

The Sermon on the Mount: A Reformed Exposition

Chapter 19: The Fifth Antithesis—Christ’s Teaching on Personal Retaliation

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Ye have heard that it hath been said, “An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth”: But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if any man will sue thee at the law, and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloak also. And whosoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him twain. Give to him that asketh thee, and from him that would borrow of thee turn not thou away (Mt. 5:38-42).

In the fifth antithesis, Jesus turns His attention to another abuse of a judicial law. As the Jews at that time were abusing the Mosaic regulations regarding divorce and oaths, they had also misconstrued the “eye for an eye,” “tooth for a tooth” principle regarding restitution and retaliation. This principle has come to be known by the Latin phrase, *lex talionis*, or “law of retaliation.” The English word, “retaliate,” originated from the same Roman root word for “*talionis*.” Unfortunately, the modern usage of the word “retaliation” is more narrow than the older English usage and retaliation is now *only* associated with revenge, getting even or returning evil for evil. Thus, many scholars, commentators and pastors view the principle of *lex talionis* as primitive and barbaric. But according to the earlier usage of the word, it “conveyed a broader meaning” *to pay back or return in kind*, including good will.”¹ The point of this statute was that the penalty must fit the crime; that justice must be applied in the same manner to all. We will see that the Jews had taken a law for the judges of Israel, had illegitimately applied it to personal vendettas and were not applying the principle equally to all. They perverted the original intent of this law in virtually every possible way.

As we examine this section of the Sermon on the Mount, we need to remind ourselves that in this passage Jesus is not announcing a higher standard of ethics or jurisprudence than Moses. He is not introducing something new which is more spiritual and merciful than was required under the Old Covenant administration. Rather, once again, He is correcting a gross, false interpretation and abuse of the original intent of God’s holy law. “He continues the same course as He had followed in the context, namely to define that righteousness demanded of His followers, which was more excellent than the one taught and practiced by the scribes and Pharisees; and this He does by exposing their error and expounding the spirituality of the moral law.”² In our study we will consider three areas. First, what is the Old Testament teaching on this topic? Second, how were the scribes and Pharisees abusing it? Third, what is the Savior’s remedy or solution to the false teaching on this topic?

¹ Gary North, *Tools of Dominion: The Case Law of Exodus* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1990), 387.

² Arthur W. Pink, *An Exposition of the Sermon on the Mount*, 109.

The Teaching of the Old Testament on Retaliation

As in the first two antitheses, the position of the scribes and Pharisees is set forth by quoting verbatim from the Old Testament Scriptures. Jesus does not *directly* state how the rabbis were perverting the Word of God, but rather quotes the passage being abused and then sets forth the proper interpretation and application of it. The expression, “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,” is found in three Old Testament passages (Ex. 21:24; Lev. 24:20; Dt. 19:21). In Exodus the *lex talionis* comes in the midst of a series of judgments dealing with personal injuries caused by unlawful violence and callousness. In context it reads, “If men fight, and hurt a woman with child, so that she gives birth prematurely, yet no harm follows, he shall surely be punished accordingly as the woman’s husband imposes on him; and he shall pay as the judges determine. But if any harm follows, then you shall give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe” (Ex. 21:22-25). Like the passage in Exodus, the one in Leviticus comes in a section dealing with the penalties for killing and injuring unlawfully. “If a man causes disfigurement of his neighbor, as he has done, so shall it be done to him—‘fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth’; as he has caused disfigurement of a man, so shall it be done to him” (Lev. 24:19-20). The passage in Deuteronomy is concerned with the proper punishment for a false witness in a court of law. A false witness was to be charged on the basis of his false accusation before the judges. “And the judges shall make careful inquiry, and indeed, if the witness is a false witness, who has testified falsely against his brother, then you are to do to him as he thought to have done to his brother; so you shall put away the evil from among you. And those who remain shall hear and fear, and hereafter they shall not again commit such evil among you. Your eye shall not pity: life shall be for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot.” (19:18-21). Regarding the Old Testament use of the *lex talionis*, there are a number of things to note.

