

Jesus on the Law

PART 6: AN EYE FOR AN EYE • MATTHEW 5:38-42

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Four Lakes Church of Christ
Madison, Wisconsin
August 29, 2021



We'd like to welcome you to the Four Lakes congregation this morning! I hope all of us have the elements for the Lord's Supper, either from home or from the table in the entryway, as John/Aaron will be leading us in the prayers for the Supper right after our study this morning, and then Michael/Noah will be leading us in our songs before we dismiss [for class].

Before we continue with our study, I'd like to remind everybody here in person that we have the updated invitation cards available in the little Ziploc bags on the table in the entryway. As I've talked to people about the Lord and his church over the past year or so, and as I've given them something with the church's contact information on it, I've had to remember to mention that the times are different. So, a week or two ago, we updated one of our tools for reaching out with the new times of services every Sunday. And we have these in packs of ten, for you to keep in your car, or at home, or in your desk at work, or wherever. We've done this for years, and I remember explaining this for the first time many years ago when I was excited to find little bags that fit the cards perfectly. Brother Don was a retired cop, and he pulled me aside and said, "Baxter, with that beard of yours, if you ever get pulled over, and if the officer sees those little baggies you have there, we might never see you again!" Don was always looking out for me. But, on the record, these baggies are for church invitation cards! And now, once again, we are sharing these with all of you.

As we begin today, we are putting God's plan on the wall up here, to give the references in a way you can look these up on your own. We've summarized it briefly, but in response to the good news of Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection, we obey that good news by turning away from sin, confessing Jesus as the Son of God, and by allowing ourselves to be briefly buried with the Lord in baptism for the forgiveness of sins.

And we do have some good news this morning! This first one is a follow-up from several weeks ago, when John Lenny (in London) learned about the Lord's church through Apologetics Press and the Gospel Broadcasting Network. You might remember how he was in contact with Don Blackwell and was baptized in the Thames River after a Bible study over Zoom. Well, just a few days ago, Don Blackwell let us know that John's nephew, Alex Hunter, was baptized as well, also following a Zoom Bible study. He was baptized at the Oxford church of Christ. So, we rejoice with Alex, and with his uncle John, and with the rest of our brothers and sisters in England.

And then we are also sharing some good news from Adairsville, Georgia. Just a few days ago, Derrick Fuller was baptized by his father, after watching the Jule Miller videos. Some of you might remember those from the 1960's. They are now available on a thumb drive. We have that thumb drive, and I would love for us to find a way to watch those as a congregation, but we don't have permission to share those videos on the livestream. So, we need to work on some other way. But, I remember going with my parents to study with people in the 1980's, with the filmstrip projector, the screen, and the record player. And I remember many trips to the church building for baptisms in the middle of the night because of those videos. Well, they are still working! And I love the look on Derrick's dad's face! We rejoice with Derrick, and his wife (Danielle), and his dad, and with the rest of the church down there in Adairsville, Georgia. We share all of this by way of encouragement. If you would like to study together, and if you think that you might be ready to obey the gospel yourself, please get in touch.

As most of you know, we are in a series of lessons where we are looking at what Jesus has to say about the Law of Moses in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5. Basically, the Lord says that if we would like to enter the kingdom of heaven, our righteousness needs to exceed that of the Scribes and the Pharisees. With this in mind, we've been working our way through a series of examples, where Jesus takes what the people had heard about the Law, and he clarifies and corrects a number of misunderstandings. He's dealt with murder, adultery, divorce, and the making of vows. And in each of these areas, Jesus raises the bar, as he explains the kind of righteousness that's needed to enter the kingdom of heaven.

