

## Lesson #6 – Retaliation – Matthew 5:38-42

### Review of Previous Week

- What are some of the abuses that Jesus sought to correct?
  - The abuse of women in the context of lust / objectivism.
  - The abuse of women by allowing divorces for any reason whatsoever.
  - The abuse of the laws of oaths and vows that allowed people to be dishonest with each other.
- What did Jesus mean when he said, “If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away?”
  - We are to take drastic actions to steer clear of sin in our lives.
  - What are some examples of this?
- What is the difference between “you have heard it said” and “it is written?”
  - “You have heard it said” does not refer to Old Testament law. It refers to the oral teachings / traditions / interpretive additions of the Pharisees.
  - When Jesus says, “It is written,” he is referring to Old Testament law.
- When Jesus says, “Do not take an oath at all,” is he banning all oath taking?
  - No. There are other places in the New Testament where people take oaths.
  - No. In the Old Testament, there are places where God makes an oath.
  - No. Jesus, in his trial before Caiaphas, took an oath.

### Opening

- In February 1992, Stella Liebeck ordered a cup of coffee to go from McDonalds.
  - Liebeck was sitting in the passenger seat of her nephew's car, which was pulled over so she could add sugar to her coffee.
  - While removing the cup's lid, Liebeck spilled her hot coffee, burning her legs.
  - Liebeck suffered third degree burns on over six percent of her body.
    - This type of burn destroys both the outer layer of skin (epidermis) and the entire layer beneath (the dermis).

- Originally, Liebeck sought \$20,000 in damages. McDonalds refused to settle out of court.
  - Liebeck was ultimately awarded \$200,000 in compensatory damages.
  - She was also awarded an additional \$2.7 million in punitive damages.
- Was this a frivolous lawsuit?
  - Were Liebeck's burns worth almost \$3 million in damages?

### Scripture

- Matthew 5:38-42 – “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ <sup>39</sup> But I 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. <sup>40</sup> And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. <sup>41</sup> And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. <sup>42</sup> Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you.”
- Review each of *lex talionis* and Christ's four examples in light of Jewish culture and then American culture.
- Three Points
  - Retaliation and generosity are matters of the heart
  - How are we to respond when we are wronged?
  - What if we don't follow Christ's mandate of generosity?

### Introduction

- “Do not resist the one who is evil.”
  - “Resist” is more broad in scope than “retaliate.”
    - It includes voluntary acceptance of poor treatment.
  - Note how Jesus doesn't say “Do not resist evil,” but “Do not resist *the one who is evil.*” (italics added)
    - We are to resist evil in our response to the one who is evil.
  - Jesus is pushing his followers in the direction of non-resistance.

- Many people take these verses as an exhortation for non-violent resistance.
- However, Jesus is really mandating no resistance whatsoever.
  - Even in the case of non-violent resistance, there is still resistance.
- Matthew 5:39a in the Good News Bible reads, “But now I tell you: do not take revenge on someone who wrongs you.”
- How are we to exhibit this non-resistance? Jesus provides us with four examples.
- However, before we get into those four examples, let’s look at the ancient Near Eastern legal concept involved.
- *Lex talionis* is a Latin phrase which literally means “the law of the claw.”
  - John Stott defines *lex talionis* as “the principle of exact retribution, whose purpose was both to lay the foundation of justice, specifying the punishment which a wrongdoer deserved, and to limit the compensation of his victim to an exact equivalent and no more.”<sup>74</sup>
    - The *lex talionis*, at the same time, both defined justice and limited revenge.
  - The earliest known use of this concept is found in the Code of the Hammurabi.
    - The Code of the Hammurabi dates to the eighteenth century BC.
    - It also contains the examples of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.
    - In Islamic law, the *lex talionis* specified the maximum punishment allowable by law.
  - In Scripture, it is based on Exodus 21:23-25, Leviticus 24:19-22, and Deuteronomy 19:16-21.
    - Exodus 21:23-25 – “If anyone is injured, the offender must pay a life for a life, <sup>24</sup>an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, a hand for a hand, a foot for a foot, <sup>25</sup>a burn for a burn, a bruise for a bruise, a wound for a wound.”
    - Leviticus 24:19-22 – “Whoever injures a neighbor must receive the same injury in return— <sup>20</sup>a broken bone for a broken bone, an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. Whoever injures another person must receive the same

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<sup>74</sup> Stott, 104.

injury in return. <sup>21</sup> Whoever kills an animal must replace it. Whoever kills a person must be put to death. <sup>22</sup> The same rule applies to every one of you. It makes no difference whether you are a foreigner or an Israelite, because I am the LORD your God.”

