

# *MATTHEW 5:38-42*

## *REVENGE, RETRIBUTION AND THE BETTER WAY*

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You have often heard me speak of something called, context. Context is defined in its broadest sense as: **“The situation in which something happens: the group of conditions that exist where and when something happens...”**

The context of anything is important, but it seems to me that it is of the utmost importance when we are talking about the Bible. So far, in our study of the Sermon on the Mount, we have seen Jesus correcting many wrong teachings and assumptions the people had regarding righteous living. The people had been taught to focus on the external manifestations of living the Law as opposed to the intent of the Law and the heart of the believer. One of the reasons this was an issue was that many of the things the people had been taught were based on scriptures that had been taken out of context. This can be easier to do than one might think. Our minds often take a statement or bit of information we hear and immediately interpret them in our immediate context. After some time, we form accretions, (layers) of principles, ideas and even rules that serve to place the next piece of information into a context that we see as relevant. The problem is that often times our idea of relevance is based upon a pretext – that is a self-imposed context that disregards the actual context. Today we will see that Jesus deals with just this sort of thing.

2 Peter 3:16

16 as also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, **which untaught and unstable people twist to their own destruction, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures.**

In this verse, Peter speaks of those that are untaught in the scriptures, people who twist the meaning to their own destruction. And that, in a sense is what has happened regarding the Law of retribution. Let’s look at what Jesus has to say.

**MT. 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 tell you not to 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 away your tunic, let him have your cloak also. 41 And whoever compels you to go one mile, go with him two. 42 Give to him who asks you, and from him who wants to borrow from you do not turn away.

We have here the fifth comparative statement that Jesus makes. There are six in all. Once again we have a, “You have heard it said... but I say...” situation. Jesus is once again correcting the wrong teaching to which the people had adhered. Jesus is correcting the misconceptions His followers had regarding the ethics of the life of the believer. They had been focused on the literal, external act and not the intent of the heart.

Jesus challenged His followers here. Are you challenged by what we just read? IF you aren't then you didn't hear or comprehend what was said.

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

Most of us have heard the saying, “An eye for an eye...” before, but many of us may be unfamiliar with the context of the statement.

#### **Exodus 21:24**

**24 eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot,**

This is a direct quote from the Law. There is no arguing that. But the question we have to ask ourselves is what was the context of this particular law?

1. This law was given to the judges of the people. Therefore the context is a legal one, one in which God was speaking to those that would hear the cases of the people. The judges had the authority to impose punishments on lawbreakers.
  - This law was not meant to be taken out of that context. The people were not allowed to take an eye for an eye without going through due process.
  - This would be the equivalent of us reading a law book and then imposing a sentence ourselves, outside of the justice system.
2. This allowed for the people to see this law as an obligation to be performed outside the judicial system instead of seeing the law as a limit to the amount of retribution that could be taken.

- God absolutely meant this law to stand for the people of Israel, but it wasn't to be applied on the personal level. It was to be applied in the civil justice system of Israel. It had been taken out of context.
- If you dented my fender then I am to dent your fender. Once again it was seen as an obligation and not a limit.
- If someone hits us, we then want to hit him or her back and kick him or her in the knee in return. But this law made sure that the punishment fit the crime. It imposed a limit on the amount of retribution someone could seek. (Eye for an eye, not an eye for a finger...)
- Can we fall into this trap today? Yes we can.
- The rich young ruler. Are we all bound to sell all we have in order to follow Jesus? No. That would be lifting that verse out of context.
- Also: animal sacrifices in the OT. Are we to sacrifice animals today? No.
- We need to be Bereans. They received the word with readiness and then searched the scriptures daily to see if these things were so. They weren't paranoid, but they were diligent.
- We have a tendency to go above and beyond the law of retribution and Jesus addresses that in the next verse.

**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.**

What does this mean?