First, the *lex talionis* was given specifically for civil law courts and was never intended as a rule for personal retaliation. In Exodus, the judges, in consultation with the victim, render the penalty. The law of restitution and retaliation is determined by the court sometimes in consultation with the victim. The point of these laws was to eliminate personal revenge, which was often chaotic, arbitrary and all out of due proportion to the offense, and get everyone involved before lawful civil authorities, so biblical justice could be administered publicly and fairly. This point is also clear from Deuteronomy 19:17-18 where the parties in the dispute stand before “the priests and judges who are in office in those days.” That is, the central tribunal, located at the sanctuary of the Lord. The judges would carefully investigate the evidence and pass judgment on the basis of their findings. This leaves no room for vigilantes, acts of personal revenge or the taking of the law into our own hands. Thus, we see that the rather common idea of the *lex talionis* being a primitive, barbarian form of legislation is a myth. The legislation was a great advancement of justice, law and order over the common practice of the private vendetta that preceded it.

Second, the point of the *lex talionis* was justice or equitable restitution. The concern of these laws was to make sure that the punishment fit the crime. Because human beings are created in the image of God, Jehovah demands restitution for crimes against his image-bearer. If the proper repayment in kind is not forthcoming, then injustice prevails in the land. The victim, or the family members who survive the victim, understand that a convicted criminal who is not forced to make proper restitution has escaped true justice. The law of retaliation thus limits the individual or family member so that they do not impose their own arbitrary penalty rooted in

anger and a strong desire for revenge. Note also that it limits the civil magistrate so that officers of the state do not overstep their authority and impose sanctions that are either too lenient or too harsh. “It is God’s law that must be enforced, and this law establishes criteria of evidence and a standard of justice. This standard is ‘an eye for an eye.’ A popular slogan in the modern world promotes a parallel judicial principle: ‘The punishment should fit the crime.’”³ The effect of the *lex talionis* is to keep sinful human beings from making up arbitrary rules of punishment that are unjust. The man who serves a seven year sentence for first degree murder and then is set free has not made proper restitution to the victim or his family. Biblical justice says he must die, “life for life.” Likewise, the person who serves ten years in prison for possessing a marijuana cigarette has received a gross injustice; his penalty was far too harsh. Without proper restitution and just punishments, there can be no justice in society.

The Western nations have abandoned the concept of the *lex talionis* which they believe is primitive and barbaric for the concept of reforming or rehabilitating criminals in the prison system with counseling and education. Many misguided professing Christians took part in the transition to the prison system because they believed that in the New Covenant era justice should be tempered with mercy. The result has been the abandonment of victims’ rights and a great increase in crime. The shift toward rehabilitative theory and away from simple justice by the humanistic paternalistic state has caused great injury to victims and their families and has resulted in a vast multitude of new victims. Consequently, we should note the words of Solomon that “the tender mercies of the wicked are cruel” (Pr. 12:10). Professing Christians who think that mercy somehow trumps justice in the New Covenant era should note that: (1) When he was before Festus Paul said, “If I am an offender, or have committed anything worthy of death, I do not object to dying” (Ac. 25:11); (2) According to the apostle, homosexuals and lesbians have committed acts “deserving of death” (Rom. 1:32); (3) Paul, writing under divine inspiration says, “Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap” (Gal. 6:7); (4) God required strict justice in that He did not overlook sin, but had His only begotten Son pay the full penalty for it on the cross; and, (5) Jesus is not objecting to the *lex talionis* itself which God Himself implemented, but to the perversion of it by the scribes and Pharisees.

To those who strongly object to the *lex talionis*, as defined by biblical law we ask: What is wrong with making the punishment correspond exactly to the original infraction? This biblical teaching on punishment not only obviously meets all the demands of justice (biblically defined), but also is perfectly logical. If the punishment is made to fit the crime—no more and no less, then who has reason to complain? Moreover, if the punishment does *not* fit the crime (which is common today), then on what basis has it been relaxed or made more stringent? If it has been relaxed on the basis of purely human ideas of justice and rehabilitation, then do we not have an

