

Matthew 5:38-42  
 Sermon on the Mount  
 MT1018

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 Kingdom Ethics

## “DEALING WITH ABUSE”

**INTRODUCTION:** In Matthew 5:38-42, we come to five verses that usually serve as the “deal breaker” with the Sermon on the Mount...

1. *You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you. (Matthew 5:38-42)*
2. **James Bryan Smith:** *“The next section of the Sermon on the Mount contains some of the most challenging and demanding requirements of those who want to live as Jesus’ apprentices.” (p. 121).*
3. **Dallas Willard:** *“I think it is perhaps these four statements, more than any other in the Discourse, that causes people to throw up their hands in despair or sink into a pit of grinding legalism.” (p. 177).*
4. **Sinclair B. Ferguson:** *The Sermon on the Mount; p. 98*  
*Of the entire Sermon on the Mount, no ideas are more frequently alluded to than the ones that follow: an eye for an eye; turn the other cheek; go the extra mile. They are still colourful expressions in the English language. For some people, they are the essence of Christianity. But what do they mean?*
5. These are **not** easy verses: not easy to teach, not easy to learn and not easy to live.
6. So the first thing we must do is to *debunk* them from all our false, frivolous and fearful ideas that we read into them.
7. **First of all**, we must not misconstrue these verses to justify some new social or political agenda.
  - a. **Leo Tolstoy** took these verses to mean that Jesus was teaching *“The Command of Non-Resistance.”* Tolstoy wrote in his book *What I Believe (1884)* the following (Stott; p. 108)  
*I understood that Christ says just what he says, “Resist not evil.” These words..., understood in their direct meaning, were for me truly a key opening everything else. It is impossible at one and the same time to confess Christ as God, the basis of whose teaching is non-resistance to him that is evil, and consciously and calmly to work for the establishment of property, law courts, government and military forces. Christ totally forbids the human institution of any law court’ because they resist evil and even return evil for evil.*
  - b. **Mohandes Gandhi** took these verses, along with Tolstoy’s writings, to form the core of his non-resistance movement. Not passive resistance, nor civil disobedience, but what we called “truth force”: *“It is that Sermon that has endeared Jesus to me” (Stott; p. 109).*
  - c. **Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.** took his marching orders from the Sermon on the Mount and these verses: *“Returning violence for violence multiplies violence, adding deeper darkness to*

*the night already devoid of stars...Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that...non-violence is the answer to the crucial political and moral questions of our time; the need of mankind to overcome oppression and violence without resorting to oppression and violence. Mankind must evolve for all human conflict a method which rejects revenge, aggression, and retaliation. The foundation of such method is love.”*

- d. **All these perspectives have a kernel of truth but are fundamentally and generally flawed interpretations of what Jesus said and meant to say.**
8. **Second**, we must not make Jesus’ words look stupid or exaggerate them so they seem impossibly naïve.
- a. This is a favorite technique people use to escape something they don’t like or don’t agree with.
- b. **Martyn Lloyd-Jones: *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*; p. 273.**
- Clearly, we are face to face here with a subject which has often been debated, which has been frequently misunderstood, and which has always been the cause of much confusion. There is possibly no passage in Scripture which has produced as much heat and disputation as this very teaching which tells us not to resist evil and to be loving and forgiving.*
- c. Lloyd-Jones gives us **Five Principles of Interpretation** for the Sermon on the Mount.
- i. *We must never regard the Sermon on the Mount as a code of ethics, or set of rules, to cover our conduct in detail. (spirit of the law)*
  - ii. *These teachings are never to be applied mechanically, or as a rule of thumb. (principles)*
  - iii. *If our interpretation makes the teaching appear to be impossible, it is also wrong. (daily life)*
  - iv. *If our interpretation ever makes the teaching appear to be ridiculous or leads to a ridiculous position, it is patently a wrong interpretation.*
  - v. *If our interpretation of the teachings of the Sermon on the Mount contradicts the teaching of other Scripture, we are wrong. Scripture never contradicts Scripture.*
9. What Jesus says in these five verses is neither ridiculous nor impossible, and it squares with the teachings of both Old Testament and New Testament – Moses and Paul.
10. What Jesus teaches here is *beautiful* and *balanced* and *beneficial* to all mankind.
11. **Earl F. Palmer: *The Enormous Exception*; p. 57.**

