

# You have Heard... But I say to You... 5: An Eye for an Eye

## Introduction

The desire to retaliate and get even after mistreatment is a powerful desire (lust). It started with Cain against Abel, and has continued throughout the history of God's people. Real or imagined, jealousy, envy, wrath and bitterness often turn to violence when man's hurt reaches a certain level of intensity and he decides he has had enough. God warned His people that hatred, grudges and a desire for vengeance must not be acted upon, but instead removed as quickly as possible before they do serious damage and create terrible consequences.

*You shall not hate your brother in your heart. You shall surely rebuke your neighbor, and not bear sin because of him. 18 You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the children of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord. Lev. 19:17-18*

*Do not say, 'I will do to him just as he has done to me; I will render to the man according to his work.' Pr. 24:29*

God created civil government to deal with this side of man's character. The need for punishment and even vengeance is a legitimate one. But it becomes sinful when left for individuals to carry out. God took it out of the hands of the individual and gave it to impartial judges appointed for a nation.

But in another glaring example of their ability to misapply Scripture to fit their own desires, the scribes and Pharisees had taken these laws given to Israel to regulate and direct civil government and applied them to themselves. They twisted the laws God gave to judges in criminal proceedings and used them to justify personal vengeance. Jesus quoted their words and warned His disciples not to see them as personal liberties.

*You have heard that it was said, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth. 39 But I say to you, do not resist him who is evil; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn to him the other also. Mt. 5:38-39*

Jesus warned against all forms of personal retaliation. He was not speaking of self-defense, of a government's responsibility to punish evil doers, or the rights of disciples to use the power of government to protect themselves. He wanted the barrier God placed to keep men from personal retaliation, personal vengeance, or holding a grudge firmly placed in the minds of His disciples.

As in the other portions of this sermon, Jesus demanded a fundamental spiritual and emotional change. When rude, evil or obnoxious people cross paths with a disciple, Jesus expected and demanded they remain kind and compassionate, always prepared to take more. He did not want any evil done against a disciple to affect their attitude toward the evil doer. As Paul wrote to the Romans "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." Rom. 12:21

## Laws for the Nation

The "eye for an eye" and "tooth for a tooth" was a just and honorable system. But it was for civil government, not an individual. These were principles God expected to be followed in a court of law after they had examined all the witnesses and concluded a crime had occurred. These were laws to be exercised only after all these steps had been taken.

*"If men fight, and hurt a woman with child, so that she gives birth prematurely, yet no harm follows, he shall surely be punished accordingly as the woman's husband imposes on him; and he shall pay as the judges determine. 23 But if any harm follows, then you shall give life for life, 24 eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, 25 burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe. Ex. 21:22-25*

*'If a man causes disfigurement of his neighbor, as he has done, so shall it be done to him — 20 fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth; as he has caused disfigurement of a man, so shall it be done to him. 21 And whoever kills an animal shall restore it; but whoever kills a man shall be put to death. 22 You shall have the same law for the stranger and for one from your own country; for I am the Lord your God.'" Lev. 24:19-22*

***One witness shall not rise against a man concerning any iniquity or any sin that he commits; by the mouth of two or three witnesses the matter shall be established.** 16 If an unrighteous witness rise up against any man to testify against him of wrong-doing, 17 then both the men, between whom the controversy is, shall stand before Jehovah, **before the priests and the judges** that shall be in those days; 18 and **the judges shall make diligent inquisition;** and, behold, if the witness be a false witness, and have testified falsely against his brother; 19 then shall ye do unto him, as he had thought to do unto his brother: so shalt thou put away the evil from the midst of thee. 20 And those that*

*remain shall hear, and fear, and shall henceforth commit no more any such evil in the midst of thee. 21 And thine eyes shall not pity; **life (shall go) for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot.** Deut. 19:15-21 See also Ex. 21:22-25*

Again, it is evident after reading these passages that these were instructions for Israel's judges. When a crime was committed and the criminal was captured and convicted, this was the fair and just method for meting out punishment.

There was nothing in any of these passages that would justify any application to an individual. As a matter of fact, the same book that listed the "eye for an eye" forbid personal vengeance. "You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the sons of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself; I am the LORD. (Lev. 19:17-18).

What they had heard was being misquoted from their civil code. It was God's directions for fairly meting out judicial vengeance in a court of law.

## **Civil Government is God's Minister for Vengeance**

As God commanded Israel, He commands all nations. Civil government is God's minister to take care of all matters concerning vengeance. Civil government is God's avenger.