This morning, we continue with the next example, and the passage we'll be looking at today (and also next week) is Matthew 5:38-42. And this time, Jesus addresses a misunderstanding concerning what the Law of Moses teaches about REVENGE, as summarized by the phrase, ***"an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth."*** And to many of us, this is perhaps the most difficult teaching in the Sermon on the Mount. We live in a culture of getting even. Many of our movies are structured around somebody being done wrong, and then that person settles a score. We have Liam Neeson and the "Taken" franchise. We have the Punisher series. We have so many others, ranging from Kill Bill to The Princess Bride. As a society, we love the idea of getting even. And we understand why. All of us deal with difficult people. All of us have things happen to us that are not fair, and we dream of making things right. We imagine taking vengeance.

We come to the Sermon on the Mount, though, and we come to this very difficult passage. And it's more difficult than many, not just because of what Jesus is teaching, but also because of how he words it. He seems to use some hyperbole, a figure of speech. It's similar to what he said earlier about tearing out an eye and cutting off a hand. Certainly Jesus didn't mean for us to take that literally, and yet he does use those words. We come to something similar today, and what Jesus says is so shocking that his words have carried over into modern times, and what he says makes such an impact that even those who do not believe in God are familiar with what the Lord says here. Even today, we refer to "turning the other cheek" or "going the second mile." It's important, then, that we look at this passage in context and that we learn what the Lord wants us to learn here.

This morning, then, let's look together at Matthew 5:38-42; the words of Jesus in Matthew 5:38-42,

³⁸ "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 an evil person; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also. ⁴⁰ If anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, let him have your coat also. ⁴¹ Whoever forces you to go one mile, go with him two. ⁴² Give to him who asks of you, and do not turn away from him who wants to borrow from you.

As we learn from what the Lord says here, as our custom has been for several weeks now, I want us to look at what Jesus says these people had HEARD, and then I want us to pay special attention to what JESUS has to say.

I. We start, then, with what these people had HEARD.

And in this case, Jesus quotes a phrase that's used three times in the Law of Moses (in Exodus 21:24, Leviticus 24:20, and Deuteronomy 19:21). As it was first given, it seems as if it was intended as something of a deterrent (if I poke my neighbor's eye out, he has a right to poke mine out; therefore, I probably shouldn't poke his eye out), but it was also just as much limiting revenge as much as an administration of justice. And what I mean by that is: If my neighbor gouges my eye out, I have no right to go chop his head off! So, it wasn't just a deterrent to the original offense, but it was a limit on revenge. The punishment would fit the crime, instead of the punishment being excessive. I hope we understand this: If somebody comes to my house and gouges my eye out, I will want to hurt them above and beyond that. In this sense, ***"an eye for an eye"*** was somewhat merciful. It was just, but it also protected the guilty from excessive retaliation by an angry victim.

And when we look at those original passages in the Law of Moses, we also find that the ***"eye for an eye"*** was to be carried out after an investigation by the court. So, this isn't a matter of me going next door to poke my neighbor's eye out because he poked mine out, but the courts had to handle this.

However, by the time we get to Jesus, people were taking this phrase to mean that whenever anybody does something to me, I have an obligation to retaliate. If my neighbor insults me, I honor this passage by insulting him right back. If my neighbor gives me an obscene gesture on his way to work in the morning, I have to obey God by returning that gesture, ***"an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth."*** They had shifted this from a principle to be applied by the courts, as a preventative measure, and also as a way to limit revenge, and they had turned it into some kind of command to personally retaliate and take revenge for every little offense. So when I say that the people had heard "take revenge," that's not what God had said, but that's what they had "heard."

II. Jesus, then, shows up, and he has to correct this misunderstanding, "BUT I SAY TO YOU," he says.

And he gives a series of examples, a series of illustrations, and these are practical. Some have divided these into the categories of dignity, security, freedom, and property. We are dealing with all of these right now, aren't we? We face these challenges on a daily basis. All around us, people insult our dignity, threaten our security and freedom, and try to separate us from our property. So, how do we react when people threaten our dignity, our security, our freedom, and our property? In all of these areas, Jesus encourages us to not go the "eye for an eye" route, but instead, he encourages us to not resist, ***"do not resist an evil person,"*** he says. This doesn't mean the evil shouldn't be punished, but he's referring here to personal relationships. As we interact with the world around us, when people do us wrong, our first instinct should not be to retaliate. I hope we can look at the first example this morning, and we will save the other three for next week, if the Lord wills.