- Deuteronomy 19:16-21 – “This is what you must do whenever a witness takes the stand to accuse a person falsely of a crime. <sup>17</sup> The two people involved must stand in the LORD’s presence, in front of the priests and judges who are serving at that time. <sup>18</sup> The judges must make a thorough investigation. If it is found that the witness lied when he testified against the other Israelite, <sup>19</sup> then do to him what he planned to do to the other person. You must get rid of this evil. <sup>20</sup> When the rest of the people hear about this, they will be afraid. Never again will such an evil thing be done among you. <sup>21</sup> Have no pity on him: Take a life for a life, an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, a hand for a hand, and a foot for a foot.”
- It is also known as “an eye for an eye.”
- This law of proportionate retribution is the principle that a person who has injured another person is to be penalized to a similar degree, and the person inflicting such punishment should be the injured party.
- The intent behind this principle was not to sanction revenge, but to *restrict* compensation to the value of the loss.
  - Lex talionis prohibited applying an overly severe punishment that did not fit the crime.
  - In softer interpretations, it means the victim receives the [estimated] value of the injury in compensation.
  - It might be better stated, “it might be better read 'only one eye for one eye.'”
- By the time of Jesus, several changes had been made to the *lex talionis*:
  - Rather than being a part of the public justice system, it became an opportunity for private revenge.

- The rule became applied to the realm of personal relationships, rather than the public sector (courts of law) only.
- This rule became focused on vindictiveness as opposed to merely satisfying justice.
- Physical penalties had been replaced by financial damages.
  - The Jews, in the time of Jesus, had taken the intent of the law from restrictive to permissive.
  - Rather than restrict excessive punishment, the Jews were using it to allow for punishments of any sort in personal relationships.

#### The *lex talionis* and Christ's Four Examples in Light of Jewish Culture and American Culture

- In responding to the *lex talionis* from Exodus 21, was Christ contradicting the law of Moses?
  - Christ's response to "an eye for an eye" is not contradictory to it, but rather he intensifies and internalizes the application of it in our personal lives.
  - Christ's examples in these four verses show the contrast in personal relationships of disciples of Christ and those controlled by vengeful passion.<sup>75</sup>
  - His examples also show us the lengths to which we must go to exhibit Christian non-retaliation.
- The Old Testament law in Exodus 21:23-25 was not given to allow for vengeance. How do we know? Vengeance was forbidden in Leviticus 19:18.
  - Exodus 21:23-25 – "But if there is harm, then you shall pay life for life, <sup>24</sup> eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, <sup>25</sup> burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe."
    - This law would decisively terminate vendettas.
  - Leviticus 19:18 – "You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD."

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<sup>75</sup> Murray, 175.

- Keep this verse in the back of your mind as we work through today's lesson.
- Retribution is never for the purpose of placating vindictiveness but for the purpose of satisfying justice.
- Turning the other cheek (Matthew 5:39)
  - Matthew 5:39 – “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.”
  - The premise of being struck on the cheek was not one of physical assault.
  - Rather it was an insult – the deepest offense to a person's dignity.
    - In the Middle East today, a strike on the right cheek expresses “the greatest possible contempt and extreme abuse.”<sup>76</sup>
  - There was no one greater to display this concept than Jesus Christ.
    - According to Mark 14:65, during his trial before the Jewish council, “Some of them began to spit on him. They covered his face and hit him with their fists. They said to him, “Prophesy!” Even the guards took him and slapped him.”
      - Christ's response: humble non-resistance.
    - A short while later, in Mark 15:16-20, the soldiers began to mock Christ as well, when they “led Jesus into the courtyard of the palace and called together the whole troop. <sup>17</sup> They dressed him in purple, twisted some thorns into a crown, and placed it on his head. <sup>18</sup> Then they began to greet him, “Long live the king of the Jews!” <sup>19</sup> They kept hitting him on the head with a stick, spitting on him, and kneeling in front of him with false humility.
      - Again, what was Christ's response? Humble non-resistance.
    - According to 1 Peter 2:21-23, “God called you to endure suffering because Christ suffered for you. He left you an example so that you could follow in his footsteps. <sup>22</sup> Christ never committed any sin. He

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<sup>76</sup> J. Jeremias. *New Testament Theology, Part One: The Proclamation of Jesus*. (London: SCM Press, 1963) 239.

never spoke deceitfully.<sup>73</sup> Christ never verbally abused those who verbally abused him. When he suffered, he didn't make any threats but left everything to the one who judges fairly."