³ Gary North, *Tools of Dominion*, 392. The Hammurabi Code, which many natural law advocates point to as an example of justice, required the death penalty for a thief who had sworn that he had not stolen. It also required a 30-fold restitution for any animals stolen from the state (*Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, 166; see Gary North, 394, footnote 40). In the case of the accidental death of a child in a fight between two men, unlike the Bible which required the violent man to die, the Hammurabi Code required that one of the guilty man’s children be put to death. This is obviously unjust. The Muslim Shari’a law is also unjust, in that a thief (even a young pickpocket) has his hand cut off if convicted. People rightly regard such a practice as barbaric because the punishment obviously grossly exceeds the severity of the loss originally caused to the victim by the thief. What people need to realize, however, is that if they regard the Bible’s system of *lex talionis* as too harsh or limited to Israel or for an old dispensation, and consequently they believe that the state has a completely free hand in the area of sanctions for crimes, then they have no real reason to condemn the absurdly harsh penalties noted, as well as some of our modern absurdly lenient penalties (e.g., the young woman who spent three months in a mental hospital after shooting her husband in the face with a shotgun).

addition to Scripture? Do we not have a displacement of God's Word on this matter for human opinions and philosophies? Indeed, we do. Sometimes even a pagan king can have more common sense and an understanding of justice than those in authority in our modern, supposedly sophisticated culture. Note the words of Adoni-bezek after the victorious Israelites "cut off his thumbs and big toes": "Seventy kings with their thumbs and big toes cut off used to gather scraps under my table; as I have done, so God has repaid me" (Judg. 1:7).

Third, the *lex talionis* taught equality before the law. The judges are not permitted to give a more severe penalty for a poor man or non-Jewish sojourner than to a rich man who is notable in his community. As the old saying goes, "true justice is blind." It has no regard for race, class, status or connections. The law is not to be a weapon of the rich against the poor or the poor against the rich. This point is very important because people have a sinful tendency to treat certain kinds of people more harshly or leniently than others. In our modern society people who are white, rich and famous often receive a more favorable outcome than men who are poor, black and uneducated. In civil trials where money is involved, rich people and large corporations often receive absurdly unjust judgments in poor communities. The law of just retribution and equitable restitution eliminates such sinful practices. The principle of *lex talionis* guards society from injustice.

This point is seen clearly in passages that deal with master-servant relationships and with sojourners. If a master lost his temper and caused physical harm to his servant, the servant would go free and the master would lose a very large investment. "Who can fail to see, then, that such a law placed a merciful restraint upon the passions of owners and made for the safeguarding of the persons of their slaves."⁴ Regarding the foreigner or stranger the law says, "And if a stranger dwells with you in your land, you shall not mistreat him. The stranger who dwells among you shall be to you as one born among you, and you shall love him as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God" (Lev. 20:33-34). After describing the *lex talionis* and several examples of how it applies the law says, "You shall have the same law for the stranger and one from your own country; for I am the LORD your God" (Lev. 24:22).

Fourth, the *lex talionis* biblically applied would be a great good for society by striking terror into evildoers and restraining criminal lawlessness in general. It would preserve law and order in a community by meting out the appropriate punishments on evildoers and giving justice and restitution to victims. Paul says that rulers are supposed to be a terror to those who practice evil (Rom. 13:3). They are described as ministers of God, as Jehovah's avengers to execute wrath on those who commit crimes (Rom. 13:4). We are told that they do not bear the sword of violence and execution toward criminals in vain (Rom. 12:4). The civil magistrate can express God's holy wrath and represent God's vengeance against criminals on behalf of the innocent, the weak, the law-abiding and especially the victim. "Thus so far from this law being a cruel and barbarous one, it was a most just, merciful and beneficent one, calculated to remove 'evil' and produce that which is good...let it be pointed out that this law of judicial retaliation ought to be on our statute books today and impartially and firmly enforced by our magistrates. Nothing would so effectually check the rapidly rising tide of crimes of violence. But alas, so foolish and effeminate is the present generation that an increasing number are agitating for the abolition of capital punishment...."⁵

When the state seeks to be more merciful than God and substitutes "rehabilitation" or a stay in prison for godly vengeance, restitution and restoration, degenerates are pampered and

⁴ Arthur W. Pink, *An Exposition of the Sermon on the Mount*, 111.

