

RETALIATION IS WRONG

Note two important things from Matthew 5. 1) Christ came to FULFILL the LAW in a deeper sense – that is, making it possible for His people to live out the spirit of the law in the power of the Holy Spirit (cf. Mt. 5:17). 2) Christ plainly says that unless our righteousness exceeds the standards of the scribes and Pharisees, we will not see the kingdom (5:20).

These religious leaders emphasized EXTERNAL compliance, but Christ emphasized an INTERNAL spiritual dynamic that results in an even higher standard of living. In saving faith, we have an imputed righteousness (that is, Christ's righteousness is put to our account), but we also have changed hearts, which result in practical righteousness in life.

In Matthew 5 we have what are called “The Six Antitheses.”

Six Antitheses (You have Heard – but I Say)

- 1) Murder/Anger – Mt. 5:21-26
- 2) Adultery – Mt. 5:27-30
- 3) Divorce – Mt. 5:31-32
- 4) Oaths – Mt. 5:33-37
- 5) Vengeance – Mt. 5:38-42
- 6) Love for Enemies – Mt. 5:43-48

In our study, we have now come to the 5th and 6th antitheses related to retaliation and love.

Matthew 5:38 (NKJV)

38 “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’

This prescription is found in the law of the OT Scriptures (cf. Ex. 21:24; Lev. 24:19-20; Deut. 19:21). But Christ shows that the intention was never to foster personal vengeance or retaliation.

“**An eye for an eye**” was called “***the law of retaliation***” (Latin: lex talionis). But understand this was NEVER to be a matter of personal retaliation or vindication. Rather, this was a provision under the law that was carried out in the realm of legal courts (cf. Ex. 21:22; Num. 35:9-34).

This becomes very important in terms of the flow of thought and making proper application of what Christ is saying. Personal vengeance was never the intent.

“Deut. 19:18 indicates that the “law of the tooth” (lex talionis) was a guideline for the civil authorities and did not approve private retribution.” – ***The Moody Bible Commentary***

Jesus now goes on to show that for kingdom citizens there is to be no place for retaliation or being vindictive. We are to live above this. In verses 39-42 Jesus gives 4 illustrations of this principle.

We have already noted that in the Sermon on the Mount there are places where Christ to make a point, seems to use hyperbole. We saw this in verses 29-30 where Christ says if your right eye offends then pluck it out – if the right-hand causes you to sin cut it off. Almost, no one thinks we should take this literally. Rather, we take it that Christ was speaking in exaggerated terms to make His point strong; namely that drastic action is required. And we see this hyperbolic emphasis in these verses addressing retaliation as well.

Matthew 5:39 (NKJV)

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

An evil person is one who has done you wrong, and the human tendency is to want to retaliate. A slap on the right cheek in Jewish culture was considered a major insult, injuring your pride more than anything else. Jewish law demanded a stiff fine for such an injurious insult. Instead of retaliating, Christ says to turn the other cheek. Again, understand the “spirit” in which Christ speaks.

In the context, the flow of thought continues from verse 38. In a situation where the courts should handle things, you don’t become a vigilante and try to mete out justice on a personal, vengeful basis. Instead of doing that, you just take it.

Worldly wisdom says, “*If you don’t hit me, I won’t hit you. But if you hit me, I will hit you back twice as hard.*” Christ says, “*Don’t hit back*”. Don’t take vengeance into your own hands.

Now this is not to say there is no place for the civil authorities to deal with abuse, there is – just as there was under the Law in the OT. The issue here

is personal retaliation. There is no place for personal revenge in “kingdom ethics”.

But I would argue there is a place to call the authorities when abuse is happening. If they are trying to knock your teeth out, call the police. And there is a place for self-defense and a place to be wise in proactively protecting yourself and your family (cf. Lk. 12:11; 22:36-38; Acts 22:1; 24:10).

“Jesus’ focus here is on individual conduct, as indicated by the contrast with Matt. 5:38, which shows he is prohibiting the universal human tendency to seek personal revenge.” – ***ESV Study Bible***

Romans 12:19 (NKJV)

19 Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, “Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,” says the Lord.

When someone abusively wrongs you, the thing to do is give it over to God and let Him take care of it. Vengeance belongs to the Lord. Don’t play God here. Give it to Him. It belongs to Him to repay.

Years ago, I heard J. Vernon McGee say that through the years, he had learned that God is able to handle people who mistreat you far better than you ever could. Let Him! Give them over to God!

It is important to realize that “personal retaliation” is sin! It is wrong. It is not in keeping with kingdom living.