

Matthew 5:38-39 Commentary

PREVIOUS

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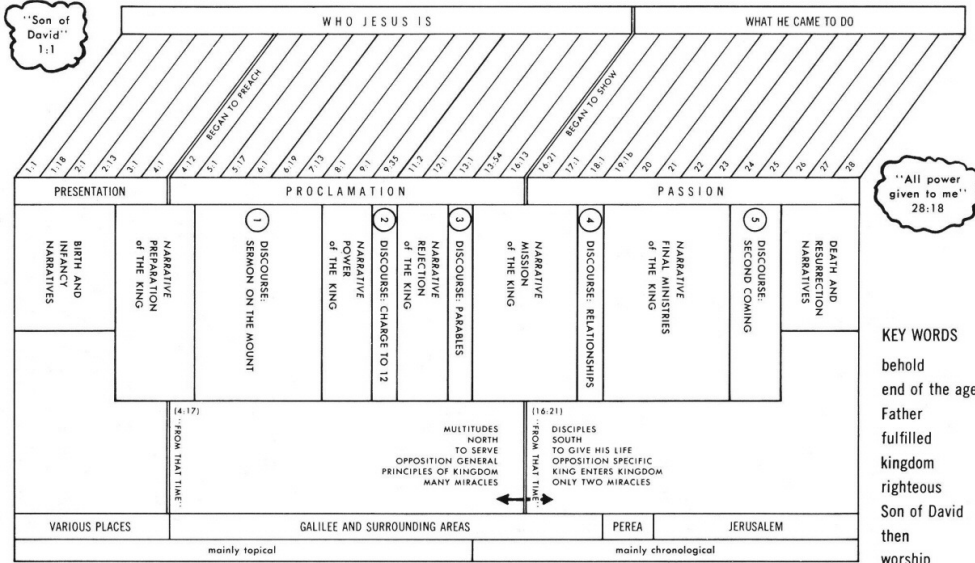
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Sermon on the Mount

MATTHEW CONTAINS
15 PARABLES
20 MIRACLES

KEY VERSES: 1:1 "The book of the generation of
Jesus Christ, the son of David, the
son of Abraham."

2:2 "Where is he that is born King of the Jews?
for we have seen his star in the east, and are
come to worship him."

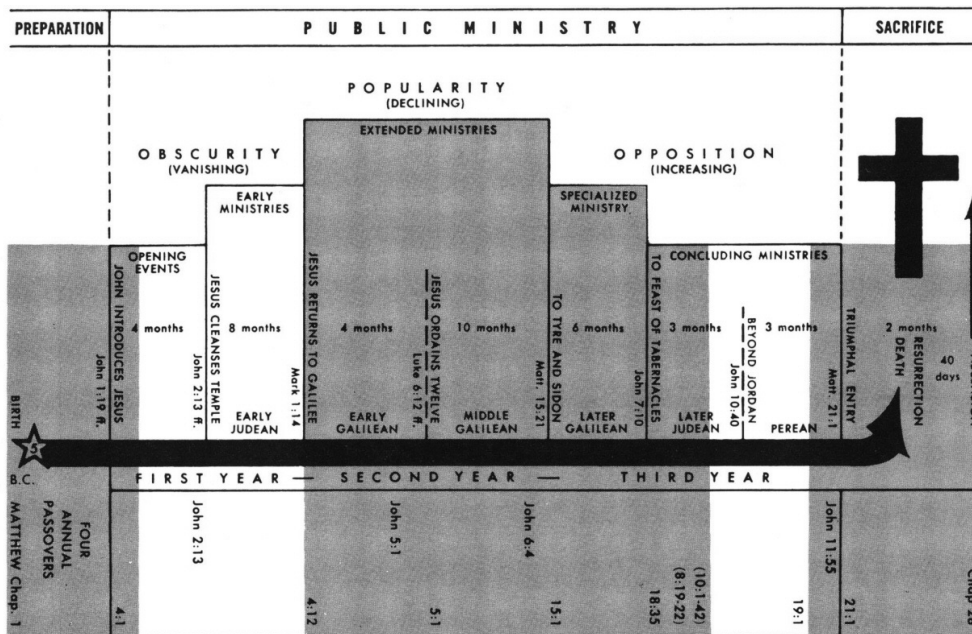


Click chart to enlarge

Charts from Jensen's Survey of the NT - used by permission

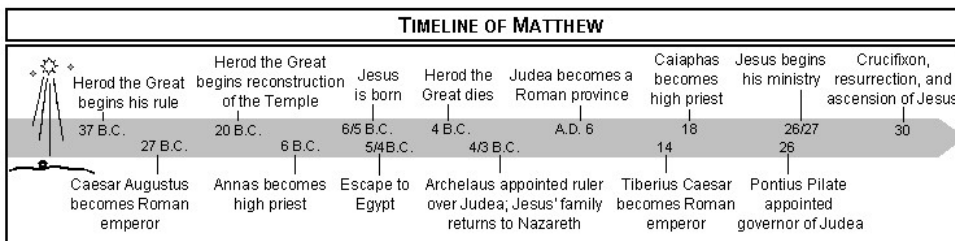
Another Chart from Charles Swindoll

THE LIFE OF JESUS AS COVERED BY MATTHEW (shaded area)



Click chart to enlarge

Jesus Birth and Early Years
Leading up to the Sermon on the Mount
Matthew 1-7



Source: Ryrie Study Bible

Greek: [Ekousate](#) (2PAAI) [oti errethe](#). (3SAPI) [Ophthalmon anti ophthalmou kai odonta anti odontos](#).

Amplified: You have heard that it was said, an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth. [Amplified Bible - Lockman](#))

NLT: "You have heard that the law of Moses says, 'If an eye is injured, injure the eye of the person who did it. If a tooth gets knocked out, knock out the tooth of the person who did it.' ([NLT - Tyndale House](#))

Philips: "You have heard that it used to be said 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth' ([New Testament in Modern English](#))

Wuest: You heard that it was said, An eye in substitution for an eye, a tooth in substitution for a tooth

Young's Literal: 'Ye heard that it was said: Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth;

YOU HAVE HEARD THAT IT WAS SAID, 'AN EYE FOR AN EYE, AND A TOOTH FOR A TOOTH: Ekousate (2PAAI) oti errethe, (3SAPI) Ophthalmon anti ophthalmou kai odonta anti odontos.

- Exodus 21:22-27; Leviticus 24:19,20; Deuteronomy 19:19
- [Matthew 5 Resources](#) - Multiple Sermons and Commentaries
- [Matthew 5:38 An Eye for an Eye, Part 1](#) - John MacArthur
- [Matthew 5:38-42 An Eye for an Eye, Part 2](#) - John MacArthur

The Law of Retaliation: Eye for Eye, Tooth for Tooth

Other titles include - "Justice According to the Law" "Balancing the Scales of Justice" "Equal Retribution: The Old Command" "The Higher Way Beyond Retaliation" "From Justice to Mercy" "Jesus' Challenge to the Law of Retaliation" "A New Ethic: Overcoming the Cycle of Revenge" "Beyond Retribution: The Call to Grace" "The Heart Behind the Law" "From Retribution to Reconciliation" "Breaking the Chain of Vengeance" "Justice or Mercy? The Choice We Face" "From Retribution to Radical Love"

In Matthew 5:38-39 Jesus challenges believers to live according to the values of God's kingdom—choosing mercy, grace, and forgiveness over retaliation. By turning the other cheek, we embody humility, reflect God's love, and break the cycle of revenge.

YOU HAVE HEARD THAT IT WAS SAID - Exact statement in Mt 5:27, 38, 43.

Charles Simeon - IF Christianity be worthy of admiration on account of the sublime mysteries it reveals, it is no less so on account of the pure morality it inculcates. Its precepts are as far above the wisdom of fallen man, as its doctrines. Search all the systems of ethics that ever were written, and where shall we find such directions as these? In vain shall we look for them in the productions of Greece and Rome: in vain shall we consult the sages and philosophers of any other nation: such precepts as these are found nowhere but in the inspired volume. The law of retaliation has in all nations been deemed equitable and right: but in the Christian code it is expressly forbidden. (Read the entire sermon - [Matthew 5:38-41 Retaliation Forbidden](#))

It was said (in Exodus) -

22 "And if men struggle with each other and strike a woman with child so that she has a miscarriage, yet there is no further injury, he shall surely be fined as the woman's husband may demand of him; and he shall pay as the judges decide.

23 "But if there is any further injury, then you shall appoint as a penalty 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 "And if a man strikes the eye of his male or female slave, and destroys it, he shall let him go free on account of his eye.

27 "And if he knocks out a tooth of his male or female slave, he shall let him go free on account of his tooth. (Ex 21:22-27)

It was said (in Leviticus) -

'If a man injures his neighbor, just as he has done, so it shall be done to him: 20 fracture for fracture, **eye for eye, tooth for tooth**; just as he has injured a man, so it shall be inflicted on him. (Leviticus 24:19, 20+)

It was said (in Deuteronomy) -

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. And 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. (Deuteronomy 19:19, 20, 21+)

See **F B Meyer's** related comments on (Matt. 5:38-42) in his discourse entitled The Second Mile

J C Ryle introduces Mt 5:38-48 with this comment...

WE have here our Lord Jesus Christ's rules for our conduct towards one another. He that would know how he ought to feel and act towards his fellow-man, should often study these verses. They deserve to be written in letters of gold: they have extorted praise even from the enemies of Christianity. Let us mark well what they contain. The Lord Jesus forbids everything like an unforgiving and revengeful spirit. ([Matthew 5:38-48 Expository Thoughts](#))

You have here our Lord Jesus Christ's rules for our conduct one towards another. He that would know how He ought to feel and act towards his fellow men, should often study these verses. They deserve to be written in letters of gold. They have extorted praise even from the enemies of Christianity. Let us mark well what they contain...

There is much in all this (Mt 5:38-48) which calls loudly for solemn reflection. There are few passages of Scripture so calculated to raise in our minds humbling thoughts. We have here a lovely picture of the Christian as he ought to be. We cannot look at it without painful feelings. We must all allow that it differs widely from the Christian as he is. Let us carry away from it two general lessons.

In the first place if the spirit of these ten verses were more continually remembered by true believers, they would recommend Christianity to the world far more than they do. We must not allow ourselves to suppose that the least words in this passage are trifling and of small moment. They are not so. It is attention to the spirit of this passage which makes our religion beautiful. It is the neglect of the things which it contains by which our religion is deformed. Unfailing courtesy, kindness, tenderness, and consideration for others, are some of the greatest ornaments to the character of the child of God. The world can understand these things, if it cannot understand doctrine. There is no religion in rudeness, roughness, bluntness, and incivility. The perfection of practical Christianity consists in attending to the little duties of holiness as well as to the great.

In the second place, if the spirit of these ten verses had more dominion and power in the world, how much happier the world would be than it is. Who does not know that quarrelings, strifes, selfishness, and unkindness cause half the miseries by which mankind is visited? Who can fail to see that nothing would so much tend to increase happiness as the spread of Christian love, such as is here recommended by our Lord? Let us all remember this. Those who fancy that true religion has any tendency to make men unhappy, are greatly mistaken. It is the absence of it that does this, and not the presence. True religion has the directly contrary effect. It tends to promote peace, and charity, and kindness, and goodwill among men. The more men are brought under the teaching of the Holy Spirit, the more they will love one another, and the more happy they will be. ([Matthew 5 Commentary](#))

This is Jesus' fifth example of how the righteousness God demands surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees (see note Matthew 5:20) and has to do a believer's response when personally wronged. The "law of retaliation" was not designed to encourage retaliation but to limit it with a view to justice. The Pharisees grossly misinterpreted the OT Scriptures and used them an encouragement for revenge instead of an impediment!

Jesus' radical view is greatly needed in a society where "personal rights", retaliation and getting "one's pound of flesh" have become the norm of the day rather than the exception to the rule! Underlying many of these attitudes and actions is often an angry, vengeful spirit. This is the timeless issues which our Lord addresses in this section of His sermon.

Without a doubt, this section (**Mt 5:38-48**) has been one of the most misinterpreted and consequently misapplied sections of the entire Sermon. For example, some have appealed to these passages to justify their call for Christians be veritable "doormats".