*Jesus has advocated the creative way of self-limitation. This depends upon God’s healing and redeeming power to make it work. It is a way that counts upon the completion of the Torah’s grand intentions by God, so that the great power of love overrides the power of retribution and animosity.*

## 12. **The Creative Way of Self-Limitation...**

*You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. And if anyone forces*

*you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you. (Matthew 5:38-42)*

13. Here's what Jesus **said** and here's what Jesus **meant**...

## I. THE FALSE PERSPECTIVE ON REVENGE (5:38)

*You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.'* (Matthew 5:38)

### A. What Moses Wrote

1. The Rabbis were again quoting (and misquoting) Moses in the *Torah* (law):
2. Moses gave the law in Exodus 20: *Ten Commandments*: followed by *case laws* in Exodus 21-23...
  - a. *When men strive together and hit a pregnant woman, so that her children come out, but there is no harm, the one who hit her shall surely be fined, as the woman's husband shall impose on him, and he shall pay as the judges determine. But if there is harm, then you shall pay life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe. (Exodus 21:22-25)*
  - b. *"Whoever takes a human life shall surely be put to death. Whoever takes an animal's life shall make it good, life for life. If anyone injures his neighbor, as he has done it shall be done to him, fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth; whatever injury he has given a person shall be given to him. Whoever kills an animal shall make it good, and whoever kills a person shall be put to death. You shall have the same rule for the sojourner and for the native, for I am the Lord your God."* (Leviticus 24:17-22)
  - c. *"Whoever takes a human life shall surely be put to death. Whoever takes an animal's life shall make it good, life for life. If anyone injures his neighbor, as he has done it shall be done to him, fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth; whatever injury he has given a person shall be given to him. Whoever kills an animal shall make it good, and whoever kills a person shall be put to death. You shall have the same rule for the sojourner and for the native, for I am the Lord your God."* (Deut. 19:15-21)
3. All three references refer to *tort law*: guidelines for the judges in Israel's courts of *personal injury*.
4. Moses establishes here the principle of *lex talionis*.
  - a. Latin: Law (*lex*) of retaliation (*talinonis*)
  - b. The legal principle of *compensatory damages*
  - c. **Wikipedia**: "*Eye for an Eye*"

*In modern times, the phrase still loosely applies. Should a person commit a tort that results in personal injury of the plaintiff, they must pay for the repairing of the injury (e.g. an eye transplant). This is called compensatory damages. The term lex talionis does not always and only refer to literal eye-for-an-eye codes of justice but applies to the*

*broader class of legal systems that specify formulaic penalties for specific crimes, which are thought to be fitting in their severity. Some propose that this was at least in part intended to prevent excessive punishment at the hands of either an avenging private party or the state. The most common expression of lex talionis is "an eye for an eye", but other interpretations have been given as well. Legal codes following the principle of lex talionis have one thing in common: prescribed 'fitting' counter punishment for an offense.*

5. Moses' instructions were meant for *judges and the church and the state* but not for *individuals or families*.
6. *lex talionis* (a rule from God) is designed to teach us three things:
  - a. *The punishment must fit the crime*
  - b. *People are responsible for their actions*
  - c. *Two wrongs cannot make a right*
7. **Three Illustrations:** "an eye for an eye"
  - a. If I punch you in the face and damage your eye so that you are blind on one side, the proper *compensation* is **not** for the court to cut out one of my eyes, but to fine me \$1 million to compensate for that which I took from you that is irreplaceable.
  - b. If I punch you in the face and break your glasses, then \$1 million is **not** just compensation, but rather to pay the doctor's bills, replace your glasses and serve probation for my assault and battery.
  - c. If I punch you in the face, you hemorrhage in your eye and die a week later, proper compensation **may be** death by hanging or 15 years for involuntary manslaughter, depending upon the court's ruling on my intent and deliberation of my actions.
  - d. **The Point:** *Just and fair compensation for crimes committed.*
8. The fact that Moses **did not** expect a literal eye or a real eye is obvious from the text: *Exodus 21:26-36*
  - a. *"When a man strikes the eye of his slave, male or female, and destroys it, he shall let the slave go free because of his eye. If he knocks out the tooth of his slave, male or female, he shall let the slave go free because of his tooth.*