⁵ *Ibid*, 111-112.

law-abiding citizens suffer. The root cause of this situation is the sad fact that most churches no longer preach on the civic function of God's law. The moral case laws are believed to be for the Jewish nation only. Consequently, law-makers and judges are ruled by positivistic laws, by human philosophies, sentimentalism and pragmatic considerations. Christianity's influence over jurisprudence in Europe and America has increasingly been replaced by secular humanism. The greatest guide for suppressing criminal lawlessness in society has been set aside and replaced with autonomous man's experiments. Nebulous concepts of natural law and emotional appeals to old-fashioned family values have not put a dent in the machinery of secularism. Many churches in America are so bad that they deliberately will not preach on the justice, holiness and wrath of God and instead only speak about God's love and mercy. The doctrine of the final judgment and hell has also been pushed into the background. Further, the widespread acceptance of pluralism has had the effect of leavening evangelical churches with the thoroughly unbiblical idea that Christ's rule does not extend beyond the four walls of the church or the prayer closet. Thus, many modern Christians willingly contribute to the spread of atheistic ideas in the civic realm in the name of pietism. Therefore, we need revival in the churches and a return to Christ's teaching on the law.

The Scribes' and Pharisees' Perversion of the *Lex Talionis*

We have seen that the biblical law regarding retaliation was just, fair and superior to the practices of the ancient and modern world. But the scribes and Pharisees had misinterpreted this teaching and had applied it in a number of ways that were contrary to the spirit and letter of Scripture. Note the following errors.

First, they took a teaching that was explicitly designed to be used only by the civil magistrate and applied it to personal conflicts. Many of the Jews at that time regarded personal revenge for being wronged as a right and even a duty based on a misreading of the *lex talionis*. Thus, the very law designed to completely remove personal vendettas from society had been turned upside down by the teaching of the rabbis. What was supposed to bring law and order had been twisted to bring vigilantism, violence and disorder, instead of a just restitution determined by the careful deliberation of a court. Violence flowed from anger and hatred. The Jewish perversion of the *lex talionis* produced lawlessness, fear, injustice and unending conflicts.

In this abuse of the law, like the previous abuses, we see a distinct pattern emerging. The scribes and Pharisees were interpreting the law in a way that catered to the people's sinful lusts and practices. Because of our sinful natures we do not like to defer matters to a court, but would much rather take vengeance into our own hands. The leaders did not challenge the people's corrupt behavior by preaching the true intent of the law, but rather supported their wicked practices with sophisticated argumentation. Corrupt teachers reinforce human traditions rather than challenge them. This sad reality is just as true now as it was then.

Second, the biblical teaching of equality before the law was rejected for an unjust, racist concept of justice. For example, the law required "life for life" and, unlike other offenses where it was likely that a monetary compensation to the victim could be substituted for the severing of a limb, homicide absolutely required death in every case (cf. Num. 35:31). But the rabbis taught that the death penalty applied only if a Jew killed another Jew. If he killed a foreigner or a heathen, then the death penalty was not required. The great medieval Jewish scholars also supported this perversion of Scripture: "If an Israelite kills a resident alien, he does not suffer capital punishment at the hands of the court, because Scripture says, *And if a man come*

presumptuously upon his neighbor (Exodus 21:12). Needless to say, one is not put to death if he kills a heathen.”⁶ In other words, a heathen is not regarded by the rabbinical traditions to be a neighbor. Therefore, the justice and proper restitution of the law does not apply to them.

In this behavior the Jews were acting in a way that was consistent with their fallen depraved natures. They were well known for their hatred and mistreatment of non-Jews. “A heathen historian, speaking of the Jews, says, ‘They readily show compassion to their own countrymen, but they bear to all others the hatred of an enemy’ [Tacitus, History v.5]; and the apostle Paul describes them as ‘contrary to all men, forbidding us to speak to the Gentiles that they might be saved.’”⁷ What was true of the Jews was true also of virtually all nations at that time. It is true of all racists in our time whether white or black. Biblical law had a solution for racist laws in the south over three thousand years before the civil government in the United States began to even seriously deal with that problem.

Third, from our Lord’s antithesis we can deduce that the scribes and Pharisees were applying the *lex talionis* to personal offenses that were not defined in Scripture as crimes. They were using the law of retaliation as an excuse for hatred and contempt of others. They turned it into a “tit for tat” positive command to get even over issues that should be left alone or covered over in love. Thus, many of the Jews became obsessed with getting even over every little offense.

