

You Said, But I Say – Part 7

“Ye have heard that it hath been said, ‘An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth. . . .’” — Matthew 5:38

That great “prince of expositors,” G. Campbell Morgan once said, “The Christly soul, the man in the Kingdom is for evermore overflowing the measure, overstepping the necessity, doing that which no man has any right to expect from him.” This is an appropriate introduction against the backdrop of the Sermon on the Mount, and also, the passage before us in Matthew 5:38.

We approach the fifth of six illustrations contrasting the rabbinic traditions and false righteous standards of the Pharisees versus that of God's standard of righteousness. The Pharisees had masked the reality of their sinfulness. In spite of what they thought, Jesus demonstrates that they were murderers (v. 22), adulterers (v. 28), liars (v. 34) and here in this passage, they were filled with vengeful, retaliatory, spiteful spirits. Jesus was saying, “You fall short.” Probably no part of the Sermon on the Mount has been subject to more misinterpretation and misapplication as Matthew 5:38-42. It has been used to wrongly support lawlessness, pacifism, conscientious objection to war, disbelief in justice and civil law, and capital punishment.

The words “An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth” are directly taken from three Old Testament passages: Ex. 21:24, Lev. 24:20 and Deut. 19:21. Leviticus adds “fracture for fracture.” The purpose of these instructions of the Mosaic law was twofold. The first was to deter or curtail further crime; the second was to prevent excessive punishment based on personal vengeance: “And the rest will hear and be afraid, and will never again do such an evil thing among you” (Deut. 19:20). God gave these laws to protect the righteous from the unrighteous. Today, God has ordained the law for the same purpose: “But we know that the Law is good, if one uses it lawfully, realizing the fact that law is not made for a righteous man, but for those who are lawless and rebellious, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane” (1Tim. 8-9). “Governing authorities . . . (are) minister(s) 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. 13:4). A.W. Pink writes, “Magistrates and judges were never ordained by God for the purpose of reforming reprobates or pampering degenerates, but to be His instruments for preserving law and order by being a terror to evil. As Romans 13 says, they are to be 'an avenger to execute wrath on him that doeth evil.' . . . Conscience has become comatose. The requirements of justice are stifled; (sentimental) concepts now prevail. As eternal punishment was repudiated — either tacitly or in many cases openly — ecclesiastical punishments were shelved. Churches refused to enforce sanctions, and winked at flagrant offenses. The inevitable outcome has been the breakdown of discipline in the home and the creation of a “public opinion” which is mawkish and spineless. School-teachers are intimidated by foolish parents, so that the rising generation is more and more allowed to have their own way without fear of consequences. If some judge has the courage of his convictions and sentences a brute for maiming an old woman, there is an outcry raised against him.”

An important significance of each Old Testament passage is that the “eye for an eye” principle was to be applied under the jurisdiction of the civil justice system. There was no reference to personal relationships, but all punishment was to be determined “as the judges decide” (Ex. 21). The punishment was also to match the crime — no more, no less. Because of our base human nature and depravity, we tend to not only return “tit-for-tat” and “get even”, but usually respond with selfish overreaction and seek retribution beyond what the offense deserves. In no case does the Old Testament allow or mandate an individual to seek personal vengeance. No one has the right to say, “Thus I shall do to him as he has done to me; I will render to the man according to his work” (Prov. 24:29).

To the scribes and Pharisees this passage had been twisted to support a vengeful, retaliatory spirit. To them this was permission to hold a grudge and give someone their ‘due’. In pursuit of their personal ‘rights’, the law had been set aside to accommodate their daily vendettas. They cherished a spirit of retaliation and a self-protective attitude regarding their ‘rights’. Jesus delineates four basic human rights by way of contrast to illustrate the principle of non-retaliation: dignity, security, liberty and property. (Mat. 5:39b-42) We will reserve these portions for the next article.

F.B. Meyer once said in regard to this passage, “We (must) be on guard against taking the law into our own hands lest our passion should drift us outside the warm zone of the love of God.” It is so appropriate that Our Lord

begins this entire Sermon with the Beatitudes — the attitudes that should be — for they set the foundation for all that follows. At the bottom of our liberties and rights must be an attitude that denies self, that surrenders freedom rather than retaliates. More than anything else, Jesus is saying that His followers have no rights. They have no right to retaliate with vengeance, no right to their possessions, their time or money, and even legal rights may be set aside. William Barclay states, “The Christian thinks not of his rights, but of his duties; not of his privileges, but of his responsibilities.” Perhaps the curtailing of our rights and the attitude of denying oneself can be summarized thus:

“When you're neglected, or purposely set at naught, and you sting and hurt with the insult or oversight, but your heart is happy, being counted worthy to suffer for Christ — that is dying to self. When your good is evil spoken of, when your wishes are crossed, your advice disregarded, your opinions ridiculed, and you refuse to let anger rise in your heart or even defend yourself, but you take it all in patient, loving silence — that is dying to self. When you lovingly and patiently bear any disorder, any irregularity, any annoyance, when you can stand face to face with waste and folly and extravagance and spiritual insensibility, and you can endure it as Jesus endured it — that is dying to self. When you are content with any circumstance, any food, any offering, any clothing, any climate, any society, any solicitude, any interruption by the will of God — that is dying to self. And when you never care to refer to yourself in conversation, or to record your own good works, or itch after commendation from others, when you can truly love to be unknown — that is dying to self. When you can see your brother prosper and having his needs met, and can honestly rejoice with him in spirit and feel no envy, nor question God while your own needs are far greater and you circumstances more desperate — that is dying to self. And when you can receive correction from one of less stature than yourself, and humbly submit inwardly as well as outwardly, finding no rebellion or resentment rising up within your heart — that is dying to self.”

One question remains — Are you ‘dead’ yet? “I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish in order that I may gain Christ . . . that I may know Him, and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death” (Philip. 3:8,10).

– Article submitted by Chuck Wetzel
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