*"When an ox gores a man or a woman to death, the ox shall be stoned, and its flesh shall not be eaten, but the owner of the ox shall not be liable. But if the ox has been accustomed to gore in the past, and its owner has been warned but has not kept it in, and it kills a man or a woman, the ox shall be stoned, and its owner also shall be put to death. If a ransom is imposed on him, then he shall give for the redemption of his life whatever is imposed on him. If it gores a man's son or daughter, he shall be dealt with according to this same rule. If the ox gores a slave, male or female, the owner shall give to their master thirty shekels of silver, and the ox shall be stoned.*

*"When a man opens a pit, or when a man digs a pit and does not cover it, and an ox or a donkey falls into it, the owner of the pit shall make restoration. He shall give money to its owner, and the dead beast shall be his.*

*“When one man's ox butts another's, so that it dies, then they shall sell the live ox and share its price, and the dead beast also they shall share. Or if it is known that the ox has been accustomed to gore in the past, and its owner has not kept it in, he shall repay ox for ox, and the dead beast shall be his. (Exodus 21:26-36)*

b. Just and fair compensation

9. **The Purpose:** *To limit excessive retaliation and unjust revenge by individuals against one another.*

10. Moses meant **only** “an eye for an eye” and not excessive revenge.

11. **John R. W. Stott:** *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount; p. 104*

*The scribes and Pharisees evidently extended this principle of just retribution from the law courts (where it belongs) to the realm of personal relationships (where it does not belong). They tried to use it to justify personal revenge, although the law explicitly forbade this: ‘You should not take vengeance or bear any grudge against the sons of your own people.’ Thus, ‘This excellent, if stern, principle of judicial retribution was being utilized as an excuse for the very thing it was instituted to abolish, namely personal revenge.’*

B. What the Rabbis Taught

1. *“You have heard that it was said...”*

2. The rabbis took a power meant for the courts and bequeathed it to individuals.

3. They ignored one half of Moses’ intent:

a. **First:** Prescriptive: prescribing compensatory justice by courts of law.

b. **Second:** Restrictive: restricting personal revenge and vendetta by the rule of the courts.

c. *The Rabbis ignored the restrictive dimension.*

4. **D. A. Carson:** *Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount (p. 52)*

*By Jesus’ day, however, both of these fundamentals were frequently overlooked. It became all too easy to see the law as prescriptive, and only marginally restrictive. The question then became, How far may my personal retaliation extend, without breaking the law? Worse, the law was thus being dragged into the personal arena, where it could scarcely foster even rough justice, but only bitterness, vengeance, malice, hatred.*

5. *By the way: This is exactly what is happening in our society: unrestricted personal lawsuits, outlandish legal verdicts and exorbitant settlements. We are a litigious society that uses tort law and lawsuits to get rich quickly and easily at another’s expense.*

6. **Illustration:** You get upset with a SOAR coach at a ballgame and sue church, school, and every pastor, asking for \$2 million in “emotional damages” for your 10-year old. Our insurance company settles with you for \$500,000, when a simple apology from the coach was truly the *lex talionis*. You sued and got an eye for a fingernail!

7. Jesus addresses this straight up...

8. **Sinclair B. Ferguson:** *The Sermon on the Mount, p. 99*

*Behind this lies the principle by which every Christian is called to live: do not make your 'rights' the basis for your relationships with others. Be prepared to take a lowly position, as a humble servant; be prepared to pay the price of imitating the example of Jesus.*

## II. THE TRUE PERSPECTIVE ON RIGHTS (5:39-42)

*But I say to you, do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you. (Matthew 5:39-42)*