A. But, the first example he gives comes in verse 39, as he says, "...but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also."

And there's a reason why I refer to this as an "insult" (on the wall up here). This is not a self-defense situation. This isn't somebody coming up and stabbing you in the chest or going for your neck with a sword; no, this is a ***"slap."*** But even more specifically, notice how Jesus even refers to this being a slap ***"on your right cheek."*** What's that about? Even back then, a vast majority of people were right-handed. So, to be slapped on the right

cheek, the other person would most likely be using the back of the right hand. In other words, this isn't an attack where my life is in danger, but this is an INSULT. Even today, we use this as a figure of speech. Somebody less qualified than we are gets the promotion, and when we meet up with friends later in the day, we might say, "What my supervisor did today was a real 'slap in the face.'" We know what that means. A "slap in the face" is an insult, and even more so, a BACKHANDED slap in the face. This is not life-threatening, this is not an all-out assault intended to cause harm (if they had intended that, they would have used a closed fist or a weapon), but this is an insult. Jesus, by the way, was slapped in the face, wasn't he?

So what is Jesus saying here? When we are slapped in the face, our first impulse might be to slap back, to retaliate, to repay evil with evil. However, the Lord tells us not to go the **"eye for an eye"** route, and instead, we are to **"turn the other cheek."** He's emphasizing that we as God's people, if we want our righteousness to surpass that of the scribes and the Pharisees, we don't start with this spirit of revenge and retaliation, but we start with a spirit of humility, even meekness. We have power, but our power is under control. And again, isn't this what Jesus demonstrated for us? Several weeks ago, I got an email from one of the companies that provides insurance for those who carry firearms, and the subject of the message was, "Fight Like Jesus." Well, that got my attention. He interviewed a combat-hardened veteran, a 4th degree blackbelt, a martial-arts instructor, and the man made the point that the goal of a fight is not to "win" the fight, but to survive; and often, the best way to do that is to avoid the fight altogether. And this takes self-control, having the power to destroy an enemy, but not necessarily using that power. His point was: The goal of carrying a firearm is to never have to use it. And that's where Jesus comes into the picture. After telling his apostles to carry a sword, Jesus condemns Peter for using the sword, and then Jesus says, **"Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels?"** (Matthew 26:53). At any point, Jesus could have fought back and won, but he avoided a physical confrontation that night. There are times when we really need to "fight like Jesus," especially when it comes to something as harmless as an insult. As Peter would go on to write later, Jesus left us an example for us to follow in his steps, **"while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously."**

So again, this isn't life-threatening, this isn't an innocent person getting beaten to death on the street, but this is a slap in the face, an insult. And when we are insulted, we don't go full-blown **"eye for an eye"** on the person, we don't need to start pulling their teeth out, but, if at all possible, we endure it. We choose restraint over revenge.

Before we wrap it up for today, though, I'd like to emphasize again that this does not prevent us from defending our lives or the lives of others. And I say this, because of some other principles elsewhere in scripture. In the Psalms, for example, in Psalm 84, God condemns those who **"show partiality to the wicked,"** and then he gives a command to the rest of us (in Psalm 84:3-4),

- ³ **Vindicate the weak and fatherless;
Do justice to the afflicted and destitute.**
- ⁴ **Rescue the weak and needy;
Deliver them out of the hand of the wicked.**

So, if it is within our power to do so, it certainly seems to me that we have a responsibility to stand up and protect those who are being abused by the wicked. This doesn't mean we take vengeance on the wicked, but we do have an obligation to rescue and deliver. I think of the Good Samaritan who patched up the man who was beaten by robbers. If he had come on that scene a few minutes sooner, wouldn't it have been even better

if he had been able to keep the man from getting beaten up in the first place? I see that as a much better option, to rescue the weak and the needy, to deliver them out of the hand of the wicked.