Others have used this section to promote pacifism (opposition to war or violence as a means of settling disputes), conscientious objection to military service, lawlessness (see allusion to Tolstoy below), anarchy, etc. These interpretations however are not logical in view of the fact that Jesus had made it clear that He did not come to annul even the smallest part of God's Law (see **notes** Matthew 5:17; 18; 5:19), a Law which includes respect for and obedience to human laws and authorities. In fact the Law of Moses prevented offended people from taking the law into their own hands and seeking private revenge against an enemy. It also kept magistrates from issuing exorbitant sentences that did not fit the offenses.

LEX TALIONIS

Spurgeon - The law of an eye for an eye, as administered in the proper courts of law was founded in justice, and worked far more equitably than the more modern system of fines; for that method allows rich men to offend with comparative impunity, But when the *lex talionis* came to be the rule of daily life, it fostered revenge, and our Savior would not tolerate it as a principle carried out by individuals. Good law in court may be very bad custom in common society. He spoke against what had become a proverb and was heard and said among the people, "Ye have heard that it hath been said." Our loving King would have private dealings ruled by the spirit of love and not by the rule of law. (Spurgeon's Matthew Commentary)

An eye for an eye - This is an exact quotation found in **three OT passages** (see above - Exodus 21:24; Leviticus 24:20; Deuteronomy 19:21) and reflects the principle of ***lex talionis***, (*lex* = law + *talionis* = retaliation = literally the "law of retaliation") one of the most ancient law codes discovered even in the secular code of Hammurabi (a Babylonian king - see article on [Babylonian law](#)) composed sometime around 2000BC. Simply put, this law required that the **punishment match the crime** and corresponds to modern expressions like "*tit for tat*" and "*quid pro quo*" (Latin for "something for something"). In that sense ***lex talionis*** was merciful for it limited the magnitude of one's revenge, restraining an angry response. Look at the Israeli-Arab conflict today, where retaliation is practiced usually expeditiously but not necessarily "tit for tat" or in kind and/or quantity. This response is what one expects when enmity and animosity seethe beneath the surface of seemingly conciliatory (sometimes) political rhetoric.

In modern society ***lex talionis*** is recognized as a foundation for all justice, as all civil, penal and international law has its basis on this ancient principle. As discussed below, in ancient Israel, the right to carry out this principle of ***lex talionis*** was restricted to the judges of Israel and not to individuals (independent of the judges or civil authorities).

Kent Hughes adds "Moreover, (***lex talionis***) was not literally carried out by the Jewish legal system because they correctly saw that in some cases to do so would result in injustice. For instance, a good tooth might be removed for a bad tooth! Thus they assessed damages just as we do in our courts today. The Mishna devotes an entire section entitled [Baba Kamma](#) to assessing proper damages. So we have the traditional Old Testament teaching regarding one's response to personal wrong in the principle of exact retribution. There was nothing intrinsically wrong with that, apart from man's manipulation of it. It brought equity and stability to human relations. (Borrow [Sermon on the Mount: The Message of the Kingdom](#))

And so to reemphasize, one purpose of ***lex talionis*** was to **prevent excessive punishment** based on personal vengeance and angry retaliation.

Another purpose of "**an eye for an eye**" was to curtail further crime. For example the effect of invoking of this principle is seen in Deuteronomy 19 where Moses records that...

"If a malicious witness rises up against a man to accuse him of wrongdoing, then both the men who have the dispute shall stand before the **LORD**, before the **priests** and the **judges** who will be in office in those days. And 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**. (the "eye for an eye" idea, *lex talionis*) Thus you shall purge the evil from among you. And the rest will hear and be afraid, and will never again do such an evil thing among you. Thus you shall not show pity (includes the idea of sparing the guilty party their just due): life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot. (Deut 19:16-21+)

Do you see the purpose of the punishment that matched the crime? Moses says "the rest will hear and be afraid and will never again do such an evil thing among you" (v20+)

This OT passage also illustrates that the Law was given to encourage appropriate punishment of a criminal in cases where there might be a tendency to be either too lenient or too strict. Note carefully that the case was tried before Jehovah, the priests and the judges. As discussed below what Jesus was countering in Matthew 5:38-42 was the teaching of the scribes and Pharisees that this law could be applied by individuals **out of** the jurisdiction of the courts (judges) and thus be used to justify one taking personal vengeance.

As alluded to above, it is critically important to remember that each OT passage that mentions the principle of ***lex talionis*** (Exodus

21:22-27; Leviticus 24:19,20; Deuteronomy 19:19) specifies in context that it is to be carried out by the judges and civil authorities of Israel. It is true, that an injured party might be allowed to inflict the actual punishment, but even in these situations it was the civil body that had the responsibility to try and sentence the guilty one. One can readily understand how such a system would serve to prevent an injured individual from over reacting and taking more than their "pound of flesh". It is interesting that even this merciful principle established by God has commonly been misrepresented as vindictive, but it is not. **Lex talionis** is not a license for cruelty, but a limit to it! It is not a license for vengeance but a guarantee of justice!

In Genesis we read of a notorious example of **personal revenge** by a wicked man named **Lamech** who arrogantly declared...

Give heed to my speech, for I have **killed** a man for **wounding** me; and a boy for **striking me**; If Cain is avenged sevenfold, Then Lamech seventy-sevenfold." (Genesis 4:23-24+)

What a contrast Lamech's vindictiveness is with the forgiving attitude taught by Christ, Who urged Peter to forgive his brother seventy times seven (Matthew 18:22+). Instead of over reaction and excessive punishment of an enemy God's desire has always been...

If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat; and if he is thirsty, give him water to drink; for you will heap burning coals on his head, and the LORD will reward you. (Proverbs 25:21-22)

Similarly in **Proverbs 24:29** we read (in the NIV)...

Do not say, "I'll do to him as he has done to me; I'll pay that man back for what he did." [NIV - IBS](#))

The practice of **personal revenge** or personal payback, though widely carried out among the world's nations and tribes, both ancient and modern, is not what the Scripture teaches. God is to be the avenger not us (Deut 32:35, Psalm 94:1 [{Spurgeon's note}](#), Ro 12:19 [note], He 10:30 [note]). It is important to understand that this proverb (and the related Proverbs) lifts up a high ethical principle which is not opposed to "**an eye for an eye**" (Ex 21:24; Lev 24:20; Deut 19:21), because the Law was intended to be overseen by judges, and it required that the penalty fit the crime. These proverbs are addressed to individuals and describe the heart attitude one should maintain when wronged in any way. The problem that existed among the Scribes and Pharisees in Jesus' day was that they taught a vengeful attitude (see Dr John MacArthur's comment below). There should be no personal retaliation or revenge.

Again in **Proverbs** we read...

Do not say, "I will repay evil". Wait for the LORD, and He will save you. (Proverbs 20:22)

One with a new heart and His Spirit (Ezek 36:26, 27+) will leave revenge in God's hands.

PERVERSION OF LEX TALIONIS

John MacArthur explains that the rabbinic tradition had perverted **lex talionis**, an "eye for an eye", which in the OT "did not allow an individual to take the law into his own hands and apply it personally. Yet that is exactly what rabbinic tradition had done. Each man was permitted, in effect, to become his own judge, jury, and executioner. God's law was turned to individual license (permit to act, freedom to take a specific course of action), and civil justice was perverted to personal vengeance. Instead of properly acknowledging the law of an **eye for an eye**, and a **tooth for a tooth** as a limit on punishment, they conveniently used it as a mandate for vengeance-as it has often been wrongly viewed throughout history. What God gave as a **restriction on civil courts**, Jewish tradition had turned into **personal license for revenge**. In still another way, the self-centered and self-asserted "righteousness" of the scribes and Pharisees had made a shambles of God's holy law. (See [Matthew Commentary - Page 330](#))

Ferguson comments that...

Of the entire Sermon on the Mount, no ideas are more frequently alluded to than the ones that follow: an eye for an eye; turn the other cheek; go the extra mile. They are still colorful expressions in the English language. For some people, they are the essence of Christianity. These statements have been used to explain and justify pacifism, by Christians and by others. For the great Russian author Leo Tolstoy (who consequently had a major influence on Mahatma Gandhi), these words produced a revolutionary effect (Ed note: Tolstoy based War and Peace on the thesis that the elimination of police, the military, and other forms of authority would bring a utopian society.) But what do they mean?... What was the purpose of this law, and the justice that it expressed? **Clearly, it was to limit and, if necessary, restrain retaliation.** It seems, however, that this law was used as the justification for gaining even limited retaliation and revenge. That was to misunderstand the purpose of the law. **Since it was meant to restrain personal vindictiveness and retaliation, the real fulfilment of it would be found in the man who did not seek such revenge...** The passage is not really

speaking to the question of whether Christians should be involved in legal or military professions. Rather, it is challenging believers to follow their Master's example in personal relationships. (Borrow [Sermon on the Mount page 98](#)) (Bolding added)

Freeman in **Manners and Customs of the Bible** comments that...

This is the principle of justice that requires punishment equal in kind to the offense (not greater than the offense, as was frequently given in ancient times). Thus, if someone puts out another person's eye, one of the offender's eyes should be put out. The principle is stated in the Book of Exodus as "Thou shalt give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot." This saying is often quoted today by those who wish to extract equal revenge for something done against them. (See [New Manners & Customs of the Bible - Page 411](#))

Some years ago, the old rule of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth was altered by the State Industrial Commission of Minnesota to read, "Seventy dollars for a tooth." It seems that Donald Naylor, who works in a large grain storage warehouse in the Twin Cities, was forced by the dust there to sneeze so violently that he literally sneezed away one of his teeth, an artificial gold one that had cost him \$70.00 to replace. So the commission ruled that restitution should be made to him for his loss. (Cf: Matthew 5:38)
—Evangelistic Illustration

Adrian Rogers - Now, the key to living with a smile is a Christ-centered life. The key to living a Christ-centered life is, first of all, emptying yourself out of your own self-life. Even God cannot fill that which is already full, so the Christ-filled life is a self-emptied life. So many of us are so full of self. And, as the wise man said, "A man wrapped up in himself makes a very small package." I want you to think with me now on this principle, a principle of living—selfless living, joyful living, Christ-filled living: the principle of the second mile. And, remember this: it's the second mile that brings the smile. There are three things I want to tell you about the second mile this morning, and I pray God the Holy Spirit will not only write them in your notes, but write them on your heart. ([See his sermons The Miracle Mile | Matthew 5:38–42 and The Second Mile | Matthew 5:38–48 on page 347](#))

"If Anyone Wants To Follow In My Footsteps, He Must Give Up All Rights To Himself"

Such as:

The right to revenge: "You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth,' But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also." (Matthew 5:38, 39)

The right to dignity: "Do not resist an evil person, If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also." (Matthew 5:39b)

The right to justice: "If someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well." (Matthew 5:40b)

The right to freedom: "If someone forces you to go a mile, go with him two miles." (Matthew 5:41)

The right to control my resources: "Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you ... Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth ... But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven ... For where your treasure is there your heart will be also." (Matthew 5:42; 6:19a, 20a, 21)

The right to hate my enemies: "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you ..." (Matthew 5:43–44a)

The right to recognition: "Be careful not to do your 'acts of righteousness' before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven." (Matthew 6:1)

The right to bear a grudge: "If you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins." (Matthew 6:14b, 15)

The right to judge others: "Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you." (Matthew 7:1, 2)

The right to anything: "Any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple." (Luke 14:33b)

Because, "The man who wants to save his life will lose it, but the man who loses it for my sake will save it." (Luke 9:24—Phillips Translation)

QUESTION - [What does the Bible mean by "an eye for an eye"? | GotQuestions.org](#)

ANSWER - The concept of “an eye for eye,” sometimes called *jus talionis* or *lex talionis*, is part of the Mosaic Law used in the Israelites’ justice system. The principle is that the punishment must fit the crime and there should be a just penalty for evil actions: “If there is serious injury, you are to take life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise” (Exodus 21:23–25). Justice should be equitable; excessive harshness and excessive leniency should be avoided.