Jesus’ Corrective Teaching

In His reply, our Lord does not contradict the law of retaliation, but rather emphasizes that in our *personal relationships* our duty is not to retaliate. Christ says, “But I tell you not to 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 away your tunic, let him have your cloak also. And whoever compels you to go one mile, go with him two. Give to him who asks you, and him who wants to borrow from you do not turn away” (Mt. 5:39-42). There are a number of things to note regarding the Redeemer’s antithesis.

First, what does Jesus mean when He says not to resist an evil person? This is an important question because this passage is a chief proof text for pacifism, or the idea that self-defense, the use of police, and even armies in defensive warfare, is always wrong for the Christian. “Perhaps the most famous advocate of this position was the great novelist Leo Tolstoy, who believed that to have soldiers, or police, or even magistrates is unchristian. Evil, he maintained, is not to be resisted; for Christ’s way is not to resist evil in any sense.”⁸ There are a number of variations of this position, some of which are not as extreme as that of Tolstoy. The position of extreme pacifism is unbiblical, dangerous and evil. There are a number of reasons why it is not taught in this passage.

(1) If we follow the analogy of Scripture and let the clear teaching of the Bible in many other places shed light on our passage, then the pacifist interpretation is rendered impossible. For example, the law of God is full of passages which tell the civil magistrate to resist evil crimes with violence under certain circumstances. There were several crimes punishable by the death penalty (e.g., murder, adultery, homosexuality, bestiality, kidnapping, rape of a betrothed woman, etc.). Further, a man could defend his own life and property with deadly force if a thief

⁶ Moses Maimonides, *The Book of Torts* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, [188-] 1954), 11:201.

⁷ John Brown, *Discourses and Sayings of Our Lord*, 1:215.

⁸ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, 1:275.

broke into or is discovered breaking into his house (Ex. 22:2). Also, a reading of Scripture demonstrates that there is such a thing as a just and necessary war. Not to stand up to someone like Adolf Hitler would not be virtuous, but evil. All of this renders the pacifist interpretation completely absurd.

(2) The pacifist viewpoint is founded upon the false interpretation that Christ is not refuting the erroneous explanations of the scribes and Pharisees, but is speaking against the law of Moses itself. They presuppose that the Savior is setting up a new, better law in its place. We have previously noted that such a view is completely untenable given the immediate and broader context of Scripture. Further, Paul certainly rejected the pacifist view since he argued that the civil magistrate is to be a terror to evildoers because he does not bear *the sword* (i.e. the instrument of punishment and execution) in vain (cf. Rom. 13:1-4). Moreover, if our Lord was teaching that all resistance to evil was completely wrong, then why did the disciples carry with them two swords (Lk. 22:38)? These swords were carried in the Savior's presence.

Moreover, it is not hard to prove that our Lord's doctrine regarding the immorality of personal retaliation is taught in *both* Testaments. Solomon says, "Do not say, 'I will recompense evil'; wait for the LORD, and He will save you" (Pr. 20:22). When Paul discusses a believer's treatment of personal enemies in Romans 12:20, he quotes Proverbs 25:21-22 which reads, "If your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat; and if he is thirsty, give him water to drink; for so you will heap coals of fire on his head, and the LORD will reward you." "Rightly did one of the older writers say, when commenting on this passage... 'The law of love is not expounded more spiritually in any single precept either by Christ or His apostles than in this exhortation.'"⁹ Another excellent passage is Proverbs 24:29: "Do not say, 'I will do to him just as he has done to me; I will render to the man according to his work.'" In these personal offenses we are not to act on personal injuries, but are to place them in God's hands. "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord" (Rom. 12:9). The Proverbs reflect the Old Testament law which expressly forbids personal vengeance: "You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the children of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD" (Lev. 19:18). Personal retaliation is forbidden in every administration of the covenant of grace.

