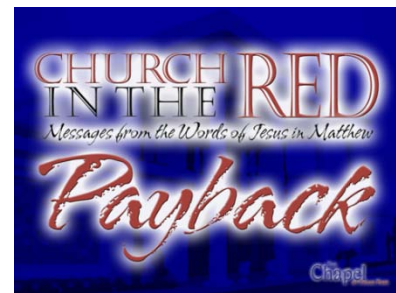


Sermon

Dan Neary

Church in the Red – Payback

In September we started on a journey we titled “Church in the Red,” giving our attention to these red lettered words in Matthew’s gospel. After twelve studies that took us nearly to the end of chapter 5, we took a *time out* for our Christmas celebration, focusing on the Advent themes.



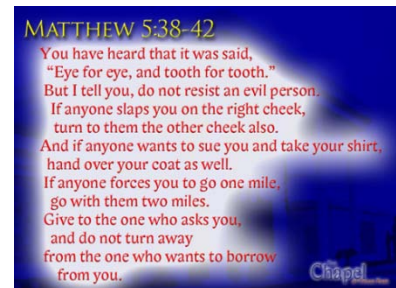
Now we’re back to these words of Jesus.

We’re still in this section that most Bibles label as the *Sermon on the Mount*. Jesus is teaching about the Kingdom of God, exposing how our conclusions and the systems we build in *our kingdoms* don’t always match what Jesus has in mind for His Kingdom.

You may recall that we’re in this section in which Jesus is specifically challenging the assumptions and systems that were common in His day, and remain common in our time as well. Most of these challenges have something to do with religion; more than merely codes of law or morality, Jesus is challenging how people think about religion and God.

Jesus shakes up our thinking in these regards, so we can best consider His Kingdom the way He describes it in these passages.

And so it is with this passage that we have in Matthew 5:38-42. Jesus begins this challenge in what is now becoming His pattern.



³⁸“**You have heard that it was said,** ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ ³⁹**But I tell you...**”¹

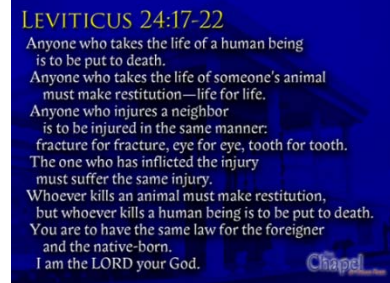
Simple justice. Vengeance in clear and simple terms. This is a basic principle that is codified and practiced in most societies throughout history.

Jesus could have been saying “you have heard” in reference to common law or common sense (he could have referred to any number of authorities, including Hammurabi’s code that preceded Jesus by nearly 2,000 years)... but, as was His pattern, He was also referring specifically to the authority of Scripture. There are several places in our Old Testaments (three in the Pentateuch) that present this simple code.

¹The Holy Bible: Today's New International Version. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005). Mt 5:38-39.

Pat read one today from Leviticus 24 this morning:

¹⁷“ ‘Anyone who takes the life of a human being is to be put to death. ¹⁸Anyone who takes the life of someone’s animal must make restitution—life for life. ¹⁹Anyone who injures a neighbor is to be injured in the same manner: ²⁰fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth. The one who has inflicted the injury must suffer the same injury. ²¹Whoever kills an animal must make restitution, but whoever kills a human being is to be put to death. ²²You are to have the same law for the foreigner and the native-born. I am the LORD your God.’ ”²



[Passages like these] are called the *lex talionis*, the law of retaliation. This law was given to protect the innocent and to make sure retaliation did not occur beyond the offense.³

It is a basic principle that gives victims the right to punish, yet puts boundaries on the punishment.

Lex talionis is meant to be a **deterrent**. We’re supposed to consider just what we’re putting at risk before doing some dastardly deed. *Don’t do the crime if you can’t do the time*. Society hopes that the threat of *lex talionis* is enough; we hope that the promise of retribution is enough, or at least that punishing a few will make the point for all who might consider crime.



It happens in every scale. On a micro level, I’ve practiced a little *lex talionis* in parenting. “If you don’t stop hitting your brother, I’m going to hold you down and let him take a few swings at you!”

On a macro level, it was the underlying principle of nuclear escalation in the Cold War. It could be that the only thing that kept nuclear intercontinental ballistic missiles in American and Russian soil was the promise of *mutual assured destruction*.

Lex talionis (eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth, life for a life) is more than just a deterrent, it is a **regulator**. It isn’t in place merely to protect the victim, but also to protect the offender. It stands against “gangster law” in which the punishment must exceed the crime.