We have no indication that the law of “an eye for an eye” was followed literally; there is never a biblical account of an Israelite being maimed as a result of this law. Also, before this particular law was given, God had already established a judicial system to hear cases and determine penalties (Exodus 18:13–26)—a system that would be unnecessary if God had intended a literal “eye for an eye” penalty. Although capital crimes were repaid with execution in ancient Israel, on the basis of multiple witnesses (Deuteronomy 17:6), most other crimes were repaid with payment in goods—if you injured a man’s hand so that he could not work, you compensated that man for his lost wages.

Besides Exodus 21, the law of “an eye for an eye” is mentioned twice in the Old Testament (Leviticus 24:20; Deuteronomy 19:21). Each time, the phrase is used in the context of a case being judged before a civil authority such as a judge. “An eye for an eye” was thus intended to be a guiding principle for lawgivers and judges; it was never to be used to justify vigilantism or settling grievances personally.

In the New Testament, it seems the Pharisees and scribes had taken the “eye for an eye” principle and applied it to everyday personal relationships. They taught that seeking personal revenge was acceptable. If someone punched you, you could punch him back; if someone insulted you, he was fair game for your insults. The religious leaders of Jesus’ day ignored the judicial basis of the giving of that law.

In the [Sermon on the Mount](#), Jesus counters the common teaching of personal retaliation: “You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ But I tell you . . .” (Matthew 5:38–39). Jesus then proceeds to reveal God’s heart concerning interpersonal relationships: “Do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you” (Matthew 5:39–42).

In giving this “new” command, Jesus is not nullifying the Old Testament law (Matthew 5:17). Rather, He is separating the responsibility of the government (to punish evildoers justly) from the responsibility we all have on a personal level before God to love our enemies. We should not seek retribution for personal slights. We are to ignore personal insults (the meaning of [“turn the other cheek”](#)). Christians are to be willing to give more of their material goods, time, and labor than required, even if the demands upon us are unjust. We should loan to those who want to borrow, love our enemies, and pray for those who persecute us (verses 43–48). Enforcing “an eye for an eye” is the magistrate’s job; forgiving our enemies is ours. We see this played out today every time a victim stands up in court to publicly forgive a convicted criminal—the forgiveness is personal and real, but the judge still justly demands that the sentence be carried out.

Jesus’ limiting of the “eye for an eye” principle in no way prohibits [self-defense](#) or the forceful protection of the innocent from harm. The actions of duly appointed agents of the government, such as police officers and the military, to protect citizens and preserve the peace are not in question. Jesus’ command to turn the other cheek applies to personal relationships, not judicial policy. The principle of “an eye for an eye” is meant as a judicial policy, not as a rule for interpersonal relationships. The believer in Christ is guided by Jesus’ words to forgive. The Christian is radically different from those who follow the natural inclination to respond in kind.

QUESTION - [What does the Bible say about revenge? | GotQuestions.org](#)

ANSWER - The Bible has a great deal to say about revenge. Both the Hebrew and Greek words translated “vengeance,” “revenge,” and “avenge” have as their root meaning the idea of punishment. This is crucial in understanding why God reserves for Himself the right to avenge.

The key verse regarding this truth is found in the Old Testament and quoted twice in the New Testament. God said, “It is mine to avenge; I will repay. In due time their foot will slip; their day of disaster is near and their doom rushes upon them” (Deuteronomy 32:35; Romans 12:19; Hebrews 10:30). In Deuteronomy, God is speaking of the stiff-necked, rebellious, idolatrous Israelites who rejected Him and incurred His wrath with their wickedness. He promised to avenge Himself upon them in His own timing and according to His own perfect and pure motives. The two New Testament passages concern the behavior of the Christian, who is not

to usurp God's authority. Rather, we are to allow Him to judge rightly and pour out His divine retribution against His enemies as He sees fit.

Unlike us, God never takes vengeance from impure motives. His vengeance is for the purpose of punishing those who have offended and rejected Him. We can, however, pray for God to avenge Himself in perfection and holiness against His enemies and to avenge those who are oppressed by evil. In Psalm 94:1, the psalmist prays for God to avenge the righteous, not out of a sense of uncontrolled vindictiveness, but out of just retribution from the eternal Judge whose judgments are perfect. Even when the innocent suffer and the wicked appear to prosper, it is for God alone to punish. "The LORD is a jealous and avenging God; the LORD takes vengeance and is filled with wrath. The LORD takes vengeance on his foes and maintains his wrath against his enemies" (Nahum 1:2).

There are only two times in the Bible when God gives men permission to avenge in His name. First, after the Midianites committed hideous, violent acts against the Israelites, the cup of God's wrath against the Midianites was full, and He commanded Moses to lead the people in a holy war against them. "The LORD said to Moses, 'Take vengeance on the Midianites for the Israelites. After that, you will be gathered to your people'" (Numbers 31:1-2). Here, again, Moses did not act on his own; he was merely an instrument to carry out God's perfect plan under His guidance and instruction. Second, Christians are to be in submission to the rulers God has set over us because they are His instruments for "vengeance on evildoers" (1 Peter 2:13-14). As in Moses' case, these rulers are not to act on their own, but are to carry out God's will for the punishment of the wicked.

It is tempting to try to take on the role of God and seek to punish those who we feel deserve it. But because we are sinful creatures, it is impossible for us to take revenge with pure motives. This is why the Mosaic Law contains the command "Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD" (Leviticus 19:18). Even David, a "man after God's own heart" (1 Samuel 13:14), refused to take revenge on Saul, even though David was the innocent party being wronged. David submitted to God's command to forego vengeance and trust in Him: "May the LORD judge between you and me. And may the LORD avenge the wrongs you have done to me, but my hand will not touch you" (1 Samuel 24:12).

As Christians, we are to follow the Lord Jesus' command to "love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 5:44), leaving the vengeance to God.

QUESTION - [What does the Bible say about retaliation?](http://GotQuestions.org) | GotQuestions.org

ANSWER - To retaliate is to return in like kind. Usually, we speak of retaliation in negative contexts, so it's almost exclusively a returning of evil for evil. Someone hurts us; we hurt him back. Getting even is a natural response to being wronged, but God calls us to live above our natural responses. He demonstrated holiness through His Son Jesus Christ, and He offers to empower us through His Holy Spirit so that we can live above our selfish instincts. God's way is usually opposite our way, so the Bible has much to say about retaliation that contradicts everything that feels right to us (Isaiah 55:9; 1 Corinthians 1:27-29).

Retaliation for harm done is the world's way of making things right. But God's way is to "heap [burning coals](#) on his head" by refusing to stoop to the level of the offender (Proverbs 25:22; Romans 12:20). When we retaliate with evil for evil, we join our offender in his error. Jesus told us not to return evil for evil, but to overcome evil with good (Romans 12:21; Matthew 5:39). Retaliation is when we take matters out of God's hands and insist on fixing things ourselves. Romans 12:19 gives clear instructions about how Christians are to respond when wronged: "Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord" (cf. Hebrews 10:30; Deuteronomy 32:35-36).

These commands against retaliation are for individuals, and they should not be applied without qualification to nations or law enforcement. When we try to use Jesus' words about loving others to matters of national security, they fall apart. Jesus' followers are to seek to practice every scriptural principle in their personal and family lives. But governments must operate by a different standard. Government was instituted by God for the common good of a people (Romans 13:1-2). There are times when a nation must retaliate in order to preserve its freedom and its people, such as the United States' response to Japan's bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941. A nation is given permission by God to exercise force and retaliate against other nations in defense of its citizens (1 Samuel 15:2-3; 1 Samuel 30:1-2, 8, 17-18). A state can also "retaliate" against lawbreakers for the common good (Romans 13:3).

God's commands always come down to heart attitudes (1 Samuel 16:7; Mark 2:8). He has issued commands regulating outward behaviors because He knows the inward evil that motivates them (Matthew 15:18-19). A man using a gun to take revenge on his neighbor for not mowing his lawn is sinning because the motivation is selfish retaliation. However, that same man using a gun to protect his family from an intruder is not sinning because his motivation is protection of the innocent, not vengeance.

Our job as Christians is to [forgive](#), not retaliate (Luke 6:27-31). We can set healthy boundaries in destructive relationships. We can

protect ourselves from further harm and report to authorities someone breaking the law (James 5:20). But personal vigilante justice is never condoned in Scripture. Two wrongs do not make a right. We have a Higher Authority to whom we report, and He has promised to right all wrongs done against His servants (Isaiah 54:17). God's ways are not like our ways, so what the Bible says about retaliation might contradict what we naturally feel (Isaiah 55:9; 1 Corinthians 1:27–29).

QUESTION - [What is the law of retribution?](#) | [GotQuestions.org](#)

ANSWER - The law of retribution, also called the law of retaliation or [lex talionis](#), was part of the Old Testament Law given to Israel through Moses. Retribution was one of the cornerstones of Israel's penal code. The punishment was supposed to mirror the crime. The principle of *lex talionis* is clearly stated in Leviticus 24:19–21: "Anyone who injures their neighbor is to be injured in the same manner: fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth. The one who has inflicted the injury must suffer the same injury. Whoever kills an animal must make restitution, but whoever kills a human being is to be put to death." Monetary damages are to be paid for killing an animal belonging to someone else, but, if a person is murdered, then the murderer must forfeit his life in return. Exodus 21:23–25 and Deuteronomy 19:16–21 echo the same stipulations.

In ancient Israel, part of the law's enforcement fell to the family of the murder victim. According to Numbers 35:16–21, in some cases the "[avenger of blood](#)" (normally a close family member of the deceased) would be charged with carrying out the death sentence, possibly even tracking down the murderer if the murderer had fled. There was no police force in ancient Israel, so kinship posses were called upon to enforce the law. It is important to keep in mind that this system of retaliation operated within the legal system as it existed. The law of retribution was not a simple pretext for [revenge](#), although it is easy to see how it could descend to that level. "Eye for eye, tooth for tooth, and life for life" was the penal code and was never intended to justify a personal code of revenge or vigilantism. In fact, the Law warned against personal hatred: "Do not hate a fellow Israelite in your heart. Rebuke your neighbor frankly so you will not share in their guilt. Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord" (Leviticus 19:17–18).

In the New Testament, Christians in the Roman Empire lived under a different penal code. In Romans 12:17–13:4, Paul warns believers that they must not take the law into their own hands, but he also maintains that the government has the right and responsibility to enforce penalties, including the death penalty, for criminal acts. In that passage, quoted below, you will notice how Paul moves from personal vendettas to governmental enforcement of justice. Because the switch happens at a chapter break, many readers may not realize the connection. (Remember, the [chapter and verse divisions](#) are not inspired. They were added later to help facilitate easy study and reference, but sometimes a chapter break can obscure the connection with the previous chapter.)

Do not repay anyone evil for evil.

Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.

Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord.

On the contrary: If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and you will be commended. For the one in authority is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They are God's servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer.

It is easy to see how, in ancient Israel, personal revenge and penalties administered under "due process" might be somewhat mingled. That's one of the reasons God chose the [cities of refuge](#) in Joshua 20:7–8. In New Testament times, Paul tells believers that they cannot take personal revenge. They must love and even serve their enemies, allowing God to retaliate in His time as He sees fit. Divine retribution may come through some "act of God" in this life (or certainly in the next), but it is also possible that the government functioning in its God-given role will be the agent God uses to bring about justice. It may be morally right for a government to execute a murderer, but it would be morally wrong for a family member of the victim to ambush the murderer and kill him, even if he had already been convicted and sentenced to death in court. The personal response is to offer love and forgiveness while the governmental response is to enforce justice.

In Matthew 5:38–48 (during the Sermon on the Mount), Jesus rejects the "eye for an eye" principle as applied to personal ethics. As

is clear from the explanation He gives, He is not rejecting or even commenting upon penalties administered by the government after "due process." He is rejecting a personal code of revenge that would "do unto others as they have done unto me." Rather than enforce the law of retribution in personal matters, Jesus requires individuals to love their enemies, "go the extra mile," and "turn the other cheek." In Matthew 7:12 He says, "So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you." This code of conduct leaves no place for personal revenge or even resentment.

In summary, the law of retribution or the law of retaliation may be a legitimate guide for criminal penalties administered by governmental authorities, but it is not to be used as the basis for personal revenge. Personal revenge puts the avenger in the place of God as Judge and Executioner making the avenger a usurper of divine authority.