- Jesus Christ is the perfect model of Christian non-resistance.
  - Dietrich Bonhoeffer reflected Peter's observation, "On the cross, Jesus fulfilled the law he himself established and thus graciously keeps his disciples in the fellowship of his suffering. The cross is the only power in the world which proves that suffering love can avenge and vanquish evil. But it was just this participation in the cross which the disciples were granted when Jesus called them to him. They are called blessed because their visible participation in the cross."<sup>77</sup>
  - Spurgeon encourages us to be like Christ, as to "be as the anvil when bad men are the hammers."<sup>78</sup>
- Legal non-resistance (Matthew 5:40)
  - Matthew 5:40 – "And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well."
  - Definitions:
    - Tunic – the under clothing, similar to a shirt.
    - Cloak – the outer clothing, similar to a jacket.
    - However, both a cloak and tunic looked more like a robe rather than a shirt or jacket.
  - Jewish culture
    - Mosaic law forbid the taking of the outer cloak, even as an overnight pledge.
      - The reason for this is that for the poor, the outer cloak often doubled as bedding.
  - American culture

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<sup>77</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer. *The Cost of Discipleship*, p 94.

<sup>78</sup> Charles Spurgeon. *The Gospel of the Kingdom*. (Passmore and Alabaster, 1893.) 30.

- Say that your vehicle was struck by another. Would reporting the other driver to your insurance agent violate the spirit of this passage?
- Going the extra mile (Matthew 5:41)
  - Matthew 5:41 – “And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles.”
  - In this example, Jesus is likely speaking of the demands of the Roman army.
    - A mile, according to Roman law, was 1,000 paces.
    - Roman taxes did not cover all of the Roman army’s needs. Therefore, soldiers were allowed to conscript their captives into service.
    - These conscriptions, however, were often abused.
  - Jesus, in this example, is commanding his followers to not just submit to unfair demands, but to actually exceed them.
    - We are not only to go the extra mile, but we are also to volunteer to go an additional mile.
- Surrendering your possessions (Matthew 5:42)
  - Matthew 5:42 – “Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you.”
  - If non-resistance means forgoing our right to personal honor, our most basic possessions, and our time when others take them by force, we are also to forgo these things to the poor.
  - “When the kingdom comes, our deeds rather than our wealth will matter.”<sup>79</sup>
    - Matthew 6:19-21 – “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal,<sup>20</sup> but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal.<sup>21</sup> For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”
    - Matthew 25:34-40 – “Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom

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<sup>79</sup> Keener, 132.



prepared for you from the foundation of the world. <sup>35</sup> For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, <sup>36</sup> I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.’ <sup>37</sup> Then the righteous will answer him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? <sup>38</sup> And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? <sup>39</sup> And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?’ <sup>40</sup> And the King will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.’”

- Does that mean that we are to give away all of our resources to the poor?
  - St. Augustine noted that the text says, “give to everyone that asks,” not “give everything to him that asks.”

#### Retaliation and Generosity are Matters of the Heart

- Jesus’ words in these four examples really strike at the heart of selfishness.
  - Each of the four examples ultimately serve to show us how to respond when we are in a difficult relationship with another.
    - The principle is that the needs of others comes before my own convenience.
    - Deuteronomy 15:8-11 – “Be generous to these poor people, and freely lend them as much as they need. Never be hard-hearted and tight-fisted with them. <sup>9</sup> When the seventh year—the year when payments on debts are canceled—is near, you might be stingy toward poor Israelites and give them nothing. Be careful not to think these worthless thoughts. The poor will complain to the LORD about you, and you will be condemned for your sin. <sup>10</sup> Be sure to give to them without any hesitation. When you do this, the LORD your God will bless you in everything you work for and set out to do. <sup>11</sup> There will always be poor

people in the land. That's why I command you to be generous to other Israelites who are poor and needy."

