

## Chapter 16: “An Eye for an Eye”

*Matthew 5:38–42*

In the sixth section of Jesus’ teaching about the law in the Sermon on the Mount, he touches a spiritual nerve. When we are hurt, the most natural response in the world is to seek immediate retaliation. While Jesus does not repudiate the public implications of the “eye for an eye” laws, he shows that those laws were never meant to justify private vengeance or personal vendettas. While there is an important place for public justice, Jesus shines his pure light of righteousness into another one of the darkest—yet best hidden—corners of our hearts. While we long to gain justice for the ways that we suffer, *Jesus came to suffer for sinners*.

### Dispassionate Suffering (Matt. 5:38–39)

As Jesus moves into the fifth antithesis in his teaching on the law, he takes up the ancient *lex talionis* (the “law of retaliation”): “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth’” (v. 38). Earlier, in Jesus’ teaching on the Sixth Commandment against murder, the Seventh Commandment against adultery, and the commandments against swearing falsely, Jesus critiqued an unbiblical narrowing of the full demands of those laws. On the other hand, when Jesus quoted Moses’ teaching on divorce from Deuteronomy 24:1, he exposed an unlawful expansion of that law to cover not only divorces for sexual immorality, but for any reason whatsoever, so long as the husband gave the proper paperwork to his wife to finalize the divorce. As Jesus comes to the Old Testament teaching about an “eye for an eye” (Ex. 21:24; Lev. 24:20; Deut. 19:21), he is once again dealing with an evil expansion of the law, rather than its narrowing.

#### Why “Eye for an Eye”? (v. 38)

The original purpose of *lex talionis* was to place strict limitations on the penalties for justice. By this law, God prohibited the kind of retributive, vendetta-driven justice that would not merely repay someone for an injury, but that would add additional damages beyond the original injury—and then those additional damages would then fuel another round of responses of repayment plus additional damages, which would start the cycle all over again.<sup>1</sup> To avoid the endless one-upmanship of something like a Hatfield/McCoy feud, God commanded the civil magistrate to inflict exact justice—no more, no less.<sup>2</sup> The clearest way to inflict this punishment was to mutilate a body in the exact manner that the perpetrator had injured another person; however, the law also provided for other

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<sup>1</sup> “Rather, it was given, as the OT context shows, to provide the nation’s judicial system with a ready formula of punishment, not least because it would decisively terminate vendettas.” (Carson, “Matthew,” 189.)

<sup>2</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, 1:297.

kinds of compensation for damages (e.g., Ex. 21:26–27).<sup>3</sup> The oft-repeated sentiment that “an eye for an eye makes the whole world go blind” is unserious and historically ignorant. Indeed, it was precisely through the limitations on vengeance that were codified with the “eye for an eye” laws that *prevented* escalations of retribution that could eventually make the whole world go blind.

In the case of this law, however, the Pharisees had twisted the law away from its context as a prescription for *public* justice as a “pretext for taking private revenge. They thought that they did no wrong, provided they were not the first to make the attack, but only, when injured, returned like for like.”<sup>4</sup> This violated the clear teaching of the law, which required public justice (Lev. 24:16, 17), and which explicitly forbade private vengeance (Lev. 19:18; see also Prov. 20:22; 24:29).<sup>5</sup> By expanding the provisions for public justice so that they spilled into permitting private vengeance, the Pharisees distorted one part of God’s law and trampled over the clear teaching of another part. God had intended to invest the civil magistrate “with authority to restrain the wicked and repress their violence,” and for “every man to bear patiently the injuries which he receives.”<sup>6</sup> Instead, as Lenski observes, the Pharisees’ distortion of the law encouraged “every man [to] likewise retaliate in kind and...in every case [to] insist on his full rights....The worst feature of this perversion was the fact that those who insisted on their rights adorned their revengeful and base actions with the very Word of God as though God himself bade them act as they did.”<sup>7</sup>

### Turning the Other Cheek (v. 39)

To counter the false teaching of the Pharisees, Jesus says, “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” (v. 39). This is a difficult command to understand, much less to obey. On the one hand, we must remember that everything Jesus says in this section is not for the purpose of *abolishing* the law, but for *fulfilling* the law (cf. Matt. 5:17).<sup>8</sup> Therefore, what Jesus says here is *not* contrary to what the Old Testament *genuinely* taught about *lex talionis*, but only contrary to the distortions of that teaching. On the other hand, Jesus clearly teaches a *complementary* principle that the eye for an eye legislation itself does not address. Furthermore, even if the Bible had not laid down the principles of *lex talionis*, Jesus’ words would remain hard for us to receive. We must, then, establish principles that will frame the true teaching of this passage against any distortions and misunderstandings of what Jesus is teaching.