Related Resources:

- [Do Christians have to obey the Old Testament law?](#)

Quote Misquote - In the opening chapter of Tom Sawyer, Mark Twain presents an interesting conversation that reflects human nature. Tom tries to persuade his friend Huck to join him in his plans to form a band of robbers and to take captives much like pirates used to do. Huck asks Tom what pirates do with the captives they take, and Tom answers, "Ransom them." "Ransom? What's that?" asks Huck. "I don't know. But that's what they do. I seen it in books; and so of course that's what we got to do," explains Tom. "Do you want to go doing different from what's in the books, and get things all muddled up?"

This dialog represents a way of thinking that's not much different from what Jesus encountered. The people were also quoting and repeating things they had found in a book--the Old Testament. But they were merely mouthing words. The ideas had been separated from the spirit of the original revelation. By misapplying Mosaic principles of conduct, the people were justifying their sinful attitudes and actions (Mt. 5:27-42).

This should be a reminder to us. When we quote the Bible, let's be sure we understand its meaning and context. Then we won't get things "all muddled up." --M R De Haan II (Reprinted by permission from [Our Daily Bread Ministries](#). Please do not repost the full devotional without their permission.)

When reading God's Word, take special care
To find the rich treasures hidden there;
Give thought to each line, each precept hear,
Then practice it well with godly fear.
--Anon.

A text taken out of context can be a dangerous pretext.

Matthew 5:39 "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](#). ([NASB: Lockman](#))

Greek: [ego de lego](#) (1SPA) [umin me antistenai](#) (AAN) [to ponero](#); [all' ostis se rapizei](#) (3SPA) [eis ten dexian siagona](#) [sou], [strepson](#) (2SAAM) [auto kai ten allen](#)

BGT γ δ λ γω μ ν μ ντιστ ναι τ πονηρ · λλ σπς σε απ ζει ε ς τ ν δεξι ν σιαγ να [σου], στρ ψον α τ κα τ ν λλην·

KJV But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also.

Amplified: But I say to you, Do not resist the evil man [who injures you]; but if anyone strikes you on the right jaw or cheek, turn to him the other one too. ([Amplified Bible - Lockman](#))

NET But I say to you, do not resist the evildoer. But whoever strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other to him as well.

CSB But I tell you, don't resist an evildoer. On the contrary, if anyone slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also.

ESV But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.

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

NLT: But I say, don't resist an evil person! If you are slapped on the right cheek, turn the other, too. [NLT - Tyndale House](#))

NLT (revised version) But I say, do not resist an evil person! If someone slaps you on the right cheek, offer the other cheek also.

NRS But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also;

NJB But I say this to you: offer no resistance to the wicked. On the contrary, if anyone hits you on the right cheek, offer him the other as well;

NAB But I say to you, offer no resistance to one who is evil. When someone strikes you on (your) right cheek, turn the other one to him as well.

Philips: but I tell you, don't resist the man who wants to harm you. If a man hits your right cheek, turn the other one to him as well. ([New Testament in Modern English](#))

Wuest: but let your word be, Yes, Yes, No, No; and that which is more than these things is of the evil which is in active opposition to the good.

Young's Literal: but I -- I say to you, not to resist the evil, but whoever shall slap thee on thy right cheek, turn to him also the other;

BUT I SAY TO YOU, DO NOT RESIST AN EVIL PERSON: ego de lego (1SPA1) humin me antistenai (AAN) to ponero

- Leviticus 19:18; 1Samuel 24:10-15; 25:31, 32, 33, 34; 26:8, 9, 10; Job 31:29, 30, 31; Proverbs 20:22; Proverbs 24:29; Luke 6:29; Romans 12:17, 18, 19; 1Corinthians 6:7; 1Thessalonians 5:15; Hebrews 12:4; James 5:6; 1Peter 3:9
- [Matthew 5 Resources](#) - Multiple Sermons and Commentaries
- [Matthew 5:38 An Eye for an Eye, Part 1](#) - John MacArthur
- [Matthew 5:38-42 An Eye for an Eye, Part 2](#) - John MacArthur

THE CALL TO RESIST RETALIATION

Some other titles of Mt 5:39 might be - "Turning the Other Cheek" "Responding to Evil with Grace" "Breaking the Cycle of Revenge" "Radical Love Overcomes Retaliation" "Forgiveness in the Face of Insult" "Grace in the Face of Opposition" "Responding to Hurt with Forgiveness" "Do Not Resist: A Call to Radical Peace" "A New Way to Face Injustice" "Grace Over Retaliation" "Overcoming Evil with Love" "Jesus' Call to Nonviolence" "The Strength of Non-Retaliation"

But - term of contrast

But I say to you - 14v ALL BY JESUS - Matt. 5:22; Matt. 5:28; Matt. 5:32; Matt. 5:34; Matt. 5:39; Matt. 5:44; Matt. 12:6; Matt. 17:12; Matt. 26:29; Mk. 9:13; Lk. 4:25; Lk. 6:27; Lk. 9:27; Rev. 2:24

See **F B Meyer's** related comments on (Matt. 5:38-42) in his discourse entitled **The Second Mile**

As noted [Lex Talionis](#), the law of retaliation, was never intended to encourage personal revenge, but to protect the offender from punishment harsher than the offense warranted. Jesus forbids citizens of the Kingdom of heaven to seek revenge and instead insists upon positive good in the face of evil

*Non-resistance and forbearance
are to be the rule among Christians.*

Spurgeon comments that "Non-resistance and forbearance are to be the rule among Christians. They are to endure personal ill-usage without coming to blows. They are to be as the anvil when bad men are the hammers, and thus they are to overcome by patient forgiveness. The rule of the judgement-seat is not for common life; but the rule of the cross and the all-enduring Sufferer is

for us all. Yet how many regard all this as fanatical, utopian, and even cowardly! The Lord, our King, would have us bear and forbear, and conquer by mighty patience. Can we do it? How are we the servants of Christ if we have not his spirit? (See his commentary on Matthew 5)

J C Ryle writes that "The Lord Jesus forbids everything like an unforgiving and revengeful spirit. "I say unto you, That ye resist not evil." A readiness to resent injuries, a quickness in taking offence, a quarrelsome and contentious disposition, a keenness in asserting our rights,-all, all are contrary to the mind of Christ. The world may see no harm in these habits of the mind; but they do not become the character of the Christian. Our Master says, "Resist not evil." ([Matthew 5:38-48 Expository Thoughts](#))

Resist (436) (**anthistemi** from **anti** = against, opposite + **histemi** = stand, set) means to stand (up) against, to set one's self against, to arrange in battle against. **NAS** = cope with(1), oppose(1), opposed(5), opposing(1), resist(5), resists(2).

Anthistemi - 14x in 12v - Matt 5:39; Luke 21:15; Acts 6:10; 13:8; Rom 9:19; 13:2; Gal 2:11; Eph 6:13; 2 Tim 3:8; 4:15; Jas 4:7; 1 Pet 5:9

Evil (4190) (**poneros** from **pónos** = labor, sorrow, pain) refers to evil in active opposition to good. It refers to that which is actively harmful. The idea is one who is pernicious, which means highly injurious or destructive, exceedingly harmful, and vicious.

Poneros - 78x in 72v - **NAS** = bad(5), crimes(1), envious (1), envy*(m)(1), evil(49), evil one(5), evil things(1), malignant(1), more evil(1), more wicked(1), vicious(1), what is evil(2), wicked(6), wicked man(1), wicked things(1), worthless(1).

Matt 5:11, 37, 39, 45; 6:13, 23; 7:11, 17f; 9:4; 12:34f, 39, 45; 13:19, 38, 49; 15:19; 16:4; 18:32; 20:15; 22:10; 25:26; Mark 7:22f; Luke 3:19; 6:22, 35, 45; 7:21; 8:2; 11:13, 26, 29, 34; 19:22; John 3:19; 7:7; 17:15; Acts 17:5; 18:14; 19:12f, 15f; 25:18; 28:21; Rom 12:9; 1 Cor 5:13; Gal 1:4; Eph 5:16; 6:13, 16; Col 1:21; 1Th 5:22; 2Th 3:2f; 1 Tim 6:4; 2 Tim 3:13; 4:18; Heb 3:12; 10:22; Jas 2:4; 4:16; 1 John 2:13f; 3:12; 5:18f; 2 John 1:11; 3 John 1:10; Rev 16:2.

Some interpret Jesus as teaching complete nonresistance under any circumstances, becoming in essence a virtual "doormat" for people to walk on! Leo Tolstoy upon pondering the Sermon on the Mount came to the conclusion that this was Jesus' commandment. Based on an inaccurate interpretation, he recommended an inappropriate application, concluding that no Christian should be involved in the armed forces, police or law courts! (One shudders to think what law courts would look like in America if they were completely devoid of the salt and light of genuine believers!)

Kent Hughes in fact gives a tragic illustration of a man who believed as did Tolstoy, writing...

I personally have seen this lived out, for I know a man who was present when his daughter and son-in-law were attacked physically by some thugs over a legal dispute, and the man did nothing to help or protect them. So some believe Jesus outlaws all force in any form. Not all pacifists, however, hold to this view. Some believe force is just and necessary for the police and courts but disavow killing and war. Other Biblical pacifists would not isolate and absolutize this verse but base their beliefs on other Biblical passages, from which a far stronger case can be made. I personally believe this verse does not have anything to do with pacifism as it relates to the killing and taking of life, for that is not what the passage is about. The question of pacifism must be settled, one way or another, on other Biblical grounds... The problem comes when we isolate and absolutize Jesus' words without giving due attention to the context, the flow of the argument, and the specific social implications of the time. Jesus clarified what he meant by providing four one-sentence illustrations of what it means to "not resist an evil person." Each of the illustrations is culturally specific, but they give us general principles for today's living. The principles are not for everyone, but only for those who follow Christ. ([Ferguson, Sinclair: Sermon on the Mount :Banner of Truth](#))

Jesus does not teach Christians are not to resist evil. What He forbids is that Christians do not seek to retaliate in personal relationships, which is what the Pharisees were teaching. The scribes and Pharisees took the lex talionis out of the courtroom and brought it into personal relationships, in essence encouraging their disciples to get their "pound of flesh." Clearly Jesus Himself resisted evil in His reaction to the sacrifice sellers and money changers, John recording that...

He made a scourge of cords, and drove them all out of the temple, with the sheep and the oxen; and He poured out the coins of the moneychangers, and overturned their tables and to those who were selling the doves He said, "Take these things away; stop making My Father's house a house of merchandise." (John 2:15-16)

Furthermore believers are commanded to resist the evil one, the devil...

Submit therefore to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. (James 4:7-note)

Be of sober spirit, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls about like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. But resist him, firm in your faith, knowing that the same experiences of suffering are being accomplished by your brethren who are in the world. (see **notes** 1 Peter 5:8; 5:9)

Finally believers are commanded to resist evil in general Paul writing..

Let love be without hypocrisy. **Abhor what is evil**; cling to what is good. (Ro 12:9-note)

Examine (present imperative = make this your habitual practice) everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good; **abstain** (present imperative = keep holding yourself away from all that has even the appearance of evil. Middle voice conveys sense we must initiate this action and we participate in results) from every form of evil. (1Th 5:21, 22- notes)

BUT WHOEVER SLAPS YOU ON YOUR RIGHT CHEEK, TURN THE OTHER TO HIM ALSO: all' hostis se rhapizei (3SPA) eis ten dexian siagona [sou], strepson (2SAAM) auto kai ten allen

- 1 Kings 22:24; Job 16:10; Isaiah 50:6; Lam 3:30; Micah 5:1; Luke 6:29; 22:64; 1Peter 2:20-23
- [Matthew 5 Resources](#) - Multiple Sermons and Commentaries
- [Matthew 5:38 An Eye for an Eye, Part 1](#) - John MacArthur
- [Matthew 5:38-42 An Eye for an Eye, Part 2](#) - John MacArthur

Parallel passage:

Luke 6:29+ Whoever hits you on the cheek, offer him the other also; and whoever takes away your coat, do not withhold your shirt from him either.

TURNING THE OTHER CHEEK

But - term of contrast. What is Jesus contrasting?