*Let every person be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God...for it is a minister of God to you for good. But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for **it is a minister of God, an avenger who brings wrath upon the one who practices evil.** Rom. 13:1,4*

*Be subject to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake: whether to the king, as supreme; 14 or unto governors, as sent by him **for vengeance on evil-doers** and for praise to them that do well. 1Pet. 2:13-14*

God has protected all mankind from the danger or the need for personal vengeance by giving this duty to the governing authorities. They are God's ministers to bring His wrath upon those who practice evil. If they fail, then only God is left to deal with them. It has never been the right of any man to take personal vengeance on another.

*Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay," says the Lord. Rom. 12:19(NASB)*

It was a terrible misinterpretation that allowed this civil code to be used by individuals to justify their own angry retaliation over mistreatment.

## **Laws for Individual Disciples**

Just as the scribes and Pharisees were only dealing with individuals in their teaching, Jesus only dealt with the individual disciple. Jesus was not modifying or addressing the role of civil government. The teaching Jesus was combating was simply "if you insult me, I insult you back." "If you strike me, then I strike you back." "If you put out my eye then I will find a way to put out yours." Essentially what was in play was record keeping and keeping the slate equal. Whatever you do to me should be repaid to the same degree. Until that repayment was made, grudges were held, and meditations will center on ways to get even.

As noted above, they had no excuse for this misapplication. God had plainly told them, "you shall not hate your fellow countryman in your heart," "You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge," and "you shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Lev. 19:17-18).

Jesus simply broadened out and fully explained the true meaning of "loving your neighbor as your self." Whether insulted in word, physical violence, or treated unfairly, a disciple was bound by the Lord to take no personal action.

*Repay no one evil for evil. Have regard for good things in the sight of all men. 18 If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men. 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. 20 Therefore "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him a drink; For in so doing you will heap coals of fire on his head." 21 Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. Rom. 12:17-21*

First of all, Jesus expected His disciples to be compassionate, kind and forbearing under all circumstances. In order to do this they must learn to absorb the abuses of others. A desire for vengeance or the carrying of a grudge destroys both salt and our light. It sends the wrong message.

The wisdom that comes from above is far different. It is always looking for peace, gentleness, and mercy.

*But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without hypocrisy. James 3:17*

The other wisdom, the one Jesus sought to destroy was the wisdom of “an eye for an eye.” A wisdom too many in this world hold even today.

*But if you have bitter envy and self-seeking in your hearts, do not boast and lie against the truth. 15 This wisdom does not descend from above, but is earthly, sensual, demonic. 16 For where envy and self-seeking exist, confusion and every evil thing are there. James 3:14-17*

*For we also once were foolish ourselves, disobedient, deceived, enslaved to various lusts and pleasures, spending our life in malice and envy, hateful, hating one another. Titus 3:3*

The malice, envy and hatred that those in the world direct toward one another must be removed from the heart of a disciple. True disciples do not believe in the “eye for an eye” mentality. It is of this world. Devout Christians are always prepared to turn the other cheek, not to lash out in anger or malice. They will do this, not simply because Jesus asked for it here. They will do it because they are from above and have put off the terrible philosophy that held us when we were foolish, deceived and disobedient.

Paul spoke of this to the Corinthians who were using civil authority to get even with their brethren.

*I say this to your shame. Is it so, that there is not a wise man among you, not even one, who will be able to judge between his brethren? ... 6 But brother goes to law against brother, and that before unbelievers! 7 Now therefore, it is already an utter failure for you that you go to law against one another. Why do you not rather accept wrong? Why do you not rather let yourselves be cheated? 8 No, you yourselves do wrong and cheat, and you do these things to your brethren! 1 Cor. 6:1, 5-8*

This broadens out Jesus’ words in a very powerful way. As we work with each other, the attitude we cultivate is very simple.

*“Now we that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak, and not to please ourselves. 2 Let each one of us please his neighbor for that which is good, unto edifying.” Rom. 15:1-2*

Our role in this life is to edify, build up and strengthen. If this requires us to “take wrong,” then we are prepared to do so. If this requires we take mistreatment and even buffeting, we will do so.

*For this is commendable, if because of conscience toward God one endures grief, suffering wrongfully. 20 For what credit is it if, when you are beaten for your faults, you take it patiently? But when you do good and suffer, if you take it patiently, this is commendable before God. 21 For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps: 22 “Who committed no sin, Nor was deceit found in His mouth”; 23 who, when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously; 1 Peter 2:19-23*

## **Present Day Applications**

There is so much rude and obnoxious behavior today. Worldly people have taken the idea of “I have my rights” to a sinful degree. This has led to many violations of the Savior’s words. While driving, waiting in checkout lines, sitting in restaurants, or talking on the phone, those who feel mistreated often become angry and hateful. How seldom today is an honest mistake forgiven?