- "We are to be so unselfish and trust God so much that we leave our vindication with him."<sup>80</sup>
  - At the end of the day, we are not to practice private revenge at all.
  - Jesus is prohibiting believers from having the attitude of, "That scoundrel has wronged me. Wait until I get even with him!"
- The principle of legal non-resistance as found in verse 40, is not to avoid lawsuits, but to develop an unselfish attitude toward our own rights and property.
- "A readiness to resent injuries, a quickness in taking offense, a quarrelsome and contentious disposition, a keenness in asserting our rights, all, all are contrary to the mind of Christ." (J.C. Ryle)<sup>81</sup>
- Being selfish versus being generous
  - Love of our neighbors is more than simply not harming our neighbors. It is putting ourselves in harm's way for our neighbors.
  - Christian kindness and generosity need to go far beyond tit-for-tat retribution.
  - Believers should cause others to react in bewilderment in those around them by the way they respond to being hurt by others.
  - In exhibiting such generosity, the cycle of action and vindictive reaction can be broken.
- Being generous is winsome to the Gospel.
  - "Unfailing courtesy, kindness, tenderness and consideration for others, are some of the greatest ornaments to the character of a child of God. The world can understand these things if it cannot understand doctrine. There is no religion in rudeness, roughness, bluntness, and incivility." (J.C. Ryle)<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Keener, 127.

<sup>81</sup> Ryle, 40.

<sup>82</sup> Ryle, 42.

- “True religion 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.” (J.C. Ryle)<sup>83</sup>

#### How are We to Respond When We are Wronged

- God has generously made us members of his kingdom. As members of the Kingdom of God, we are to reflect that generosity in our lifestyles.
  - By freely turning the other cheek, we show that we are confident in our place in God’s kingdom, rather than being concerned with human honor.
    - “Because we value God’s honor more than our own (Matthew 5:16, 6:1-18), because our very lives become forfeit to us when we follow Jesus Christ (16:24-27), we have no honor of our own to lose.”<sup>84</sup>
    - In regard to being deeply insulted, we are not to respond with insults, even if it means having our honor damaged at a much deeper level.
  - We are to respond to unfair treatment, with loving kindness (hesed).
    - We are to respond this way because God has responded to our violations of his laws in the same manner.
    - Rather than wonder, “How have I been treated by others?” we must wonder, “What would Christ have me do?”
    - This does not mean that an abused spouse must stay with their husband or wife. God does not expect the abused spouse to remain instead of leaving.
- We must trust God alone to serve justice.
  - Rather than become vindictive, we should be willing to suffer additional loss.
  - We are to be more generous with our honor, possessions and time than what the law demands.

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<sup>83</sup> ibid

<sup>84</sup> Keener, 238.

### What if We Don't Follow Christ's Mandate of Generosity

- If we refuse to follow Christ's mandate of generosity, and continue to use the vengeful application of *lex talionis*, what would occur?
  - Mahatma Gandhi allegedly used this phrase in the context of universal harmony: "An eye for an eye only ends up making the whole world blind."
  - Coretta Scott King later used this phrase in the context of racial violence: "The old law of an eye for an eye leaves everyone blind."
  - Ultimately, if we refuse to follow Christ's mandate of generosity, we will lose our distinction (and subsequent witness) as image-bearers of God.

### Conclusion

- We are to reject all actions based on selfish motivation, and instead work for the good of our enemies.
- When subjected to wrongs, when our rights are infringed upon and our liberties invaded, let us not be animated and our conduct dictated by vindictive resentment, but rather let us be generous and forbearing even to those who inflict that wrong.<sup>85</sup>
- Paul echoes this in Romans 12:17-21 – "Don't pay people back with evil for the evil they do to you. Focus your thoughts on those things that are considered noble. <sup>18</sup>As much as it is possible, live in peace with everyone. <sup>19</sup>Don't take revenge, dear friends. Instead, let God's anger take care of it. After all, Scripture says, "I alone have the right to take revenge. I will pay back, says the Lord." <sup>20</sup>But, "If your enemy is hungry, feed him, If he is thirsty, give him a drink. If you do this, you will make him feel guilty and ashamed." <sup>21</sup>Don't let evil conquer you but conquer evil with good."

### Review Questions

- What does *lex talionis* mean? What was its intended purpose?

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<sup>85</sup> Murray, 175.

- How had the culture at the time of Jesus removed the *lex talionis* from its intended purpose?
- Does the *lex talionis* still apply today? Why or why not?
- How can we go beyond the *lex talionis* today and not have selfish hearts?