- Slap me, I’ll punch you
- Break my arm, I’ll break both your legs
- Beat me up, I’ll kill you
- You kill one of my guys, I’ll kill ten of yours

²The Holy Bible: Today’s New International Version. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005). Le 24:17-23.

³John F. Walvoord, Roy B. Zuck and Dallas Theological Seminary, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983-c1985). 2:31.

The principle of *lex talionis* acknowledges that people, and societies, often demand punishment that exceeds the crime.

War doesn't typically follow along the principle of *lex talionis*. The lives eventually lost in war almost always far outnumber (by large multiples) the lives taken in the instigating offense. Our righteous nation, for example, responding to the terrorists attacks of 9/11/2001, in oversimplified terms, has gone far beyond the standard of *eye for an eye*. In an effort to dismantle the systems that led to the attacks, many multiples more have lost their lives. Convinced that we love life more than our enemies, and intent to take down evil, we suspend *lex talionis* when it comes to *just war*. These are difficult issues with which to grapple, and I don't pretend to have all the answers.

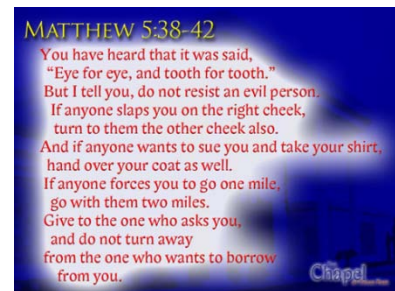
While we don't abide precisely to these "eye for an eye" policies in our contemporary means of justice in our courts, we do attempt to match the severity of the punishment with the price of restitution, or the penalty imposed. If someone knocks out my tooth, I don't want one of their teeth. I want their money so I can have my mouth repaired and have a bit extra for my "pain and suffering." And if they knocked out my tooth with criminal intent, I want them to spend some time in jail too. This is lawful. This is only fair. This seems to be just.

But Jesus says:

³⁸“**You have heard that it was said**, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ ³⁹**But I tell you...** ⁴

Moses had clearly prescribed a set of rules. Common sense called for rules like this, and societies throughout the ages had codified laws based on this simple principle. But Jesus, in describing how His Kingdom would operate, turns everything sideways.

³⁸“You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ ³⁹But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. ⁴⁰And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. ⁴¹If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles. ⁴²Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.” ⁵



⁴The Holy Bible: Today's New International Version. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005). Mt 5:38-39.

⁵The Holy Bible: Today's New International Version. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005). Mt 5:38-42.

This one may be among the most difficult to take. Jesus, what about my rights?

Jesus pointed out, ~~however~~, that while the rights of the innocent were protected by the Law, the righteous need not necessarily claim their rights. ~~A righteous man would~~ [Citizens of the Kingdom could] be characterized by humility and selflessness. Instead he might go “the extra mile” to maintain peace. When wronged by being struck on a **cheek**, or sued for his **tunic** (~~undergarment; a cloak was the outer garment~~), or forced to travel with **someone a mile**, he would not strike back, demand repayment, or refuse to comply. Instead of retaliating he would do the opposite⁶

A quick read here may make it seem that Jesus is directing us to be a bunch of doormats. It may seem that Jesus is calling us to simply be pacifists. It may help us understand just what he is getting at by unpacking these words that have rich cultural meaning. It doesn't appear that Jesus picked random scenarios to demonstrate this stance of non-retaliation.

The **slap on the cheek** indicates **insult**. More than a mere act of aggression, to slap someone on the cheek, in the culture of the day, was among the most forceful insults. Jesus is teaching that we will, for the sake of His Kingdom, receive insult. He is teaching that rather than repaying insult with insult, we should simply endure insult and be prepared for more. For an insult to have power, it must be received. When we simply endure insult, the children's saying is really true: “I'm rubber and your glue, what bounces off of me sticks on you.”

Suing for a shirt is a reference to **debt**. Specifically it is a reference to the debt of the poor. It was customary to pledge ones shirt to repay a small loan, yet it was illegal to require ones coat in repayment of a debt. Society did not want the poor freezing to death in the streets. But Jesus is saying, when you owe a debt withhold nothing in repayment.

Going a mile is a reference to **forced labor**. More specifically it is reference to government forced service (a draft). Jesus is teaching, as was His pattern, that government is to be obeyed whenever possible... even going the extra mile.

And finally, **giving to the one who asks** is a clear reference to **charity**. Jesus said it:

¹¹**The poor you will always have with you**, but you will not always have me. ⁷

Here Jesus is teaching that the citizens of His Kingdom will care for the beggar, not turning away from the needs of the poor.