(3) The pacifist interpretation of not resisting evil is essentially an invitation to hand this whole world over to Satan and law breakers. Christ is not teaching that civil magistrates, courts, armies and police are to stand by and watch people commit mayhem, violence and murder toward the innocent. Such behavior would be wicked and unconscionable. But rather, He is speaking about a *personal* wrong toward a Christian individual that does not require self-defense or the intervention of the police. The Redeemer speaks of a slap with the back of the hand, not armed robbery, assault with a deadly weapon, rape or attempted murder. The pacifist interpretation completely ignores and overturns the many passages that speak of the civil magistrate's duty to stop crime.

Moreover, Jesus does not ask us to pretend that the insulting behavior is acceptable. He does not say that we are permitted to condone such behavior. He also does not command us to refuse to defend others who are in danger of violence from criminals. What He does not allow is *personal retaliation*. We are not permitted to take revenge on a person who wrongs us. This point is rather obvious when we consider the fact that when believers observe a sin in another Christian that is so serious that it cannot simply be covered over with love, they are commanded to follow the Matthew 19 process and confront the erring brother face to face. If the person

⁹ Arthur W. Pink, *An Exposition of the Sermon on the Mount*, 116.

doesn't repent, he is to go before the church court and is to be excommunicated if necessary. Clearly, such activity is a resistance to evil.

(4) The pacifist interpretation ignores the fact that Jesus Himself strongly resisted evil during His ministry. On two occasions when our Lord saw that the Temple area set aside for the Gentile had been turned into an area of commerce and fraud, He made a whip of cords and drove out the animals and overturned the tables of the moneychangers (Mt. 21:12-16; Mk. 11:15-17; Lk. 19:45-47; Jn. 2:13-16). He openly rebuked those who were committing evil. When our Lord was struck on the face during His trial He did not remain silent and turn the other cheek, but challenged the officer who struck Him (cf. Jn. 18:23). Although we never see the Redeemer condone or participate in retaliation, He did aggressively resist evil. He was not a pacifist. Further, in the case of the woman caught in adultery (cf. Jn. 8:1-11), Christ had no objection whatsoever to the death penalty for such a crime. He rejected the accusers as unlawful witnesses (Jn. 8:7). Also, from other passages we learn that Jesus refused to act as a judge during His earthly ministry (Jn. 12:47).

Second, Jesus follows His command not to resist an evil person with four mini-illustrations which explain how Christians are to put this command into practice. "They are vivid little cameos drawn from different life-situations. Each introduces a person (in the context a person who in some sense is 'evil') who seeks to do us an injury, one by hitting us in the face, another by prosecuting us at law, a third by commandeering our service and a fourth by begging money from us."¹⁰ These illustrations confirm the interpretation that resisting evil refers to avoiding personal retaliation or returning evil for evil. We will examine each of these mini-illustrations in turn.

The first illustration refers to a slap on the right cheek. The mentioning of the right cheek is deliberate and is intended to inform the audience that this was a blow not in self-defense or even in a fight, but was a slap intended as an insult. Using the palm of the hand, a right handed man facing another man will virtually always hit the left side of the face. But when a man in that culture insulted another man he would usually strike him with the *back* of the hand thus hitting the right side of the face. Interestingly, "according to Jewish Rabbinic law to hit a man with the *back* of the hand was twice as insulting as to hit him with the *flat* of the hand. So, then, what Jesus is saying is this: 'Even if a man should direct at you the most deadly and calculating insult, you must on no account retaliate, and you must on no account resent it.'"¹¹

The expression, "turn the other cheek," is a figure of speech which means that the Christian is not to respond in kind, but rather is to patiently bear the insult. He is not to avenge the injury either physically or verbally. It is totally wrong to view this expression as an invitation to the wicked person to go ahead and strike the other cheek. Indeed, it would be wrong to tempt the aggressor to repeat the offense. It is simply a way of instructing the disciples that they need to be willing to endure further insults calmly and peaceably, without any retaliation. We are not to encourage more insults, but are to discourage them with a loving demeanor. This is the teaching of the whole New Testament. As Paul says, "Repay no one evil for evil. Have regard for good things in the sight of all men. If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men. Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, 'Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,' says the Lord. Therefore, 'if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in so doing you will heap coals of fire on his head.' Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Rom. 12:17-21). As followers of Jesus and

¹⁰ John R. W. Stott, *Christian Counter Culture*, 106.