- A common fallacy: I only have two cheeks, so after a guy hits me twice I can hit him back.
- In that culture, this was a means of insulting someone after they felt they had been insulted in public. (The distinguished man or woman with a glove)
- This is clear by the use of the phrase: right cheek. This is not dealing with a physical attack but an insult.
- We insult in different ways nowadays. We aren't to trade insult for insult. Don't resist them by giving it back to them. Trust God to defend you. Walk away.
- Jesus modeled this very principle. He was insulted constantly. He was called a drunk, an illegitimate child, a glutton, a blasphemer, crazy and more. He didn't answer by hailing insults. He even endured more while on the cross. All He had to do was call 10,000 angels to His defense. They even spit in his face. And He took it. "Father forgive them for they know not what they do."

1. Common fallacy: A physical attack should not be answered. We have a responsibility to defend ourselves and others in harm's way.
  - The disciples carried swords, at least for a time at the behest of Jesus.
  - There may be a time for a person to absorb a physical attack, all for God's glory. Example: Dick Weaver – converted in 1852, (turned the other cheek)
  
2. It is wrong to think that Jesus is teaching here that evil should not be resisted. Jesus himself resisted evil when addressing the scribes and also when He overturned the tables in the Temple court.
  - We are to be salt and light. You can't do that by not resisting evil at some point.
  
3. It is also wrong to think that Jesus is teaching that there is no place for punishment or retribution in society. Romans 13 states that the authorities are here for that purpose.

**Rom. 13: 1 – 6**

**1 Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God. 2 Therefore whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves. 3 For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil. Do you want to be unafraid of the authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same. 4 For he is God's minister to you for good. But if you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God's minister, an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil. 5 Therefore you must be subject, not only because of wrath but also for conscience' sake. 6 For because of this you also pay taxes, for they are God's ministers attending continually to this very thing.**

Example: Someone in your home in the middle of the night. We love and forgive the burglar personally but we are also to hand him over to the authorities.

When we bring, "It shouldn't be an eye for an eye or tooth for tooth into the argument, we are guilty of the same thing Jesus is correcting in this passage.

**40 If anyone wants to sue you and take away your tunic, let him have your cloak also.**

- Jesus is quoting Exodus 22, Dt. 24. If you sue someone and win the lawsuit, you are allowed to take their shirt but not their cloak. Jesus said to go above and beyond when you have been found at fault. When you are FORCED to give up your shirt, then out of love give them your cloak also. That is sacrificial Christian love. WOW!
- **Rom. 12: 20,21**
- **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.**

**41 And whoever compels you to go one mile, go with him two.**

What did Jesus mean by this?

- Roman law allowed for a Roman soldier to require a Jew to carry his pack for a mile.
- Jesus says go above and beyond the mile. You HAD to go the first mile, but do the second mile out of love for Jesus. Take the opportunity to turn the situation into ministry.
- Love is the limit, not my self-interest.
- Michael Belk photo (show slide here)

**42 Give to him who asks you, and from him who wants to borrow from you do not turn away.**

Now many of us may be sweating bullets. What am I supposed to do if I give to everyone who asks of me? What is the limit?

The limit is love.

It isn't love, to give to someone when it will exacerbate his or her situation. It isn't love to give to someone in order to reward or enable bad behavior or bad habits. You don't give cash to an addict. We aren't exhibiting love when we give in to the diabetic who is asking for a twinkie, et al.

**Love is the limit, not my self-interest.**

I don't know if I can live this way!!! Welcome to the club. But we serve a Lord that indwells us. We must allow him to live out these things through me.

**Don't think of it as doing this FOR Jesus, as if it is something we serve up to Him or bring before Him, like some good work. But know that we serve a savior that can do it THROUGH me.**

That totally changes the perspective, doesn't it? And we must remember that we serve a risen savior whose grace has forgiven me where I have fallen short in these things. Thank you Jesus for perfectly fulfilling out this command. Forgive me for not doing it, but empower me to do it from now on.