WHOEVER SLAPS YOU ON YOUR RIGHT CHEEK - **Whoever** means just that - no exception clause here! And Jesus is not saying if they slap you on the left cheek you can retaliate! His point is **never** pay back evil for evil to anyone (cf Ro 12:17-note).

IVP Background Commentary - The blow on the right cheek was the most grievous insult in the ancient Near East. The clothing in the verse refers to the outer and inner cloak, respectively; the poorest of people (like the average peasant in Egypt) might have only one of each; thus here Jesus refers, perhaps in hyperbolic images, to absolute nonresistance on one's own behalf. (See [The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament - Page 196](#))

Slaps (4474) (**rhapizo** related to **rhábdos** = a stick or **rhapis** = rod) means to hit with the open hand, especially on the cheeks or ears. Rhapizo can refer to striking a blow with an instrument, such as a club, rod, or whip. Only used here, Mt 26:67 and twice in the Septuagint (Jdg 16:25 where Septuagint adds " they smote [rhapizo] him with the palms of their hands", Hos 11:4).

Rhapizo should be distinguished from **kolaphizo** which means to punch or strike with a clenched fist. Both verbs are used to describe the treatment of our Lord on the night He was betrayed, when the Jewish religious leaders (which undoubtedly included a few scribes and Pharisees who had been teaching about "an eye for an eye" - here they were ironically breaking their own perverted teaching!). And we see here that Jesus (empowered by the Spirit - cf Lk 4:14, Acts 10:37-38), practiced what He preached giving His disciples an example to follow...

Then they spat in His face and beat Him with their **fists** (**kolaphizo**); and others **slapped** (**rhapizo**) Him (Mt 26:67)

TURN THE OTHER TO HIM ALSO - What is Jesus teaching in his first example of non-retaliation to evil? Jesus is teaching **believers**, citizens of the kingdom of heaven, (and these instructions are intended for those who are poor in spirit, those who are meek, those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, etc) that they are not to retaliate to insults.

Jesus gave us the **"example... to follow in His steps"** for when He was slapped in the face, though He could have called in a host of angels, He did not personally retaliate (see Isaiah 50:6)

For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you

to follow in His steps, 22 WHO COMMITTED NO SIN, NOR WAS ANY DECEIT FOUND IN HIS MOUTH; 23 and while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously; 24 and He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, so that we might die to sin (e.g., the desire to pay back a slap to the one who slaps us - that is the **NATURAL** reaction) and live to righteousness (to not pay back evil for evil - that is the **SUPERNATURAL** reaction!); for by His wounds you were healed. 25 For you were continually straying like sheep, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Guardian of your souls. (1Pe 2:21, 22, 23, 24, 25-see **notes** 1Pe 2:21; 22; 23; 24 25)

This non-retaliation was prophesied by the Messiah in Isaiah...

I gave My back to those who strike Me, And My cheeks to those who pluck out the beard; I did not cover My face from humiliation and spitting. (Isaiah 50:6)

In Jesus' day a **slap to one's face** was considered a gross insult by the Jews, and was among the most demeaning and contemptuous acts one person could inflict on another person. Jesus is not describing a physical attack and telling us to roll over and "play dead". He is describing what was well known in the culture to be a calculated insult. A slap to one's face was not intended to cause physical harm but was intended as a terrible indignity, in which one human created in the image of God is treating another human being as even less than a human! A slave would rather receive a rod or whip across the back than a slap from their master's hand!

What does Jesus tell us to do? To turn the other cheek which pertains more to what we are not to do than what we are to do. **Why?** When you turn the other cheek, you refuse to avenge the gross insult. You refuse to retaliate. If you lived by the letter of the Law as the Pharisees taught what should you do? They would say you should take your revenge and slap "their cheek for your cheek"! Jesus counters their false teaching and says "No, no. You dearly beloved of My Father, you turn your other cheek."

How can one do this naturally? It is not the natural response! It is a supernatural response representing the work of God's Spirit in the new heart of a citizen of the Kingdom of Heaven who is controlled by a gentle, meek spirit that chooses not to respond. While the Spirit will give us the desire and the power, we are not robots and must still make a conscious, volitional choice not to respond back in kind! (See ["Paradoxical Principle of 100% Dependent and 100% Responsible"](#)) Remember meekness is not weakness but power under control and in this example the one slapped by all cultural norms of the day (including the "blessing" of the Pharisees) had a valid right to respond but was under such control by the Holy Spirit that he chooses not to respond. Such an individual has fully surrender his or her personal rights to the Lord.

We are also enabled to be non-retaliatory by the truth and assurance that God is our Protector and Defender as well as a righteous Judge Who will bring all injustice to light.

*"In taking revenge, a man is but even with his enemy;
but in passing it over, he is superior."*
--Francis Bacon

Kent Hughes offers an intriguing interpretation (found in several other commentaries) responding to insults with practical application regarding a slap on the **"right cheek"** (versus the left cheek)...

Notice that Jesus specifically mentions "the right cheek," which tells us he is describing a backhanded slap (since most people are right-handed, this is surely what Jesus had in mind). According to rabbinic law, to hit someone with the back of the hand was twice as insulting as hitting him with the flat of the hand. The back of the hand meant calculated contempt, withering disdain. It meant that you were scorned as inconsequential - a nothing. Imagine how you would respond. My blood would boil... It was an insult for which a Jew could seek legal satisfaction according to the law of *Lex Talionis*. That is, he could seek damages. But Jesus says, do not do it! "If you are dishonored... says Jesus, you should not go to law about it; rather you should show yourselves to be truly My disciples by the way in which you bear the hatred and the insult, overcome the evil, forgive the injustice." In short, though you could take your opponent to the cleaners, do not do it! Lovingly absorb the insult... we must not respond by getting even, by getting our legal pound of flesh according to the *Lex Talionis*, but must turn the other cheek. Jesus calls us to swallow our pride and give up our "rights" to reparation and fairness. That is the basic, essential interpretation.

But there is another level of application that really gets down to where we live: We are to set aside our petty ways of getting even - the kind of living that punishes others by returning their own sins to them. If your spouse is messy, you leave things messy in return. If your friend is late, you will be late next time yourself. In effect Jesus asks us, in turning the other cheek, to make the other person and his or her well-being the center of our focus. We think of them and adjust our actions according to what we think will point them to Christ. And when

we really do this, we begin to affect them. Such vulnerable love brings them to spiritual awareness. Evangelist Tom Skinner often told about the time after he was converted when he was playing football with some of the Harlem Lords, members of the gang he had formerly led. During the game someone took advantage of his Christianity and punched, kicked, and insulted him. After the game Tom said, "You know, because of Jesus, I love you anyway." That is what Jesus was talking about. (Borrow [Sermon on the Mount: The Message of the Kingdom page 132](#))

J Vernon McGee has a humorous (albeit not interpretatively accurate) note on this verse...

It reminds me of the Irishman whom someone hit on the cheek and knocked down. The Irishman got up and turned his other cheek. The fellow knocked him down again. This time the Irishman got up and beat the stuffing out of that fellow. An observer asked, "Why did you do that?" "Well," replied the Irishman, "the Lord said to turn the other cheek and I did, but He never told me what to do after that." (See [Thru the Bible Vol. 34: The Gospels Matthew 1-13](#))

Turn (4762) (**strepho**) means to turn, to turn about. The first use is here in Mt 5:39 where a literal turning of the cheek signifies an act of non-retaliation. Jesus made several literal turns (in fact most of the literal uses in the NT describe Jesus turning), some so dramatic we can picture them in our mind (See Mt 9:22, 16:23, Lk 7:9, 44, 9:55, 10:23, 14:25, 22:61, 23:28, Jn 1:38). Jesus used strepho figuratively to refer to conversion (Mt 18:3 = turning of one's heart to Jesus, the antithesis is seen in Acts 7:39!). Strepho describes Judas' return after remorse but his return was too late for conversion (Mt 27:3, cp Jn 12:40). In Acts 7:39 we read of the Hews in the OT after coming out of Egypt "in their hearts **turned back** to Egypt!" Strepho then describes God turning away from His rebellious people (Acts 7:42, cf Isaiah 63:10) Of Mary seeing Jesus after His resurrection (Jn 20:14, 16). Paul and Barnabas when repudiated by the Jews said "we are **turning** to the Gentiles" or taking the Gospel to them. In Rev 11:6 the two witnesses "have power over the waters to turn them into blood." (cf "the staff that was turned into a serpent" in Ex 7:15)

Friberg - (1) active transitively; (a) turn something toward someone (Mt 5:39); (b) as making a change of substance turn, change something into something (Rev 11:6); (c) return something to someone, take back to (Mt 27:3); (2) passive with a reflexive meaning; (a) turn around, turn toward (Mt 7:6; Lk 7:9); (b) figuratively, of establishing a relation with someone begin to relate to, turn to (Acts 13:46); turn back to (Acts 7:39); (c) turn or change inwardly, change one's ways, be converted (Mt 18:3) (Borrow [Analytical Lexicon of the Greek New Testament](#))

Gilbrant - In classical Greek strepho means "turn, turn aside, turn about, change." Compounds of this word relate to the scriptural idea of conversion (*Moulton-Milligan*). Other usages of this word include "cause to rotate, sprain, dislocate," and "twist" or "plait" the hair. Figuratively it can mean "return, consider" (turn over in one's mind), and "give back" (*Liddell-Scott*). **Strephō is used 50 times in the Septuagint**. Twenty-three times it translates the word hāphakh, "turn, change, pervert, overturn," etc. For example, in 1 Samuel 10:6 Saul was changed into another man when God appointed him as king over Israel. Lamentations 1:10 speaks of inner torment caused by circumstances. Changing a curse into a blessing is indicated in Esther 9:22 and Ps 30:11 and Ps 114:8 . Five times strephō translates the Hebrew word šāvav. Several examples may be cited: the heart of the people is "turned back" to the Lord (1 Kings 18:37); the flow of the Jordan is "driven back," i.e., the direction was changed when Israel crossed it into the Promised Land (Psalm 114:3,5); and Pr 26:14 speaks of a door "turning" on its hinges as picturing a slothful person on his bed. In the **New Testament strephō** carries many of the same meanings as in classical and especially Septuagintal Greek. Most references mean "turn to or toward" or "turn around" (Matthew 7:6; Luke 7:9,44; 9:55; 14:25; 22:61; John 1:38; 20:14,16). This word is used figuratively in Acts 13:46 of Paul's decision to stop trying to evangelize the Jews as a general rule. Because of the hardness of their hearts, Paul stated, "We turn to the Gentiles." In Revelation 11:6 the two witnesses have the power to change water to blood. In Luke 10:23 Jesus stated that all power had been "given" to the Son by the Father. Another concept related by strephō in the New Testament is repentance. In Matthew 18:3 Jesus taught His disciples that they would not enter the kingdom of heaven unless they "be converted, and become as little children." Finally, in Acts 7:39 Stephen said that the fathers of Israel as a whole did not have their hearts "turned back." As a result, God "turned" against them (Acts 7:42). (Complete Biblical Library Greek-English Dictionary)

Strepho - 21x in 21v - converted(2), returned(1), turn(3), turned(8), turned away(1), turned back(1), turning(5).

Matthew 5:39 "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.

Matthew 7:6 "Do not give what is holy to dogs, and do not throw your pearls before swine, or they will trample them under their feet, and **turn** and tear you to pieces.

Matthew 9:22 But Jesus **turning** and seeing her said, "Daughter, take courage; your faith has made you well." At once the woman was made well.

Matthew 16:23 But He **turned** and said to Peter, "Get behind Me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to Me; for you are not setting your mind on God's interests, but man's."

Matthew 18:3 and said, "Truly I say to you, unless you are **converted** and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven.

Matthew 27:3 Then when Judas, who had betrayed Him, saw that He had been condemned, he felt remorse and **returned** the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders,

Luke 7:9 Now when Jesus heard this, He marveled at him, and turned and said to the crowd that was following Him, "I say to you, not even in Israel have I found such great faith."

Luke 7:44 **Turning** toward the woman, He said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave Me no water for My feet, but she has wet My feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair.

