

An Eye for an Eye

Matthew 5:38-42

Introduction – We come to another passage in the Sermon on the Mount that is frequently quoted with all kinds of erroneous applications. What exactly are we to make of ‘an eye for an eye’, ‘turning the other cheek’, and ‘going the extra mile’? We live in a sinful world and so we must expect to meet with personal injustices and unprovoked injuries. The Pharisees had one particular kind of error. Teaching absolute non-resistance is another.

Justice and Governments – There are two important contextual issues to understand when applying this concept of ‘an eye for an eye’.

The Punishment Fits the Crime – (Lev 24:19-20, Ex 21:22-25) The purpose of these sayings was to limit the punishment to that which fit the crime.

Knowing Your Government(s) – The beginning of Exodus 21 shows us that these punishments were to be meted out as judgments (precedents). In other words, these instructions were to the judges of the Jewish nation. This is explicit in Deut 19:18-21.

Personal Vengeance – This was encouraged and almost demanded in the teachings of the Pharisees. But Lev 19:18 says “You shall not take vengeance,” and Prov 20:22, 24:29 emphasize this. Reconciliation of taking an eye and not taking an eye requires the understanding of governments (Rom 12-13).

Graciousness Lived Out (vv39-42) – The only way we can understand and apply these examples Jesus gives is to understand governments and to have a particular demeanor ourselves – the demeanor of the Beatitudes. If the demeanor is right, the applications will be obvious.

‘Do not resist an evil person’ – There are times we must do this. There are times we must not (Matt 23, Rom 12:21).

‘Turn the other cheek’ – This is not a threat of life, but a slap, a smite, an act of humiliation. There are times we must do this. There are times we must not (John 18:22-23).

‘Capitulate in lawsuits’ – This has to do with legitimate uses of the courts verses imposing the law over trifles. There are times we must do this. There are times we must not (Matt 18:15-20).

‘Go the second mile’ – Roman law required civilians to carry a soldier’s burden when requested, and the Pharisees taught that they and their disciples were above this. There are times we must do this. There are times we must not (Acts 16:35-38).

‘Give and loan money’ – We have been given much so that we might share. There are times we must do this. There are times we must not (2 Thess 3:10).

My Spirit of Retaliation – We must rid ourselves of the constant tendency to be watching out for our own interests. Jesus is our example – “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 Pet 2:23. When an injustice occurs, we must ask some honest questions – Why did this thing upset me? Is it truly out of concern for the principle of justice and righteousness, or is it just myself I am concerned for?

“It is not comfortable teaching to consider and I can assure you that it is not an easy thing to spend a week with a text like this. But this is the Word of God, and this is what Christ would have us be. It deals with our whole personality, down to the little practical details of life. Holiness is not something to be received in a meeting; it is a life to be lived and to be lived in detail.”- D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones.

How Am I To Do This? – my natural inclination always is to defend and retaliate.

Remember the Beatitudes – You must keep in mind what you deserve from God.

Leave Vengeance in God’s hands – You must trust that He will recompense.

Prizing the Great Mercies – You must believe that the sufferings are nothing compared to the weight of glory being wrought.

Grow in Maturity – Obedience to the Word of God requires maturity (Heb 5:12-14).