

Matthew 5:38-42

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Jesus flips the world system of 'justice' on its head. He tells His disciples to seek out opportunities to serve rather than looking for opportunities to exact payback under the letter of the law.

The parallel account of this teaching is found in Luke 6:29-30.

Having dealt with the issue of oaths and honesty in regards to righteousness (social harmony), Jesus addresses the matter of personal retribution for wrongs done against you. *You have heard that it was said* in the Law of Moses that '*An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth*' is the just principle to go by when paying back wrongs. Jesus took this directly from the Old Testament law:

"You shall appoint as a penalty life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise"
(Exodus 21:23-25).

"If a man takes the life of any human being, he shall surely be put to death. The one who takes the life of an animal shall make it good, life for life. If a man injures his neighbor, just as he has done, so it shall be done to him: fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth; just as he has injured a man, so it shall be inflicted on him. Thus the one who kills an animal shall make it good, but the one who kills a man shall be put to death. There shall be one standard for you; it shall be for the stranger as well as the native, for I am the Lord your God"
(Leviticus 24:17-22)

God gave this law through Moses as a standard for restitution to prevent the excesses of revenge or the influence of personal bias destroying the social harmony within the nation of Israel. Punishment for wrong doing was to be proportional to the harm inflicted. Losing a tooth is not that severe a loss. A minor offense should have a minor punishment, a *tooth for a tooth*. Losing an eye is a severe loss. A severe infraction should have a severe penalty, an *eye for an eye*. This principle has carried into modern society as "the punishment should fit the crime."

The Rule of Law was to govern society, rather than vendettas leading to a never-ending cycle of vengeance and chaos. Human justice and restoration matter, but they were to be applied by God's rules and not by tyrants or victims. The Lord says "Vengeance is Mine" (Deuteronomy 32:35). And God's standard was to ensure proportionality in response, so relationships can heal, rather than spiraling into feuds.

Jesus said that the righteousness of His Kingdom did not consist of obsessively paying back an *eye for an eye*, but it was obtained through mercy. Referencing His authority yet again by saying *But I say to you*, He says *not to resist* (seek to pay back) *an evil person* for the evil they have done you. Instead of returning *evil for evil*, return good.

This is at the heart of His kingdom. This is the mercy principle Jesus shared in the Beatitudes: “Makarios (blessed) are the merciful for they shall receive mercy” (Matthew 5:7). This is what Paul will tell the believers in Rome, “Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Do not be overcome by evil, but, overcome evil with good (Romans 12:17; 21). This is what James means when he writes, “mercy triumphs over judgment” (James 2:13). Righteousness (social harmony) comes when people forgive and overlook offenses done to them, not when they prosecute every wrong.

Jesus then gives four specific examples of the mercy principle that leads to righteousness, harmony, and life.

The first example involves insults. *Whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also.* To slap someone in the face is a stinging and public insult. The natural reaction is to slap back. But Jesus tells His disciples to show mercy and not retaliate. Instead they are to, remarkably, *turn the other* cheek to the one who slapped them. An application of this statement might be to say, “Never react when someone does something offensive to you.” This principle is also stated by Solomon, who said:

“If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat;
And if he is thirsty, give him water to drink;
For you will heap burning coals on his head,
And the LORD will reward you”
(Proverbs 25:21-22).

This Proverbs passage is quoted by Paul in Romans 12:20. It is interesting to note that applying the mercy principle is actually more effective in besting evil than retaliation. When we retaliate, we focus on and are controlled by the action of the offender. Plus, we reward the offender by drawing attention to the offense. People don’t gather around to watch someone be merciful. They gather around to watch a fight.

By being merciful, we “heap burning coals” on the head of the offender. Perhaps one way we “heap burning coals” is by showing them they do not control our actions. We show them we will choose our actions based on our values, rather than be controlled by them. In doing so, we do not give them the attention they seek by attacking us. When we behave in this manner, the Lord promises He will reward us.

This kind of meekness and humility is disarming. It avoids escalating the situation with violence. By offering your *other* cheek you may get struck a second time, but you also are refusing to be controlled. This can be viewed as a metaphor for how to respond to the world’s system. By refusing to react, you are inviting *the other* person to join you in harmony along with Jesus in God’s kingdom. In so doing you are giving *the other* an invitation to be your brother. You are also eliminating the motivation for the attack. What is the fun of attacking someone who is not provoked or offended?

The second example involves lawsuits. *If anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, let him have your coat also.* If someone claims something against you, let them have not only what they

claim but even more. Instead of digging in and “lawyering up” and making your neighbor an adversary, make them your friend, by giving them what they demand plus something extra for good measure.

In this case, the opponent *wants to sue*. This implies there has been some sort of transaction in which the other party feels they have been wronged, and has a point. If they didn’t have a point, they wouldn’t have a basis to *sue*. We aren’t speaking here of being shaken down by a con artist. We are speaking of bringing harmony to relationships and engagements between neighbors.

It will cost you *your shirt* and *your coat* to settle the dispute, but it may win you a friend. A *shirt* and *coat* would both have been valuable possessions in Jesus’s time. But in neither case would losing them have threatened someone’s life or livelihood. In addition to not reacting to physical provocation, we also should seek out win-win opportunities. It seems it would be impossible to apply this kingdom principle while seeking to gain personal benefit from mere extraction. Kingdom transactions should provide benefits for both parties.

The third example involves duty and customs. *Whoever forces you to go one mile, go with him two*. Under Roman law, a Roman dignitary or authority could demand lower-class people assist them by hauling their luggage one mile. Naturally, people begrudged this inconvenience and loss of time to walk two miles (one there and one back.) This was especially true if they resented Rome to begin with, as many Jews did. Jesus tells His disciples that any time a Roman official *forces you to go one mile*, do not *go with him* begrudgingly or because you ‘have to.’ Instead you should *go with him two* miles (actually four—two miles with and two miles on the return.)

“Going the extra mile” shows a willingness to serve the other person. This trains our hearts to value others and respect authority. This is a great witness, and it trains our hearts to bow to God’s authority.

The fourth example Jesus offers involves a neighbor asking to *borrow from you*. Jesus says in that instance to *not turn away from him who wants to borrow from you*, but rather to be willing to lend. If someone *asks of you* then *give to him*. Give it willingly, without any bitterness. Jesus exhorts His disciples to have a heart that seeks the best for others. To treat other people with generosity.

This kingdom principle reflects the wisdom of Solomon:

'Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due,
When it is in your power to do it.

Do not say to your neighbor, ‘Go, and come back,
And tomorrow I will give it,’
When you have it with you ”

(Proverbs 3:27-28).

Jesus contrasts this heart of generosity with the attitude of legal proportionality. Jesus’ disciples are not to merely seek to follow the law and assert their legal rights, making sure everyone gets their just due. Rather, Jesus’s followers are to look for opportunities to serve, give, and share with their neighbor. In each case, Jesus focuses upon the heart attitude. The overarching goal of

our actions should be social harmony (righteousness) rather than self-seeking. His disciples should love, and seek true benefit for others and our communities.

Biblical Text

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