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<sup>3</sup> Carson, “Matthew,” 189.

<sup>4</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, 1:297.

<sup>5</sup> Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 310.

<sup>6</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, 1:297.

<sup>7</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 240.

<sup>8</sup> I am therefore uncomfortable with the approach of Blomberg on this passage, who states that Jesus “formally abrogates an Old Testament command in order to intensify and internalize its application” (Blomberg, *Matthew*, 113). Similarly, Carson argues that “Jesus’ teaching formally contradicts the OT law” because it points forward to Jesus’ eschatological, new covenant ministry where the hardness of heart would be taken away (Carson, “Matthew,” 189). Both of these approaches seem to contradict Jesus’ self-declared principles for understand his teaching on the law from Matt. 5:17–20. With great respect for Carson’s biblical learning, the immediate context makes it clear that Jesus is not abrogating the law (even formally), but asserting its continuity, correcting its distortions, and clarifying its true requirements.

First, we must continue to recognize that *lex talionis* is a principle for *public* justice. Therefore, Jesus is not teaching something different about how public justice ought to be administered; rather, he is teaching about the *private*, internal, and even spiritual responses of each person to injustice that they receive.<sup>9</sup> Second, we should recognize the kind of injuries that Jesus highlights here have more to do with insulting someone’s pride than with inflicting serious injury. R. T. France observes that striking someone in the face was “a serious insult (2 Cor 11:20; cf. Lam 3:30) for which legal redress could be claimed...but to slap the *right* cheek required (if the assailant was right-handed) a slap with the back of the hand, which was far more insulting and would entail double damages....This is more a matter of honor than of physical injury, and honor required appropriate recompense.”<sup>10</sup> Third, we should remember that the law acknowledged the kind of “necessary defense” that did not consider it murder (for example) to kill a thief who had broken into someone’s home (Ex. 22:2).<sup>11</sup> Jesus is not in the least condemning the defense of your life, or the lives of your family.

### Emotions, Passions, and Affections

Jesus, is not, then, asking us to forego all attempts to *prevent* serious injuries or death. Rather, Jesus is addressing *how we respond* to the *insult* of our injuries. Lenski puts this well:

And the worst feature of this sin is the anger, resentment, and passion which fill the heart when such resistance is offered. Christ’s word is intended to keep our hearts clean of all such carnal propensities. Those misunderstand its meaning who demand a “non-resistance” which would ignore or overthrow all righteousness. The law of love is not intended to throw open the floodgates to unrestrained cruelty and crime.<sup>12</sup>

Note here Lenski’s use of the older word “passion.” This is an important biblical word (noun: πάθος; *pathos*; verb: πάσχω; *paschō*), referring particularly to suffering. Thus, we speak of “Christ’s passion” (i.e., suffering) not only at the cross (Luke 22:15; 24:46; Acts 1:3; 3:18, etc.) but also during his temptations (Heb. 2:18). Christ’s sufferings, then, were passive—he suffered under those things. Beyond Christ’s sufferings, this word also appears to describe the suffering of others (1 Cor. 12:26; 1 Pet. 2:20; 3:17). It is also a word that describes strong desires, particularly sexual “passion” (Rom. 1:26; 1 Thess. 4:15) or other impure, evil desires (Col. 3:5). Significantly, the Bible teaches that God is “without...passions” (WCF 2.1), for human beings are both unified and differentiated from God as being of “like passions” with one another (Acts 14:15; Jas. 5:17). While Christ’s passions were purely passive, we suffer *both* passively (from the evil and disorder of the world) *and* actively (from the sinful motions of our own souls).

The reason this is so important is that we often conflate our feelings under the single term

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<sup>9</sup> “Jesus again expounds the ethics of the kingdom. What he presents is ethics directed more to conduct at the personal, rather than the societal, level. These directives are for the recipients of the kingdom, not for governmental legislation.” (Hagner, *Matthew 1 - 13*, 131.)