Luke 9:55 But He **turned** and rebuked them, and said, "You do not know what kind of spirit you are of;

Luke 10:23 **Turning** to the disciples, He said privately, "Blessed are the eyes which see the things you see,

Luke 14:25 Now large crowds were going along with Him; and He turned and said to them,

Luke 22:61 The Lord **turned** and looked at Peter. And Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how He had told him, "Before a rooster crows today, you will deny Me three times."

Luke 23:28 But Jesus **turning** to them said, "Daughters of Jerusalem, stop weeping for Me, but weep for yourselves and for your children.

John 1:38 And Jesus **turned** and saw them following, and said to them, "What do you seek?" They said to Him, "Rabbi (which translated means Teacher), where are You staying?"

John 12:40 "HE HAS BLINDED THEIR EYES AND HE HARDENED THEIR HEART, SO THAT THEY WOULD NOT SEE WITH THEIR EYES AND PERCEIVE WITH THEIR HEART, AND BE **CONVERTED** AND I HEAL THEM."

John 20:14 When she had said this, she **turned** around and saw Jesus standing there, and did not know that it was Jesus.

John 20:16 Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She **turned** and said to Him in Hebrew, "Rabboni!" (which means, Teacher).

Acts 7:39 "Our fathers were unwilling to be obedient to him, but repudiated him and in their heart **turned back** to Egypt,

Acts 7:42 "But God turned away and delivered them up to serve the host of heaven; as it is written in the book of the prophets, 'IT WAS NOT TO ME THAT YOU OFFERED VICTIMS AND SACRIFICES FORTY YEARS IN THE WILDERNESS, WAS IT, O HOUSE OF ISRAEL?

Acts 13:46 Paul and Barnabas spoke out boldly and said, "It was necessary that the word of God be spoken to you first; since you repudiate it and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are **turning** to the Gentiles.

Revelation 11:6 These have the power to shut up the sky, so that rain will not fall during the days of their prophesying; and they have power over the waters to **turn** them into blood, and to strike the earth with every plague, as often as they desire.

Strepho - 35x in 34v in the Septuagint - Gen. 3:24; Exod. 4:17; Exod. 7:15; Jdg. 7:13; 1 Sam. 10:6; 1 Sam. 14:47; 1 Ki. 2:15; 1 Ki. 6:34; 1 Ki. 18:37; Neh. 13:2; Est. 4:17; Est. 9:22; Job 28:5; Job 34:25; Job 41:25; Ps. 30:11; Ps. 32:4; Ps. 41:3; Ps. 78:9; Ps. 114:3; Ps. 114:8; Prov. 12:7; Prov. 26:14; Isa. 34:9; Isa. 63:10; Jer. 2:21; Jer. 2:27; Jer. 30:6; Jer. 30:23; Jer. 31:13; Jer. 48:39; Lam. 1:20; Lam. 5:15; Ezek. 4:8;

Genesis 3:24 (So He drove the man out; and at the east of the garden of Eden He stationed the cherubim and the flaming sword which **turned** every direction to guard the way to the tree of life.

Psalms 30:11 You **have turned** for me my mourning into dancing; You have loosed my sackcloth and girded me with gladness,

Isaiah 63:10 But they rebelled And grieved His Holy Spirit; Therefore He **turned** Himself to become their enemy, He fought against them.

ILLUSTRATION - December 1984. Four black youths in a crowded New York subway surround a thin white man. They ask him for \$5.00 so they can play video games. Without saying a word, [Bernhard Goetz](#) pulls out a .38 revolver and shoots each one in rapid succession. He then checks the first 3 to see that they are "taken care of", in his words. When he comes to the fourth one, Goetz doesn't see any blood. So he says, "You don't look too bad, here's another." The bullet strikes 19-year-old Darrell Cabey in the spinal cord, paralyzing him.

Ending Escalation

Read: Matthew 5:38-48

I tell you not to resist an evil person. But whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also. —Matthew 5:39

The pastor of an inner-city church told his congregation: "Some people believe in 'an eye for an eye.' But in this neighborhood, it's two eyes for an eye. You can never even the score; you can only raise the stakes." The people nodded in solemn understanding of the reality they faced each day.

We've seen it happen on a school playground or in our own homes—a child bumps into another during a game. The one who was bumped pushes back, and the shoving quickly grows into a fight. It's the process of retaliation and escalation in which each act of revenge exceeds the one that provoked it.

In Matthew 5, Jesus tackled a number of key relational issues by raising the standard to the one that pleases God: "You have heard that it was said But I tell you . . ." (vv.38-39). His words about turning the other cheek, going the second mile, and giving to those who ask may sound as radical and unrealistic to us as they did to those who first heard them (vv.38-42). Are we willing to ponder and pray about His teaching? Are we ready to apply it when we are wronged at home, at work, or at school?

The cycle of escalation can be broken when a courageous, faith-filled person refuses to strike back. By David C. McCasland (Reprinted by permission from [Our Daily Bread Ministries](#). Please do not repost the full devotional without their permission.)

Lord, help me not retaliate
When someone wants to pick a fight;
Instead, give me the strength and faith
To show Your love and do what's right.
—Sper

To return good for good is natural; to return good for evil is supernatural.

Impossible?

Read: Matthew 5:38-42

You have heard that it was said, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." But I tell you not to resist an evil person. —Matthew 5:38-39

When Nobel Chairman Gunnar John delivered his presentation speech for Martin Luther King's 1964 Peace Prize, he quoted Jesus: "Whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also" (Matt. 5:39). As Mr. John noted: "It was not because he led a racial minority in their struggle for equality that Martin Luther King achieved fame. . . . [His] name will endure for the way in which he has waged his struggle."

In 1955, King had led a year-long, peaceful boycott to protest segregation on buses. He paid a high price. His home was bombed, and he was assaulted and arrested. He never retaliated. Eventually he was murdered.

How contrary Dr. King's peaceful example stands to my fleshly nature! I want justice now. I want retribution. I want others to pay for their wrongdoing, especially when it's directed at me. What I do not want is to turn the other cheek and invite them to take another swing.

Haddon Robinson comments on the lofty standards Jesus set forth in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5–7), calling them "goals . . . not impossible ideals. [Jesus] wants His disciples to strive toward these goals to master a new kind of life." By Tim

Gustafson (Reprinted by permission from [Our Daily Bread Ministries](#). Please do not repost the full devotional without their permission.)

Amid the injustices of life, may we have the courage, faith, and strength to turn the other cheek.

It takes true strength to refuse to retaliate.

(Ed: It takes supernatural strength from the Spirit!)

A Misunderstood Command - Geoffrey, a dedicated believer, took seriously our Lord's command about turning the other cheek, yet he misunderstood the meaning of what Christ taught. When a man struck him, for example, he turned the other side of his face to his assailant and allowed him to hit it again. He said, "I have now fulfilled the Lord's command." Then he proceeded to pound his foe into submission. That's quite obviously not what Jesus had in mind.

The Russian writer Leo Tolstoy also misinterpreted this command. He said that we should be completely nonresistant when people steal from us or hurt us. His theory was that the wicked would soon be so ashamed that they would correct their ways. But his logic was wrong. Society doesn't operate that way. Without the restraining force of the police, the wicked would completely overpower decent, law-abiding citizens.

What then did Jesus mean when He told us that we should turn the other cheek? He was saying we should not let the desire to get even dominate our lives. Instead, we should be governed by the principles of giving and forgiving. Through the power of the Holy Spirit who lives in us, we can do exactly what Jesus commanded. --H V Lugt (Reprinted by permission from [Our Daily Bread Ministries](#). Please do not repost the full devotional without their permission.)

Let me turn the other cheek
As You so often did;
Let me feel the joy of love
When saying, "I forgive." --Monroe

The best way to get even is to forgive as you have been forgiven.

Oswald Chambers - The Account With Persecution

But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil; but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also." Matthew 5:39

These verses reveal the humiliation of being a Christian. Naturally, if a man does not hit back, it is because he is a coward; but spiritually if a man does not hit back, it is a manifestation of the Son of God in him. When you are insulted, you must not only not resent it, but make it an occasion to exhibit the Son of God. You cannot imitate the disposition of Jesus; it is either there or it is not. To the saint personal insult becomes the occasion of revealing the incredible sweetness of the Lord Jesus.

The teaching of the Sermon on the Mount is not - Do your duty, but - Do what is not your duty. It is not your duty to go the second mile, to turn the other cheek, but Jesus says if we are His disciples we shall always do these things. There will be no spirit of - "Oh, well, I cannot do any more, I have been so misrepresented and misunderstood." Every time I insist upon my rights, I hurt the Son of God; whereas I can prevent Jesus from being hurt if I take the blow myself. That is the meaning of filling up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ. The disciple realizes that it is his Lord's honour that is at stake in his life, not his own honour.

Never look for right in the other man, but never cease to be right yourself. We are always looking for justice; the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount is - Never look for justice, but never cease to give it.

Revenge Hurts

On an old "Amos and Andy" television program, Andy was angry. There was a big man who would continually slap Andy across the chest every time they met. Andy finally had enough of it. He told Amos, "I'm going to get revenge. I put a stick of dynamite in my vest pocket. The next time he slaps me on the chest he's going to get his hand blown off." But Andy forgot that the dynamite would also blow his own heart out. Revenge may hurt the other person but it always blows our own heart out.

Turning the Other Cheek

My friend's four boys were young and bursting with energy, especially in church. But the sermon her minister preached on "turning the other cheek" got their undivided attention. The minister stressed that no matter what others do to us, we should never try to "get

even.” That afternoon the youngest boy came into the house crying. Between sobs he told his mother he had kicked one of his brothers, who had kicked him in return. “I’m sorry you’re hurt,” his mother said. “But you shouldn’t go around kicking people.” To which the tearful child replied, “But the preacher said he isn’t supposed to kick me back.”

PARADOXES

To conquer we must surrender (Matt. 5:39; 1 Cor. 15:57).

To live, we must die (John 12:23, 25).

To save life, we must lose it (Matt. 10:39; Luke 17:33).

To get, we must give (Prov. 11:23, 25).

To reign, we must serve (Luke 12:42–44).

To be wise, we must become fools (1 Cor. 3:18).

To be exalted, we must become humble (Matt. 18:4; 23:12).

To be first, we must be last (Mark 9:35; Matt. 20:26).

We must be humble in order to be exalted.

We must take up our yoke in order to find peace and rest.

We must work in order to be stronger.

We must surrender in order to win.

We must die in order to live.

We must give in order to receive.

OVERCOMING EVIL WITH GOOD - Cyril Hocking

EXACT RETRIBUTION was demanded by the scripture quoted, Exod. 21:23–25; Lev. 24:19–20; Deut. 19:21. It defined justice, hard, rigid justice, the principle of adequate compensation for injury suffered, but it also restrained revenge. The Lord Jesus forbade revenge. Revenge comes easily to the human race. We have a natural tendency to retaliate when anyone harms us. The Lord’s words were directed against the abuse of the law by the lawyer/scribes who exploited it for personal revenge. Our duty to individuals who wrong us is not retributive, but the acceptance of injustice without revenge or redress.

Who are we dealing with here? It is ‘him that is evil’, Matt. 5:39 R.V., the person who wrongs you. The Lord is instructing His followers not to be intent on getting their own back when someone wrongs them. To be the victim of some form of evil does not give us the right to hit back.

We must interpret the instruction, v. 39, by the Lord’s own example, Mark 14:65; 15:16–20; 1 Pet. 2:21–23, and by the teaching of the New Testament, Rom. 12:17–21; 1 Thess. 5:15. The follower of Christ, when he has suffered wrong, is to banish from his mind the natural desire to retaliate, or accuse. There is a limitation imposed by the Lord’s example, John 18:22–23. He did not invite a second blow, but took occasion to instruct the smiter. Without thought of reprisal, but with desire that right and truth should prevail, He said, ‘If I have spoken evil, bear witness of the evil: but if well, why smitest thou me?’

Even more is to be given than is demanded, of a follower of Christ, Matt. 5:40–41. The oppressor is seeking to obtain the coat, which is less valuable. To the cloak, the more valuable garment, its owner had an inalienable right—it could not be taken away from him permanently, Deut. 24:12–13. Its voluntary surrender here is thus significant. So the disciple is to meet evil not with a manifestation of anger, hatred or retribution, but with a readiness to submit to more.