¹¹ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 1:166.

as those associated with His holy name, we are to conduct ourselves in such a way as to confound our enemies and glorify God. We must “love our enemies” (Mt. 5:44; Lk. 6:27).

The great wisdom of our Lord’s statement is seen in the following observations.

(1) Turning the other cheek nips further aggression in the bud and promotes peace in society. The old saying, “it takes two to tango,” certainly applies to argumentation, coarse jesting, insulting tirades and degrading hand gestures. When one person not only does not respond in kind, but acts in a calm, reasonable, loving manner, situations of hostility are usually disarmed. “There is one who speaks like the piercings of a sword, but the tongue of the wise promotes health” (Pr. 12:18). “Pleasant words are like a honeycomb, sweetness to the soul and health to the bones” (Pr. 16:24).

(2) As a despised and persecuted minority in a heathen culture, such behavior would demonstrate to all the love, peaceableness and law-abiding nature of Christians. Believers were despised in the Roman Empire. They were slanderously called cannibals and anti-social incendiaries. They were falsely accused of gross immorality because of their practice of closed communion. The Redeemer’s instructions were very practical and necessary in that hostile environment. In our own time when paganism and immorality is growing by leaps and bounds, believers must be prepared to receive insults and mockery with a spirit of meekness and love.

(3) Such behavior will greatly aid the cause of the gospel because a reaction of peace, control and kindness is exactly the opposite of what people expect under such circumstances. It causes people to think, “What is it about that person that makes him different than others?” There have been examples in church history where people who struck Christians or mistreated them in other ways were led to examine the gospel and believe in Christ because the abused believer’s response was so unusual and unexpected. We need to look at insults by the heathen as an opportunity to make a deep impression upon them for our Savior.

(4) A reaction of non-retaliation demonstrates faith in God and His justice. We do not take vengeance into our own hands because we know that God protects His children; if any retribution is deserved God will take care of it in His own time and manner. “Vengeance is Mine, I will repay says the Lord” (Rom. 12:19; Dt. 32:35). Interestingly, when Paul was slanderously attacked by certain people in the church at Corinth, he was so assured of God’s just judgment and vindication that he acted as if he was almost completely unconcerned. He says, “But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by a human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself” (1 Cor. 4:3). The apostle had such a strong faith in Christ and His judgment of all things that unjust criticisms of his ministry did not unhinge him. He had become indifferent to the unfair attacks and insults of men. Beloved, all of us need to develop that faith-saturated mindset. It takes a strong faith to remain silent under the abuse of the wicked pagans and sometimes even by hypocritical professing Christians.

(5) To act without personal retaliation is to imitate our Lord and take up His cross. When Peter instructs Christian slaves, he commands them to be submissive even to harsh or cruel masters saying, “For this is commendable, if because of conscience toward God one endures grief, suffering wrongfully. For what credit is it if, when you are beaten for your faults, you take it patiently? But when you do good and suffer, if you take it patiently, this is commendable before God. For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that should follow His steps: Who committed no sin, nor was deceit found in His mouth; who when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously” (1 Pet. 2:19-23). The Christian answer to

unjust suffering is to follow the Savior's pattern and endure suffering by continuing to do good. Such behavior, accompanied by the gospel, is the most powerful way to overcome evil.

With the second illustration Jesus turns His attention from a personal insult toward an attack on one's possessions. "If anyone wants to sue you and take away your tunic, let him have your cloak also" (Mt. 5:40). The tunic (*chiton*) was the long cotton or linen inner garment which was worn next to the body. It was relatively inexpensive and even poor Jews would have a change of tunics. The cloak was the long outer garment that looked somewhat like a modern robe. It was made of a thicker more expensive material and was used as a blanket at night. Most Jews would only have one cloak. The cloak was such an important piece of clothing that if it was taken in a pledge it had to be restored before sundown (cf. Ex. 22:26-27). Christ says that if a man takes you to court and goes after your tunic (the inexpensive inner garment), then do not fight the lawsuit, but settle immediately and even give him the cloak also if it will bring the lawsuit to an end.