<sup>10</sup> France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 220.

<sup>11</sup> See *Westminster Larger Catechism*, #136. The Scriptures exclude the cases “of public justice, lawful war, or necessary defense” from what is forbidden by the Sixth Commandment against murder.

<sup>12</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 242.

“emotions.” In his book, *From Passions to Emotions: The Creation of a Secular Psychological Category*, Thomas Dixon traces the two hundred-year historical transformation of the way that we came to speak about our feelings as something that arose from our biology and our psychology—while increasingly denying that such feelings emerged from our *souls*.<sup>13</sup> As scientists and philosophers began to reject any spiritual realm within our material world, they gave invented a catch-all category of “emotions”—a word that is not yet two hundred fifty years old.<sup>14</sup> In large part, the rise of the word “emotions” was a rejection of the notion that we have moral culpability for our feelings—especially for the passions of our souls that lurch in lust toward someone not our spouse, or that rise in anger when we are offended. According to the explanations given by materialistic philosophers, scientists, psychologists, and psychiatrists, our “emotions” are of no more moral significance than the instinctual urges of animals.

Jesus, however, is teaching precisely that we are responsible for our passions. If our split-second responses to humiliation is the rise of vengeful anger in our souls, we have already sinned—indeed, we have violated the Sixth Commandment against murder, as Jesus taught earlier in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:21–26). Indeed, one of the duties required by the Sixth Commandment is the “subduing all passions” (WLC #135), while one of the sins forbidden by the Sixth Commandment is “all excessive passions” (WLC #136). Jesus teaches us that God’s law regulates even our emotional responses.

Now, because of the corruption of sin, it is very difficult to understand what exactly it would look like for us to respond without vengeful anger toward someone who humiliates, belittles, or despises us. Indeed, we don’t even need the Pharisees to instinctively want to apply *lex talionis* to give us permission for getting even with those who have wronged us! Two illustrations may help us to get into the mindset that Jesus is describing. First, consider what it means that God is “without... passions” (WCF 2.1) and “slow to anger” (Ex. 34:6). God does not have a temper that may flare up if we do or say the wrong thing. God always is exactly what he is. He is unchangeable, which theologians call “immutable.” This is critical to understand his lack of anger, as he declares to us: “For I the LORD do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed” (Mal. 3:6). In the face of our endless rejection of him, God deals with us *dispassionately*. That is, God is not moved to act as we often are, by the *pain* we that experience through envy, wounded pride, fear, etc. When God’s wrath comes, it comes not as an overreaction at the end of an exhausting day, but perfectly and purely as exact justice and retribution for evil. God is not moved by any passions in him, but rather by his *affections*. That is, God is moved by what he *loves*, in accordance with his perfect wisdom, knowledge, and will, and not to relieve some kind of suffering in his spirit.

The second illustration brings this kind of an idea closer to our own existence. Consider how little babies sometimes hit or scratch their parents. The babies genuinely don’t mean to harm their parents; they simply don’t know what they are doing. As a parent, this can be very frustrating, especially if something painful happens; however, as parents, we are called to respond out of our *affections* of love, and not out of our *passions* of pain. In other words, we cannot strike back to get

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<sup>13</sup> Thomas Dixon, *From Passions to Emotions: The Creation of a Secular Psychological Category* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

<sup>14</sup> Thomas Dixon, “Emotion’: The History of a Keyword in Crisis,” *Emotion Review* 4, no. 4 (October 1, 2012): 338–344.

even; we must rather “turn the other cheek.” I once saw a video of an elderly father interacting with his grown son, who had significant mental and physical disabilities. One of the ways those disabilities manifested themselves was that the son was physically aggressive in the way he related to his father when he got excited. This father gently and patiently stopped his son from causing any harm, but his eyes were absolutely locked on his son in warmth and love. Even though he defended himself from harm, he wasn’t offended, embarrassed, or angered by his son’s actions. He bore it all without even a trace of passionate anger, but entirely through his affections.