What happens when irksome duties are imposed upon us?, v. 41. During the first mile of portage the compeller may be master, but by volunteering the second mile the disciple becomes master of the situation, for he is conferring a favour. On a wider application, we are always to be prepared to waive our personal liberties, to surrender our personal conveniences, for the Master’s service. There is no place for the insistence upon one’s rights here!

Chris Tiegreen - Unattached to Dignity [At His Feet: Daily Readings to Deepen Your Walk with Jesus - Page 9](#)

“If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.” Matthew 5:39

“Revenge is the most worthless weapon in the world.”

—David Augsburger

IN WORD In Jesus’ code of ethics, there is no room for an inflated sense of dignity. That isn’t to say that we have no dignity; created in the image of God, we could have no less. What Jesus prohibits is our instinct to defend our “approval rating” in others’ eyes. We are not to guard our image as though our self-esteem depends on people. We are children of God, a kingdom of priests, and one with Christ. Why would we be zealous for the opinions of a sinfully competitive culture? We can be content with what’s truly valuable.

Why are we so concerned about the impression we make on others? And why are we so convinced that a vigorous defense of our rights makes a better impression than our humility? Jesus articulates what ought to be clear to us: Honor comes to those who do not strive for it. The most admired are the most humble. The kingdom of God is well represented not by the strident and the overassertive, but by those who know their heavenly citizenship and are entirely content with it. That's how we can become unattached to our reputation; we already know who we are.

Jesus doesn't tell His people to be doormats. He tells us to be reasonable. We don't need to assert ourselves to be valued. We don't need to respond to evil with evil. The best resistance against aggression is to give it no ground for continuing. We are to defy it by showing its holy alternative. Evil is exposed in the face of humility. It does not know how to disturb a truly peaceful heart.

IN DEED How do you respond when people offend you? Even when the offense is real, the response should be a display of the character of God rather than the impulses of men. The world expects eye for eye and tooth for tooth. But no one who plays by those rules stands out from the crowd. There is no witness to the kingdom of God—this kingdom of grace—when we miss occasions to show it. We must decide which is more important to us: a defense of our dignity before others, or a demonstration of the holy kingdom.

The Grace to Forgive

"Daddy, come quick," shouted my four-year-old daughter. "Someone stole the presents from under the Christmas tree."

At first I thought that the children were playing on me. But I could see quickly that they were visibly upset. Apparently someone had come into our house while we slept, picked out some choice presents, removed the blanket that covers my favorite chair, and used it to haul away about a dozen or so gifts that were to be given to the children and to friends and family on Christmas morning.

To say that the children were angry would be an understatement. After my 11-year-old son, Johnathan, realized that among the gifts stolen were his brand new Nike sneakers, he stormed out of the house in tears.

I sat silent on my coverless chair, stunned and fuming. I had seen the children's Christmas special, "How the Grinch Stole Christmas" dozens of times since childhood. But I never believed such a tale could come true. How do you forgive a person like this? How do I teach my children to practice forgiveness?

Because it is unnatural, we have to practice forgiveness, like any other discipline. According to Dr. King, "Forgiveness is not just an occasional act: it is a permanent attitude."

Later that day I put the question to my son. "How should we as Christians respond to the person who tried to steal our Christmas?"

"Yeah, yeah, I know, Dad," he said. "Even though he doesn't deserve it, we're supposed to give him grace."

Sure, I knew that the words that came out of his mouth were almost the complete opposite of what he was feeling in his heart (I knew because I felt the same way). But I also knew we had to start somewhere. And if, one step at a time, our discipleship as Christians could include giving each other grace, if our children could learn and practice forgiveness as well as they practice praise and worship, if we could literally create a counter-culture of grace, then just maybe, as we all mature in our faith, our hearts could finally line up with our words.

And the world would have to take notice.

—Spencer Perkins, Playing the Grace Card. From the files of Leadership

Jon Courson - Matthew 5:39 [Jon Courson's Application Commentary: Volume 3, New ... - Page 30](#)

There have been those throughout history who have found that what Jesus said was potent and dynamic—that turning the other cheek actually puts one in control.

Mahatma Gandhi understood this. The entire sub-continent of India was freed from the powerful British rule because Gandhi read this verse and, although he was not a believer, he believed what Jesus said. He inspired an entire nation to turn the other cheek, and it blew the Brits away. After all, what could the British do? They could beat the people with clubs, fire guns into their midst—but not without destroying the morale of their own army in the process.

Martin Luther King Jr. found the same thing to be true. If the protestors had fought back, the US marshals would have felt justified in firing their guns indiscriminately—and the civil rights movement would have died. But peaceful resistance won out, and an entire people experienced liberation.

Jesus wasn't being a coward when He told us to turn the other cheek. On the contrary, He was sharing a very practical and potent principle: the one who controls the situation is the one who doesn't fight back.

In your family, at work, in your neighborhood, at school, take the words of Jesus literally. Don't fight back. You won't be a wimp. You'll be a winner.

This is a hard saying in the sense that it prescribes a course of action which does not come naturally to us. Unprovoked assault prompts resentment and retaliation. If one wants to be painfully literal, the assault is particularly vicious, for if the striker is right-handed, it is with the back of his hand that he hits the other on the right cheek.

This is one of a number of examples by which Jesus shows that the lifestyle of the kingdom of God is more demanding than what the law of Moses laid down. "You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth'" (Mt 5:38). This was indeed laid down in Israel's earliest law code (Ex 21:24), and when it was first said it marked a great step forward, for it imposed a strict limitation on the taking of vengeance. It replaced an earlier system of justice according to which if a member of tribe X injured a member of tribe Y, tribe Y was under an obligation to take vengeance on tribe X. This quickly led to a blood feud between the two tribes and resulted in suffering which far exceeded the original injury. But incorporated into Israel's law code was the principle of exact retaliation: one eye, and no more, for an eye; one life, and no more, for a life. When wounded honor was satisfied with such precisely proportionate amends, life was much less fraught with hazards. The acceptance of this principle made it easier to regard monetary compensation as being, in many cases, a reasonable replacement for the infliction of an equal and opposite injury on the offending party.

But now Jesus takes a further step. "Don't retaliate at all," he says to his disciples. "Don't harbor a spirit of resentment; if someone does you an injury or puts you to inconvenience, show yourself master of the situation by doing something to his advantage. If he gets some pleasure out of hitting you, let him hit you again." (It should not be necessary to say that this saying is no more to be pressed literally than the saying about plucking out one's right eye and throwing it away—it is not difficult to envisage the other cheek being turned in a very provocative manner.) If a soldier or other government official conscripts your services to carry a load for him so far, you are under compulsion; you are forced to do it. But, when you have reached the end of the stipulated distance, you are a free person again; then you can say to him, "If you'd like it carried farther, I will gladly carry it for you." The initiative has now become yours, and you can take it not by voicing a sense of grievance at having been put to such inconvenience but by performing an act of grace. This way of reacting to violence and compulsion is the way of Christ.

To have one's services conscripted to carry a soldier's pack for him is not an everyday experience in the Western world. How, in our situation, could this particular injunction of Jesus be applied? Perhaps when a citizen is directed by a policeman to assist him in the execution of his duty. But if (say) it is a matter of helping him to arrest a larger number of suspicious characters than he can cope with single-handed, would they not also come within the scope of duty to one's neighbor? This simply reminds us that Jesus' injunctions are not usually of the kind that can be carried out automatically; they often require careful thought. Whatever sacrifices he expects his followers to make, he does not ask them to sacrifice their minds. What they are urged to do is to have their minds conformed to his, and when careful thought is exercised in accordance with the mind of Christ, the resulting action will be in accordance with the way of Christ.

Another parallel might be the Christian's reaction to his income tax demand. The tax demanded must be paid; no choice can be exercised there. But suppose the Christian taxpayer, as an act of grace, pays double the amount demanded, or at least adds a substantial amount to it; what then? The computer would probably record it as tax overpaid, and the surplus would come back to him as a rebate. Perhaps it would be wisest if he were to send it to the government anonymously—not only so as not to let his left hand know what his right hand was doing, but to forestall unworthy suspicions and enquiries. Once again, the carrying out of the simple injunctions of Jesus in a complex society like ours is not so easy. But where the spirit which he recommended is present, the performance should not go too far astray.

The admonition to turn the other cheek is given by Jesus to his disciples. It belongs to the sphere of personal behavior. There are many Christians, however, who hold that this teaching should be put into practice by communities and nations as well as by individuals. Where Christian communities are concerned, we may well agree. The spectacle of the church enlisting the aid of the "secular arm" to promote its interests is rarely an edifying one. "It belongs to the church of God," someone once said, "to receive blows rather than to inflict them—but," he added "she is an anvil that has worn out many hammers."⁷ But what about a political community?

The situation did not arise in New Testament times. The first disciples of Jesus did not occupy positions of authority. Joseph of Arimathea might be an exception: he was a member of the Sanhedrin, the supreme court of the Jewish nation, and according to Luke (Lk 23:50–51), he did not go along with his colleagues' adverse verdict on Jesus. As the gospel spread into the Gentile world, some local churches included in their membership men who occupied positions of municipal responsibility, like Erastus, the city treasurer of Corinth (Rom 16:23); but neither Paul nor any other New Testament writer finds it necessary to give special instructions to Christian rulers corresponding to those given to Christian subjects. But what was to happen when Christians became rulers, as in due course some did? Should the Christian magistrate practice nonretaliation toward the criminal who comes up before him for judgment? Should the Christian king practice nonretaliation toward a neighboring king who declared war against him?

Paul, who repeats and underlines Jesus' teaching of nonretaliation, regards retaliation as part of the duty of the civil ruler. "Would you have no fear of him who is in authority?" he asks. "Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain; he is the servant of God to execute his wrath on the wrongdoer" (Rom 13:3–4 RSV). For Paul, the ruler in question was the Roman emperor or someone who held executive or judicial authority under him. But his words were relevant to their chronological setting. The time had not yet come (although it did come in less than ten years after those words were written) when the empire was openly hostile to the church. Still less had the time come when the empire capitulated to the church and emperors began to profess and call themselves Christians. When they inherited the "sword" which their pagan predecessors had not borne "in vain," how were they to use it? The answer to that question cannot be read easily off the pages of the New Testament. It is still being asked, and it is right that it should; but no single answer can claim to be the truly Christian one.

See also comment on EXODUS 21:23–25.

ILLUSTRATIONS

1. The Peacemaker in the Office

- **Illustration:** A colleague spreads false rumors about someone in the office, trying to damage their reputation. Instead of retaliating by sharing negative things about the colleague, the person chooses to respond with kindness, refusing to engage in gossip and even defending the colleague's work when appropriate.
- **Application:** This reflects turning the other cheek, choosing to de-escalate conflict and embodying forgiveness and grace in difficult circumstances.

2. The Farmer and the Insult

- **Illustration:** A farmer is insulted by his neighbor over a land dispute. Instead of responding with harsh words, the farmer invites the neighbor over for tea to talk things out peacefully. The neighbor, surprised by the act of kindness, eventually apologizes.
- **Application:** This shows how a soft response can disarm hostility and open the door to reconciliation, embodying Jesus' teaching of non-retaliation.

3. Gandhi's Nonviolent Resistance

- **Illustration:** Mahatma Gandhi, inspired by the teachings of Jesus and other spiritual leaders, led nonviolent protests against British rule in India. Even when met with violence, his followers refused to retaliate, ultimately leading to India's independence.
- **Application:** This example demonstrates the power of nonviolent resistance in overcoming oppression and achieving justice without resorting to retaliation.

4. A Mother's Example

- **Illustration:** A child is hit by a sibling during an argument. Instead of hitting back, the child pauses and tells the parent, "I don't want to fight anymore." The mother praises the child for showing restraint and helps both children resolve their conflict peacefully.
- **Application:** This teaches that even children can learn the importance of turning the other cheek and seeking peace instead of revenge.

5. The Christian and the Persecutor

- **Illustration:** A missionary in a hostile region is confronted by someone who mocks their faith and throws their Bible to the ground. Instead of responding with anger, the missionary calmly picks up the Bible, smiles, and says, "I'll pray for you." This unexpected reaction leaves the persecutor speechless.