### A. What Jesus Taught

1. Christ says, *"The way to solve conflict is not to seek revenge or to use retaliation but to work for peace at all costs. Use good to overcome evil. Overcome hate with love, revenge with grace, malice with mercy."*
2. Christ uses **four illustrations** of day-to-day situations to teach this *principle*...
  - a. **First:** The example of personal insult or injury.
    - i. *But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. (Matthew 5:39)*
    - ii. A "slap on the cheek" is an action of deliberate insult (physical or verbal)
    - iii. A slap across the face is **not** a personal, bodily, dangerous assault –
      1. Not someone slugging you
      2. This is **not** a prohibition to self-defense. This is **not** forbidding the government's use of police, military or even just war.
      3. This is **not** a prescription not to defend your family, your community or your church.
      4. This is **not** teaching about how to handle personal persecution for your faith (cf. 5:10-12).
    - iv. Jesus is simply saying: *"Let the little stuff go. A slap on the face should be met with patience and an honest attempt to reconcile. Not with returned insults."*
    - v. Self-defense, ok; retaliation, no!
  - b. **Second:** The example of a personal lawsuit.
    - i. *And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. (Matthew 5:40)*
    - ii. If your neighbor says, *"Your fence is falling down! Either you fix it or I'll sue you and take you before both the Courts and Homeowner's Association!"*
    - iii. Your response: Not only fix the fence, but apologize and offer to relocate the fence to suit his eyesight.

- iv. The point: *Work to set things right by doing more than expected.*
  - v. **Illustration:** *Tom Grigg's car, my pine trees and sap, cutting the trees down.*
- c. **Third:** The example of government interference.
- i. *And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. (Matthew 5:41)*
  - ii. A Roman soldier could conscript any Jewish citizen to carry his armor or backpack one mile. This was the oppressive law of Roman occupation.
  - iii. Jesus says, *"Go an extra mile with this hated oppressor as a display of goodwill, an act of Christian kindness and a chance to share Christ with him."*
  - iv. **Illustration:** Fill out the census report by the date the government requests; if the policeman orders you to do something, ask him if you could help out in other ways; don't just sort out the plastic, glass and tin cans for the waste department pick-up – leave them a dozen cookies every few months.
- d. **Fourth:** The example of charity and mercy.
- i. *Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you. (Matthew 5:42)*
  - ii. Stop and give the panhandler what he asks and help out your irresponsible brother-in-law by not requiring him to fix your lawnmower that he broke!
3. What's the point of all this? Is *all* this about "revenge"?
- a. Some is: point one...yes, a slap in the face
  - b. Point 2: perhaps. Legal revenge in lawsuits
  - c. Points 3 and 4: no. These are right of the government and the needs of our neighbor.
  - d. *So...how does all this fit together?*
4. **Jesus is talking about letting go of your rights in order to bring peace, do justice, fulfill civic duty, help others.**
5. **James M. Boice:** *The Sermon on the Mount; p. 134.*
- a. *These verses teach that a follower of the Lord Jesus Christ has no right to retaliation, no right to things, no right to his own time, and no right to his money. In other words, he holds all his possessions in trust from the Lord, and he is obliged to use them as Jesus did, to help others.*
  - b. **The Right to Retaliation** (slap in the face)
  - c. **The Right to Things** (suing you for a tunic)
  - d. **The Right to Time and Convenience** (the extra mile)
  - e. **The Right to Money** (beggars and borrowers)
  - f. *Do not abuse your rights in pursuing unnecessary retaliation.*
6. **Please note:** *All that these people may be doing to us is evil, of one sort or another –*

- a. **Note v. 39:** *“But, I say, do not resist the one who is evil...”*
  - b. The evil of insults, the evil of frivolous lawsuits, the evil of government interference, the evil of lazy and irresponsible people asking for money.
  - c. Jesus says: *Overcome evil with good.*
7. Why? Because this is what Moses was aiming at: Go the “extra mile” to make sure justice is served and peace is maintained.
8. Why? Because this is what Jesus did Himself: *1 Peter 2:20-24*
- a. *For what credit is it if, when you sin and are beaten for it, you endure? But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God. For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. (1 Peter 2:20-24)*
  - b. Jesus took our fists in the face, insults and abuse...
  - c. ...our unjust testimony at His trial...
  - d. ...our corrupt laws that condemned Him to crucifixion...
  - e. ...our infinite debt of sin owed to God...
  - f. *And He overcame our evil with God’s grace for our good!*
9. Why? Because we are recipients of this grace, Paul tells us to *“overcome evil with good...”*
- Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality.*
- Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight. Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” To the contrary, “if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.” Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. (Romans 12:9-21)*
10. Why? And because Brother James sums it all up for us: *Mercy triumphs over judgment...*
- So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty. For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment. (James 2:12-13)*