Perhaps the strongest indictment against our culture for this sin is in our entertainment. Many of the movies that Clint Eastwood, Chuck Norris, Charles Bronson or Sylvester Stallone have gained fame and fortune starring in were based exclusively on personal vengeance. They were unfairly treated in the beginning and everyone is made to feel sorry for them. They then get even, often by killing those who harmed them, and the crowds often cheer them on. Brethren, it is wrong to watch others sin, and even worse to cheer them on. God condemns any culture that takes pleasure in watching others sin.

*and, although they know the ordinance of God, that those who practice such things are worthy of death, they not only do the same, but also give hearty approval to those who practice them. Rom. 1:32*

It is hard to deny that Americans do not “**give hearty approval**” to this sin. How popular would these movies be if they turned the other cheek instead?

Jesus expected those who follow Him to replace this desire for personal vengeance with tolerance and mercy. It is evil to feel a desire to hurt someone no matter what they have done to us. This is

the real meaning behind “**do not resist.**” He was not forbidding us to call “911,” if a burglar is breaking into our home or someone threatens to kill us. He was not forbidding us to defend ourselves or someone else if we are afraid. He was dealing with vengeance, and the desire to get even.

As disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ, we live by the wisdom that comes down from above. We seek to be peaceable, gentle, reasonable and merciful. God has given us the duty to show His love to a lost and dying world. There is no room for a desire to repay evil for evil:

*To sum up, let all be harmonious, sympathetic, brotherly, kindhearted, and humble in spirit; 9 not returning evil for evil, or insult for insult, but giving a blessing instead; for you were called for the very purpose that you might inherit a blessing. 1 Pet. 3:8-9*

This is the high and noble spirit of those who have been forgiven and who then go on to forgive others. Jesus captured the true forbearance of His disciples in his final words.

*And if anyone wants to sue you, and take your shirt, let him have your coat also. And whoever shall force you to go one mile, go with him two. Give to him who asks of you, and do not turn away from him who wants to borrow from you. Mt. 5:41-42*

## **Always Prepared to Take More**

The key to this section is “**always be prepared to take more,**” and “**always be prepared to give more.**” If struck on the cheek, be ready for a second blow. If they take your cloak, be willing to give up your coat. If they force you to go one mile, be ready to go two. A genuine disciple of Jesus never stops wanting to give. No matter what the provocation, they never stop loving and never cease wanting to serve and help. Such an attitude will protect from bitterness and anger.

Even young children are taught that striking others or screaming out in rage when mistreated is wrong. In this respect, parents are the governing authority meting out the proper punishment. How many who have hit their brother or sister have not been disciplined for taking matters into their own hands and not bringing it to the one in authority who can coolly look at the facts and render a righteous judgment. Thus from youth we were all trained that the right way to handle unfair treatment is to defer it to those God has ordained to deal with it. No grudge or desire to retaliate can exist in the heart of children or adults.

How the Scribes and Pharisees could have taken the judicial code and applied it so loosely is hard to understand. But that was exactly what they had done. This was the specific problem Jesus dealt with. The passage is a barrier against taking personal vengeance or personally lashing out against others.

- 1 What is Jesus seeking to guard his disciples against in this section?
- 2 Does this passage remove the right of civil government to punish evildoers?
- 3 Was the command about an “eye for an eye” given to the individual or the government?
- 4 What did the book of Leviticus say about personal vengeance?
- 5 Did the Law of Moses permit them to hold a grudge?
- 6 Who is still God’s minister for vengeance today?
- 7 Whether we are insulted in word or by physical violence what do the Lord demand?
- 8 What does the wisdom from above teach us about our relationships with others?
- 9 When we were deceived and disobedient how did we feel toward others?
- 10 What did Paul tell the Corinthians about brethren even using civil government to get even?
- 11 What would be better than to do wrong and defraud our brethren?
- 12 What is one genre of our entertainment industry that would violate the spirit of Jesus words?
- 13 What are we to replace the desire for personal vengeance and retaliation with?
- 14 What should the disciple always be prepared to do when being mistreated?
- 15 What are even young children taught about taking matters into their own hands?
- 16 This passage is a barrier to keep us from what?