- **Application:** This illustrates how showing humility and grace in the face of opposition can reflect Christ's love.
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6. The King and the Thief

- **Illustration:** A king catches a thief stealing from his palace. Instead of punishing him, the king forgives the thief and gives him food and clothes, saying, "You don't need to steal; I will provide for you." The thief, overwhelmed by kindness, pledges his loyalty to the king and becomes an honest man.
 - **Application:** This story mirrors God's mercy and shows how responding to wrongs with grace can transform lives.
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7. Nelson Mandela's Forgiveness

- **Illustration:** After 27 years of imprisonment, Nelson Mandela chose to forgive those who oppressed him rather than seek revenge. His actions of reconciliation helped heal a divided South Africa.
 - **Application:** Mandela's response reflects turning the other cheek by overcoming injustice with forgiveness and compassion.
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8. The Baker and the Rival

- **Illustration:** A baker discovers that a competitor has been undercutting his prices and spreading false rumors about his bread. Instead of retaliating, the baker continues to produce excellent bread and sends the competitor a loaf as a gift. The competitor, shamed by the act of kindness, eventually stops the rivalry.
 - **Application:** This story demonstrates how grace and kindness can diffuse hostility.
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9. The Early Christians and Persecution

- **Illustration:** In the early church, many Christians faced persecution, including being thrown to lions or burned alive. Instead of retaliating, they prayed for their persecutors and often died with songs of praise on their lips, which inspired many to embrace the faith.
 - **Application:** This example shows the ultimate trust in God's justice and the power of living out Jesus' teaching.
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10. A Modern Neighbor Dispute

- **Illustration:** A neighbor intentionally mows over someone's flowers during a feud. Instead of retaliating, the person replants the flowers and leaves a kind note for the neighbor. Over time, the kind actions soften the neighbor's heart, and they reconcile.
 - **Application:** This illustrates how turning the other cheek can pave the way for restored relationships.
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Retaliation The Other Cheek

Richard Weaver, a Christian worker, earned his living in the mines. He had the higher priority, however, of trying to bring his associates in contact with the savior and His soul-restoring Word. While most of the men were indifferent, one became offended by his witness, and finally exclaimed, "I'm sick of your constant preaching. I've a good mind to smack you in the face!" "Go ahead if it will make you feel better," replied Weaver. The man immediately struck him a stinging blow. The Christian did not retaliate but turned the other cheek. Again the unbeliever struck him and then walked away, cursing under his breath. Weaver called after him, "I forgive you, and still pray that the Lord will save you!" The next morning his assailant was waiting for him when he came to work "Oh, Dick," he said, his voice filled with emotion, "do you really forgive me for what I did yesterday?" "Certainly," said Weaver extending his hand. As he told him again the message of salvation, God opened the man's heart, and he received Christ. (Matthew 5:39)

Alexander Maclaren summarizes Mt 5:33-37 in the following sermon...

Is His treatment of the sixth and seventh commandments, Jesus deepened them by bringing the inner man of feeling and desire under their control. In His treatment of the old commandments as to oaths, He expands

them by extending the prohibitions from one kind of oath to all kinds. The movement in the former case is downwards and inwards; in the latter it is outwards, the compass sweeping a wider circle. Perjury, a false oath, was all that had been forbidden. He forbids all. We may note that the forms of colloquial swearing, which our Lord specifies, are not to be taken as an exhaustive enumeration of what is forbidden. They are in the nature of a parenthesis, and the sentence runs on continuously without them — 'Swear not at all..., but let your communication be Yea, yea; Nay, nay.'

The reason appended is equally universal, for it suggests the deep thought that 'what is more than these,' that is to say, any form of speech that seeks to strengthen a simple, grave asseveration by such oaths as He has just quoted, 'cometh of evil,' inasmuch as it springs from, and reveals, the melancholy fact that his bare word is not felt binding by a man, and is not accepted as conclusive by others. If lies were not so common, oaths would be needless. And oaths increase the evil from which they come, by confirming the notion that there is no sin in a lie unless it is sworn to.

The oaths specified are all colloquial, which were and are continually and offensively mingled with common speech in the East. Nowhere are there such habitual liars, and nowhere are there so many oaths. Every traveller there knows that, and sees how true is Christ's filiation of the custom of swearing from the custom of falsehood. But these poisonous weeds of speech not only tended to degrade plain veracity in the popular mind, but were themselves parents of immoral evasions, for it was the teaching of some Rabbis, at all events, that an oath 'by heaven' or 'by earth' or 'by Jerusalem' or 'by my head' did not bind. That further relaxation of the obligation of truthfulness was grounded on the words quoted in verse 33, for, said the immoral quibblers, 'it is "thine oaths to the Lord" that thou "shalt perform," and for these others you may do as you like.' Therefore our Lord insists that every oath, even these mutilated, colloquial ones which avoid His name, is in essence an appeal to God, and has no sense unless it is. To swear such a truncated oath, then, has the still further condemnation that it is certainly an irreverence, and probably a quibble, and meant to be broken. It must be fully admitted that there is little in common between such pieces of senseless profanity as these oaths, or the modern equivalents which pollute so many lips to-day, and the oath administered in a court of justice, and it may further be allowed weight that Jesus does not specifically prohibit the oath 'by the Lord,' but it is difficult to see how the principles on which He condemns are to be kept from touching even judicial oaths. For they, too, are administered on the ground of the false idea that they add to the obligation of veracity, and give a guarantee of truthfulness which a simple affirmation does not give. Nor can any one, who knows the perfunctory formality and indifference with which such oaths are administered and taken, and what a farce 'kissing the book' has become, doubt that even judicial oaths tend to weaken the popular conception of the sin of a lie and the reliance to be placed upon the simple 'Yea, yea; Nay, nay.'

J C Ryle - You have here our Lord Jesus Christ's rules for our conduct one towards another. He that would know how He ought to feel and act towards his fellow men, should often study these verses. They deserve to be written in letters of gold. They have extorted praise even from the enemies of Christianity. Let us mark well what they contain.

The Lord Jesus forbids everything like an unforgiving and revengeful spirit. A readiness to resent injuries--a quickness in taking offence--a quarrelsome and contentious disposition--a keenness in asserting our rights--all, all are contrary to the mind of Christ. The world may see no harm in these habits of mind. But they do not correspond to the character of the Christian. Our Master says, "Don't resist him who is evil."

The Lord Jesus enjoins on us a spirit of universal love and charity. We ought to put away all malice. We ought to return good for evil, and blessing for cursing. We ought to "love even our enemies." Moreover we are not to love in word only, but in deed. We are to deny ourselves, and take trouble, in order to be kind and courteous. If any man "compels you to go one mile, go with him two." We are to put up with much and bear much, rather than hurt another, or give offence. In all things we are to be unselfish. Our thought must never be, "how do others behave to me?" but "what would Christ have me to do?"

A standard of conduct like this may seem, at first sight, extravagantly high. But we must never content ourselves with aiming at one lower. We must observe the two weighty arguments by which our Lord backs up this part of His instruction. They deserve serious attention.

For one thing, ***if we do not aim at the spirit and temper which are here recommended, we are not yet children of God.*** Our "Father in heaven" is kind to all. He sends rain on good and on evil alike. He causes "His sun" to shine on all without distinction. A son should be like his father. But where is our likeness to our Father in heaven, if we cannot show mercy and kindness to everybody? Where is the evidence that we are new creatures, if we lack charity? It is altogether lacking. We must yet be "born again." (John 3:7.)

For another thing, *if we do not aim at the spirit and temper here recommended, we are manifestly yet of the world.* Even those who have no religion can "love those who love them." They can do good and show kindness, when their affection or interest moves them. But a Christian ought to be influenced by higher principles than these. Do we flinch from the test? Do we find it impossible to do good to our enemies? If that be the case, we may be sure we have yet to be converted. As yet we have not "received the Spirit of God." (1 Cor. 2:12.)

There is much in all this which calls loudly for solemn reflection. There are few passages of Scripture so calculated to raise in our minds humbling thoughts. *We have here a lovely picture of the Christian as he ought to be.* We cannot look at it without painful feelings. We must all allow that it differs widely from the Christian as he is. Let us carry away from it two general lessons.

In the first place *if the spirit of these ten verses were more continually remembered by true believers, they would recommend Christianity to the world far more than they do.* We must not allow ourselves to suppose that the least words in this passage are trifling and of small moment. They are not so. It is attention to the spirit of this passage which makes our religion beautiful. It is the neglect of the things which it contains by which our religion is deformed. Unfailing courtesy, kindness, tenderness, and consideration for others, are some of the greatest ornaments to the character of the child of God. The world can understand these things, if it cannot understand doctrine. There is no religion in rudeness, roughness, bluntness, and incivility. The perfection of practical Christianity consists in attending to the little duties of holiness as well as to the great.

In the second place, *if the spirit of these ten verses had more dominion and power in the world, how much happier the world would be than it is.* Who does not know that quarrelings, strifes, selfishness, and unkindness cause half the miseries by which mankind is visited? Who can fail to see that nothing would so much tend to increase happiness as the spread of Christian love, such as is here recommended by our Lord? Let us all remember this. Those who fancy that true religion has any tendency to make men unhappy, are greatly mistaken. It is the absence of it that does this, and not the presence. True religion has the directly contrary effect. It tends to promote peace, and charity, and kindness, and goodwill among men. The more men are brought under the teaching of the Holy Spirit, the more they will love one another, and the more happy they will be. ([Matthew 5 Expository Thoughts - Commentary](#))

Takeaways From Matthew 5:38-39

1. Jesus Teaches a Higher (the Highest) Standard of Mercy

- **Takeaway:** The Old Testament law of "an eye for an eye" (lex talionis) was meant to limit retaliation and ensure justice. Jesus, however, calls His followers to go beyond justice and respond with grace and forgiveness.
- **Application:** In personal conflicts, resist the natural (fleshly) instinct to retaliate and instead, enabled by the Spirit, seek peace and reconciliation.

2. Overcoming Evil with Good (Romans 12:21+)

- **Takeaway:** Making the choice to refuse to retaliate against evil demonstrates Spirit empowered moral strength and trust in God's perfect justice (which will be dispensed in His timing).
- **Application:** Choose to respond with kindness and forgiveness, even when others wrong you, for this imitates the character of Christ and serves as a fragrant aroma to both lost and saved (2Cor 2:14-16+).

3. Turning the Other Cheek Shows Humility

- **Takeaway:** Turning the other cheek is not about being passive but about rejecting pride and choosing humility over revenge.
- **Application:** In moments of insult or humiliation, pause to consider how Jesus was humiliated, and how we are called to walk in His steps (see 1Pe 2:21-23+, 1Jn 2:6+) reflecting His gentleness and grace.

4. Breaking the Cycle of Vengeance

- **Takeaway:** Retaliation perpetuates conflict, while non-resistance can break the cycle of hatred and violence.
- **Application:** In disagreements or disputes, prioritize reconciliation over winning or proving a point.

5. Radical Love Reflects God's Kingdom

- **Takeaway:** Jesus' command to turn the other cheek demonstrates radical, supernaturally enabled love, which values mercy over fairness.
- **Application:** Walk in the Spirit (Gal 5:16+) so that you are able to live in a way that reflects God's love by showing mercy and grace, even when it is undeserved.

6. Trust in God's Justice

- **Takeaway:** Choosing not to retaliate requires trusting that God sees and will bring ultimate justice (read Ro 12:17-21+)
- **Application:** Release the need for personal revenge (enabled by the Spirit "let it drop!") and leave justice in God's hands.

7. It's Not About Weakness, But Strength

- **Takeaway:** Turning the other cheek requires self-control, the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22-23+, 2Pe 1:6+).
- **Application:** Seek daily to be continually filled with the Spirit (Eph 5:18+), relying on His supernatural power rather than relying on your natural tendency toward self-defense.

8. Love Your Enemies

- **Takeaway:** These verses set the stage for Jesus' teaching to love enemies and pray for those who persecute you (Matthew 5:44).
- **Application:** Enabled by the Holy Spirit practice praying for those who hurt you, and seek ways to show kindness in the face of hostility.

Reflection Question

- How do I typically respond when wronged? Does my response reflect Jesus' teaching and His example?