### **Affectionate Love (Matt. 5:40–41)**

Jesus continues with three other applications that further depict the kind of responses from the heart that the law demands. First, Jesus says, “And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well” (v. 40). Now, as we have seen, Jesus is not teaching that we must enable any kind of evil behavior. As Calvin writes, “None but a fool will stand upon the words, so as to maintain, that we must yield to our opponents what they demand, before coming into a court of law: for such compliance would more strongly inflame the minds of wicked men to robbery and extortion; and we know, that nothing was farther from the design of Christ.”<sup>15</sup> Rather, Jesus is teaching us about the disposition of our heart in such times of trial. Our natural (sinful) tendency is to withdraw from such people who would hurt us, forever distrusting and turning against them, however secretly, in our hearts. Rather, we must maintain a disposition that is continually ready to give to those who have hurt us in the past: “we have no right to hate the person who tries to deprive us of our possessions. Love even toward him should fill our hearts and reveal itself in our actions.”<sup>16</sup>

Second, Jesus says, “And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles” (v. 41). Such requisitions were somewhat common, so that we see the same word appear to describe how the Romans made Simon of Cyrene carry Jesus’ cross (Matt. 27:32; Mark 15:21).<sup>17</sup> No one likes to be drafted into service—not to carry a criminal’s cross, not for military service, and not even for jury duty. While we may begrudgingly submit ourselves to such tasks, Jesus is probing our hearts. Lenski once again brings up the issue of the passions of our hearts as we endure under such suffering: “In this way Jesus graphically depicts the disciple’s mastery over his own heart and will in keeping himself free from the natural bitter passions to which sin makes us prone.”<sup>18</sup> The law demands control not only over our actions, but our attitudes.

Third, Jesus says, “Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you” (v. 42). Once again, the heart’s willing response “not [to] refuse” the one asking is the primary target of Jesus’ words here. There are indeed times when we should not give, because some “helping” can actually have the opposite effect of *hurting*.<sup>19</sup> As Calvin writes, “it is certain, that it was the design of Christ to make his disciples generous, but not prodigals and it would be a foolish

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<sup>15</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 1:299.

<sup>16</sup> Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 310.

<sup>17</sup> Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 311.

<sup>18</sup> Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 243.

<sup>19</sup> Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert, *When Helping Hurts: How to Alleviate Poverty Without Hurting the Poor...and Yourself*, New ed. (Chicago, IL: Moody, 2014).

prodigality to scatter at random what the Lord has given us....Christ exhorts his disciples to be liberal and generous; and...to study to be kind to all, and not to be weary of giving, so long as they have the means.”<sup>20</sup> If my children ask for something evil, I am entirely justified in withholding it from them from love. If, on the other hand, my children ask for bread, it is wicked to give them a stone simply because they have gotten on my nerves (Matt. 7:9). Moses was in the right when he both railed at the people for their idolatry and then pleaded for God to forgive them (Ex. 32:19–34); however, he was in the wrong when he railed at them for their thirst, even though they expressed that thirst through grumbling against him (Num. 20:10–13).

## Discussion Questions

1. What did the *lex talionis* (“law of retaliation”) legislation require? Why does *lex talionis* bring wisdom and justice to the public system of justice? How had the Pharisees perverted *lex talionis* by turning the principle toward private grievances. What does the law say about private vengeance (Lev. 19:18; Prov. 20:22; 24:29)? On what basis, then, did the Pharisees expand the provisions of *lex talionis* into private grievances? How do we justify private vengeance?
2. What do we mean when we talk about “emotions”? What does the more precise category of “passions” teach us about the suffering of our soul in response to both injuries and insults? Why do our passions burn so hot when we are insulted—often far beyond what would be proportionate to the actual injury we suffered (e.g., a back-handed slap to the cheek)? Why does Jesus teach that the law forbids such passions toward retribution against the one who has wronged us?
3. Why is it such good news that God is “without...passions” (WCF 2.1)? What would change about God if he experienced the kinds of passions that we do? When the Son of God became incarnate as the man Jesus Christ, what kind of passions did he suffer: passive or active? What kinds of passions do we suffer? To what degree is our suffering passive and innocent, like Jesus? To what degree is our suffering active, from the motions of our corruption of sin?
4. What is the difference between passions and affections? How are our affections related to our reason/understanding/wisdom and our wills? What does it mean for God to have affections, but not passions? Why are right affections central to understanding what Jesus means when he tells us to give our cloak with our tunic, to walk an extra mile, and to avoid refusing the one who would borrow from us? How do we gain these right affections?

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<sup>20</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 1:301.