11. **Please remember:** Jesus is not speaking to the state, or to the church, or to the school, but to individuals like you and me. And He is not laying down laws but setting up *principles*: Four of them...
- Rights must be set aside for duty.
  - Grace looks for mercy over judgment.
  - Love overcomes evil with good.
  - Reconciliation is more important than revenge.
12. **Focus less on your civil rights and focus more on your Christian duty: Overcome evil with good.**

B. Jesus' New Way of Living

- Christ's main message, remember, is this: *"The Kingdom of God is at hand"*  
*From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."*  
 (Matthew 4:17)  
*"The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel."*  
 (Mark 1:15)
- Jesus is teaching about the presence of the Kingdom – *The Gospel way of life*.
  - A radical reality open and accessible to all kinds of people (*Beatitudes*)
  - A new sphere of living by grace where anger and contempt give way to forgiveness and respect.
  - Where lust dies and pure love grows
  - Where people see marriage as a gift from God and less for happiness than for holiness
  - Where God's people speak honestly and forthrightly, but always kindly: "Yes" and "No".
  - Where personal rights are forsaken in order to overcome evil with good, hate with love, and greed with grace.*
- Radical? You bet. *I cannot think of anything more contrary to the American way of life than these 5 verses.*
  - America: "Walk softly and carry a big stick."
  - Kingdom: "Live graciously and display a big heart."
- Can you do this? Yes, you can with the help of grace. Is this unreasonable? No, it's the only way of living that makes sense. Is this far-fetched idealism? No, it's the only way of dealing with people that puts an end to one-upmanship and senseless revenge.
- If God is sovereign, if Jesus loves you, if the Spirit is in you and is guarding you, then we don't have to fight others to assert our rights or guard our turf. Christ will be our defender. This is the promise of the Gospel and the reality of the Kingdom of God...**  
*What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously*

*give us all things? Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written,*

*“For your sake we are being killed all the day long;  
we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.”*

*No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:31-39)*

**CONCLUSION:** Here is how I ask you to apply today’s text and these radical principles of Kingdom Life...

1. Four illustrations from Christ; four questions from me...
2. **First:** *Has someone lied to you, sought to take advantage of you, cheated you or tried to “work the system” to their advantage at your expense? You have a right to say, “No way! You cheated...you lose!” Would you be willing to go to that person and say, “I’ve reconsidered. I’d like to help you out despite what we’ve been through.”? **Will you allow mercy to triumph over judgment?***
3. **Second:** *Has someone threatened you with harm? Are you at serious odds with another soul? Are you adversaries? You have a right to defend yourself – perhaps, you should. But would you be willing to take a third party with you, meet with your adversary and say “Let’s work together until we work this out. I am committed to seeing that your interests are met, as much as I am able.”? **Will you allow reconciliation to overrule revenge?***
4. **Third:** *Is someone making demands upon you that are candidly unreasonable, and maybe even selfish? You have a right to your space, your limits, your life! But would you be willing to not only meet their unreasonable requests but to communicate to them this truth: I care enough about you to give you what you ask, and I want you to know I’m here to help you as your friend.”? **Will you allow your duty to serve trump your right to resist?***
5. **Fourth:** *Can you think of someone who recently asked you for money, financial support or a charitable donation, and you thought, “My soul! What a bottomless pit this person really is!”? You have a right to say, “No.” But would you consider giving sacrificially, believing what Jesus said, “It is better to give than to receive.”? **Will you practice grace instead of self-interest?***
6. **You don’t have to do these things. You’ve got your rights, and I respect them.**
7. But I am asking, on behalf of Jesus Christ: *Would you put aside rights in order to take up duty; would you overcome evil with good; would you allow mercy to triumph over judgment and would you banish greed with grace?*
8. **This is not law. This is Kingdom principle. This is Gospel practice.**

9. This is the power of the Kingdom of heaven among the sons of men: *“Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”*
10. *Thy Kingdom come...Thy will be done...*