passages (Ex. 21:24; Lev. 24:20; Deut. 19:21); they are called the *Lex Talionis*, the law of retaliation. This law was given to protect the innocent and to make sure retaliation did not occur beyond the offense.” (The Bible Knowledge Commentary)*

- The *Lex Talionis* (“law of the claw”) was given by God to govern civil situations ... not personal conflicts as the rabbis were teaching ... the command was being used in Jesus’ day for personal offenses and to justify retaliation against those who caused any sort of personal offense.

2. The Structure of the Passage

- Jesus’ instruction was not to resist the “evil person” ... someone defined by four events: 1) slaps you in the face; 2) sues for your undershirt; 3) forces you to walk a mile; and 4) borrows your money without repaying.
- FOUR CASE STUDIES:
 - Slapped on the right cheek (my attitude in the wake of personal insults)
 - The pettiness of the offense is implied by the motivation behind the action and the response Jesus commands – instinctual self-preservation would require a response in kind, but no defense or revenge is allowed when honor is the only thing injured.
 - The contrast Jesus is making (Pharisaical teaching on retaliation within the parameters of the Law VS. a righteousness that exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees) is stark – He returns to the essence of the Law (love for God and love for neighbor).

“... we must rid ourselves of the spirit of retaliation, of the desire to defend ourselves and to revenge ourselves for any injury or wrong that is done to us.” (Lloyd-Jones, Studies in the Sermon on the Mount, pg. 248)

- This illustration DOES NOT PROMOTE pacifism in governmental action – Rom. 13 lays out the limits of the state’s power; this illustration is concerned solely with personal insult.
- Sued for a tunic (my attitude in the wake of legal compulsion)
 - The “shirt” (NASB) or tunic was worn close to the skin and was crafted only for comfort; the “cloak” or coat was the more expensive of the two and was crafted for beauty.

- The “cloak” or coat had a special purpose and enjoyed divine protection (Ex. 22:26-27 – see Mk. 10:50 for an example).
- Articles of clothing were often used as collateral for money borrowed; because of the divine protection on the cloak, the Pharisees often debated whether the tunic could be kept indefinitely as collateral.
- The pettiness of the offense is again implied by the value of the object desired – a tunic would be equivalent in value to our underclothing and easily replaced even by the poorest of people.
- The intent of the offender is to exact revenge or to elicit some vengeful response from the one sued – no one with common sense would sue for a tunic/shirt unless they really meant to create a problem and/or goad a vengeful response from the defendant.

“The lawsuit in this verse might be a legitimate case, but I think there is also an overtone in this passage that suggests that it might even be an unfair settlement. Once again, the idea is not that a Christian is some wimp, that if you get unjustly sued that you shouldn’t put on a defense or you should automatically give the plaintiff all he’s asking for and more. The idea is again that we shouldn’t try to get even. Don’t counter-sue to get them back and make them pay. Instead, be generous with what you own. Hold on to your possessions loosely. So loosely that you’re willing to give them up if the only way to hang onto them is to fight for them, stooping to the same level as the one who is cheating you.” (Chip Bell, “Sweet Revenge”, <http://bible.org/seriespage/sweet-revenge-matthew-538-42-romans-1217-21>)

Where does a Christian draw the line in countersuits?

How do you reconcile this teaching of Christ with the actions of Paul & Silas in Acts 16:37? (Paul reminded the magistrates of their oath to uphold the law)

“When the law is not honored, when it is flagrantly broken, not in any personal interest, not in any way to protect himself, he acts as a believer in God, as one who believes that all law ultimately derives from God.” (Lloyd-Jones, Studies in the Sermon on the Mount, pg. 252)

Frivolous court action is often the norm between two divorcing spouses, if for no other reason than to create misery in the life of the former spouse; should a spouse that is being divorced (defendant) refuse to contest arrangements in a divorce proceeding?

How does 1 Cor. 6:1-11 apply?

- Compelled to walk a mile (my attitude toward the injustices done by the community or State)
 - Roman law allowed a Roman to force a conquered person to walk with a burden for up to a mile (e.g. Simon in Matt. 27:32)
 - Matthew Henry calls this a “wrong to me in my liberty” – I am restrained without cause by nothing more than the selfish whims of someone else.
 - The “law of the claw” (retaliation) would demand a retaliatory response – I am inconve-

nienced and so I will inconvenience you.

“... the attitude of Jesus’ disciples under such circumstances must not be spiteful or vengeful but helpful ...” (Expositor’s Bible Commentary)

- Jesus expects the members of His Kingdom to go beyond what is required of them ... especially when the government makes demands of them that they do not approve.
- This command says nothing about lawfully changing government – it doesn’t say that we can have no interest in politics, only that we are to joyfully and submissively obey whatever laws are in place at the moment.
- Many commentators believe that the reference to “go with him two” actually refers to the spirit or attitude in which the believer walks the 1st mile – his joyful and willing spirit is above and beyond the call of duty.

How does this apply to our submission to the laws of our country? How does our submission and attitude influence our children?

- Default on a debt (my attitude toward the injustices done by those who borrow from me)
 - This command is a reiteration of Deut. 15:7-11.
 - Borrowing and lending have their own risks and rewards (see Prov. 11:15, 17:18, & 22:26) – the point Jesus is making is to be generous and gracious with our finances as opposed to “mercenary, tight-fisted, penny-pinching” (Carson, Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, pg. 55)

“The legalistic mentality which dwells on retaliation and so-called fairness makes much of one’s rights. What Jesus is saying in these verses, more than anything else, is that his followers have no rights ... Personal self-sacrifice displaces personal retaliation ...” (Carson, Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, pg. 55)

Given the injunctions of Lev. 25:35-38 & Prov. 28:8, should a believer lend money at interest to anyone? Should he/she be involved in that aspect of the banking industry?

What is a Christian’s obligation to beggars & panhandlers? What about people who show up at CLBC looking for money or food?

- The generous handling of one’s money is an attribute of the true believer, and the dishonesty of one’s financial commitments is an attribute of an unbeliever (Psalm 37:21).

3. Application

“My self isn’t most displayed when I have done wrong to others, my self is most displayed in my unwillingness to be done wrong. As a follower of Jesus Christ I have no personal rights.” (Mark Minnick in sermon “Relinquishing Rights” preached on 11/12/05)

“No man can practice what our Lord illustrates here unless he has finished with himself, with his right to himself, his right to determine what he shall do, and especially must he finish with what we commonly call the ‘rights of the self’. In other words we must not be concerned about ourselves at all ... We must rid ourselves of this constant tendency to be watching the interests of self, to be always on the lookout for insults or attacks or injuries, always in this defensive attitude.” (Lloyd-Jones, Studies in the Sermon on the Mount, pg. 257)

- 1 Peter 3:8-17 reveals that the unexpected godly behavior of Christians in the midst of conflict has an evangelistic effect on those who are “evil”.
- The desire of God is for His people to imitate the same mercy He expresses to the undeserving.
- Peacemakers (those who resolve conflict biblically) enjoy the blessing of God (See Psalm 34:12-16 & Matt. 5:8).
- Eradication of the flesh (sinful self) will at times require the radical response of Mt. 5:29-30.