Anyway, elsewhere in the New Testament, a little bit later in the Sermon on the Mount, we have what we sometimes refer to as the Golden Rule (in Matthew 7:12), where Jesus says, ***“In everything, therefore, treat people the same way you want them to treat you, for this is the Law and the Prophets.”*** If I am getting assaulted or murdered, I hope somebody would help me out a bit; in the same way, I should probably do the same for others. This isn't a case of revenge or retribution or retaliation, but it's a case of doing what is right. We might also think of what Paul writes in 1 Timothy 5:8, where he says, ***“But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.”*** Yes, we need to provide food and clothing and shelter for our families, but it seems as if we also have a responsibility to keep them safe as well.

We are not taking the time to do an in-depth study of self-defense this morning, but whenever we talk about “turning the other cheek,” this is obviously a question that comes up. Can we not defend ourselves (or others) from an attack of some kind? If somebody breaks into my home and intends to do harm to my family, do I need to just stand there and watch it happen? We need to realize that the issue here is an insult, and when we are insulted, we do not go the eye for an eye route, we do not respond with an insult of our own, but we “turn the other cheek.” I suppose, if somebody wanted to take this completely literally (the idea that in all situations we must turn the other cheek), the next problem is: What happens when we run out of cheeks? Now what? Do we have the Lord's permission to slap back at that point? No, that doesn't seem to be the point here.

As I understand scripture, we can preserve life, if possible, by stopping a threat in progress, but that is different from taking revenge. And it is this spirit of revenge Jesus is condemning here. Self-defense is not revenge. If we think it is, we are doing it wrong. In every class I have ever taken on this, the instructor always emphasizes that the goal of any use of force encounter is to stop a threat to preserve life. The law does not allow for hunting somebody down after the fact to settle a score. That is not only against the laws of the land, but it is also against the Law of God (as we see both in the Old and in the New).

I would love to hear your thoughts on this. Feel free to give a call or send a message this week. But for today, we've learned from Jesus that we are not to have a vengeful spirit, we are not to use ***“an eye for an eye”*** as a life-goal of some kind, for every little argument we might have, but instead, when we are insulted, we are to ***“turn the other cheek.”***

Conclusion:

We will leave it here for this morning, and pick up with the other examples next week. But here at the end, let's just be thankful that the chances are fairly low that we will be attacked in a way that will put our lives in danger on our way home today. However, many of us will perhaps be insulted this week. I think it's been probably 3 or 4 days since I've been insulted, so I am way overdue! Maybe one of you can help me out with that today! But somebody will probably say something offensive to us this week. Somebody will say something that will hurt us. The question is: How will we respond to that? Hopefully we can take it like the Lord did, ***“...while being reviled, He did not revile in return; ...but kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously.”***

With this, before we partake of the Lord's Supper together, let's go to God in prayer:

Our Father in Heaven,

You are the God who sent your only Son into this world to be ridiculed, abused, and ultimately put to death on a cross. This week, instead of retaliating, instead of being dominated by a spirit of revenge, we ask for your help as we respond to insults with grace and mercy, just as Jesus did. We pray that our friends and families and coworkers would see you through us, through our patient endurance and love. Thank you for Jesus.

This morning, we pray, once again, for those in positions of authority. As a nation, we've had a tough week, and we are concerned about what might happen next – not only around the world, but right here at home with a storm coming quickly. We pray, then, for our president, that you would surround him with wise advisors and that you would give him the wisdom to listen to wise counsel. We pray that we might continue to live quiet lives in all godliness and dignity. We pray for peace.

Thank you, Father, for hearing our prayer. In Jesus we pray. Amen.

To comment on this lesson: fourlakeschurch@gmail.com