⁶John F. Walvoord, Roy B. Zuck and Dallas Theological Seminary, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983-c1985). 2:31.

⁷*The Holy Bible: Today's New International Version*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005). Mt 26:10-11.

So what? What do we do with these red lettered words today? How can we make sense of all this, for us, in our context and culture and time?

Is Jesus calling us to be pacifists in all things? Or is He being really specific about special circumstances? Or is it something in between?



What about the **rule of law**?

Are we to throw out all the rules civilization has lived by and put in these new rules? Are we even sure what the new rules are supposed to be?

As we've said before in our study in this series, I think we are best served when we think of the Sermon on the Mount as more descriptive than prescriptive. It doesn't appear that Jesus is intent on giving us more rules to live by, but rather is describing His Kingdom. Rather than saying "here are more rules to follow in order to qualify for My Kingdom," Jesus is describing how His Kingdom is entirely different than what we experience or expect.

So... rather than merely a rule of law, Jesus is describing that His Kingdom operates under the **rule of peace**. Listen to how the Apostle Paul puts it in Romans 12:

¹⁴Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse...

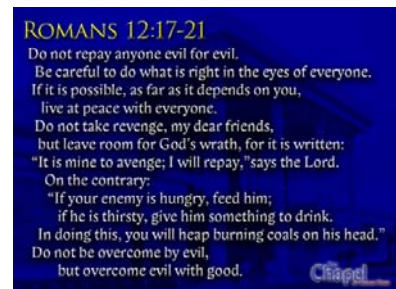
¹⁷Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. ¹⁸If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. ¹⁹Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord.

²⁰On the contrary:

"If your enemy is hungry, feed him;
if he is thirsty, give him something to drink.

In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head."

²¹Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.⁸



As far as it depends on you, citizens of God's Kingdom, live at peace with everyone. God's Kingdom is good; good prevails over evil in God's Kingdom. Citizens of God's Kingdom need "not be overcome by evil; but we overcome evil with good." We do not repay evil with evil... but overcome evil with good.

More than a mere rule of law, an eye for an eye (the *lex talionis*), Jesus demonstrates the **rule of forgiveness**. His Disciple, Peter, puts it this way:

⁸The Holy Bible: Today's New International Version. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005). Ro 12:14-21.

But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. ²¹To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.

²²“He committed no sin,
and no deceit was found in his mouth.”

²³When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. ²⁴“He himself bore our sins” in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; “by his wounds you have been healed.” ²⁵For “you were like sheep going astray,” but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.⁹

1 PETER 2:23,24

When they hurled their insults at him,
he did not retaliate;
when he suffered, he made no threats.
Instead, he entrusted himself
to him who judges justly.
He himself bore our sins
in his body on the cross,
so that we might die to sins
and live for righteousness

Chapd...

What insult, in light of the insult suffered by Jesus, is just too much for any of us to bear?

In light of our debt to a Holy God, in view of the price paid for our redemption by our Savior Jesus, what could we possibly claim as our own? What price is too much to be paid?

How can we who have benefitted by such great forgiveness of our sins withhold forgiveness ourselves in regard to whatever offense we may have suffered?

The Kingdom is marked by the **rule of peace**, the **rule of forgiveness**, and the **rule of faith**.

Consider again that passage from Romans.

¹⁹Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: “It is mine to avenge; I will repay,” says the Lord.¹⁰

Do we believe that? It takes a genuine gift of faith to not take revenge and believe that God is in control.

ROMANS 12:17-21

Do not repay anyone evil for evil.
Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone.
If it is possible, as far as it depends on you,
live at peace with everyone.
Do not take revenge, my dear friends,
but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written:
“It is mine to avenge; I will repay,” says the Lord.
On the contrary:
“If your enemy is hungry, feed him;
if he is thirsty, give him something to drink.
In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head.”
Do not be overcome by evil,
but overcome evil with good.

Chapd...

While people of faith may abide by the simple rule of law, abiding by the principle of *eye for an eye*, that really takes no faith at all.

On the contrary, it takes great faith to endure the offense, leaving vengeance to God, with faith that evil will be overcome by good. Even when we can’t see the good (maybe not even being able to imagine that good will prevail) we exercise great faith that God will work the miracle.

⁹The Holy Bible: Today's New International Version. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005). 1 Pe 2:20-25.

¹⁰The Holy Bible: Today's New International Version. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005). Ro 12:19.

These are lessons that Jesus is teaching us. Mind blowing really... as Jesus takes our notions of how things ought to work and turns them all upside down and sideways.

This is a rule of faith, so we respond in faith, and prayer, asking God to lead us, and empower us, working in us and through us.