To understand the point that our Lord is making here, it is important to note that like the first example of a slap, this court case is over a trivial matter: the inexpensive inner garment. Therefore, just as the illustration of the personal insult does *not justify refusing* to defend oneself from an attack against life or limb; this illustration does *not* mean that if someone attempts to unjustly take away our car that we should hand over our house also. Jesus is teaching that a Christian who is unfairly accused over a *minor matter* by a hostile heathen should not enter into time consuming and costly litigation over it. It would be wiser to hand over one's cloak and be done with the whole affair than insist on one's rights.

There are probably two reasons that lie behind the Savior's illustration. a) Christians living in a hostile pagan culture would be wise to suffer minor personal loss than stir up contention with adversaries. If a believer in such a scenario insists on his rights, it is possible that he will win the case; but in the process he may make many enemies. Such an outcome would not be good for the Christian community and it would make the spread of the gospel more difficult. By not insisting on our rights in such a situation we are following the instruction of Paul who said, "If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men" (Rom. 12:18). b) It is better to suffer the minor loss of personal things than to be distressed in spirit. Getting into a legal battle over trifles will not be good for one's inward tranquility. Further, such a battle can lead to anger and the temptation to get even. And it is personal retaliation that we are to avoid at all costs. "Nothing more surely unfits us for the pursuit of holiness than a heart which is resentful at and contentious with others. Angry passions and the workings of a spirit of revenge disqualify us for the worship of God. Meekness and lowliness of heart are the graces which we particularly need to learn of Christ."¹² Therefore, we must be willing to suffer loss so that we can move on with a clear mind to the service of Christ.

The third illustration involved being compelled into service by the state. "And whoever compels you to go one mile, go with him two" (Mt. 5:41). The word for compel (*aggareuein*) is a word that originally came from the Persian language. It would be applied to any man who would be ordered to help an official Persian *courier* (noun, *aggareus*) or messenger get his documents from one place to another. In the context of our Lord's audience, it referred to any kind of forced impressments into service of the Jews by the Romans, usually the military. In countries under Roman occupation the armies had the authority to force citizens to carry supplies for a certain distance. The same word is used when it says that Simon of Cyrene was *compelled* (*aggareuein*) to carry the Savior's cross (Mt. 27:32).

¹² Arthur W. Pink, *An Exposition of the Sermon on the Mount*, 124.

What Jesus is teaching here is very radical. In essence it means: “Even if the pagan occupying Roman soldiers order you to carry their food and gear for one mile, you need to not only comply with this order, but I want you to do it without any rancor or hatred or resentment. I want you to render this service with a friendly cheerful disposition.” The Jews at that time would obey such orders, but they only did so at the point of a sword or spear. Also, while they did it, they seethed with anger, bitterness and hatred against the Romans. They no doubt had all sorts of thoughts of retaliation against these hated oppressors. Christ tells His disciples that they need to be very different than their countrymen. Their righteousness must exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees.

Although, as modern Christians, we may not be compelled to do anything at the point of a spear, there are situations that are compatible to this illustration. If we happen to work for a boss that is ill-tempered and unreasonable, then we must not harbor hatred and resentment toward that person; but must cheerfully and faithfully obey our employer. We are to do our duty cheerfully as unto the Lord and not unto men. Moreover, the Christian is to take a humble, non-confrontational position toward the state. This does not mean that men should not preach against sin or that preachers cannot biblically critique the sinful public actions of a civil magistrate. But, in the day to day encounters with the state, believers should be friendly and cooperative with authorities. Christians ought to be the best citizens. Peter writes, “Having your conduct honorable among the Gentiles, that when they speak against you as evildoers, they may, by your good works which they observe, glorify God in the day of visitation. Therefore submit yourself to every ordinance of man for the Lord’s sake, whether to the king as supreme, or to governors, as to those who are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers and for the praise of those who do good. For this is the will of God, that by doing good you may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men” (1 Pet. 2:12-15). Christians should assist the police and military and should obey the law unless they are asked to commit sin. Once again, we see that the position of doing good instead of retaliating is one of great wisdom and peace. To insist on personal rights and to have a contrary spirit over insignificant things hurts the Christian community and can impede the open preaching of the gospel.

In the last illustration Jesus, sets forth the Christian response to those who ask for something or need to borrow money. “Give to him who asks you, and him who wants to borrow from you do not turn away” (Mt. 5:42). Here our Lord teaches that, in the case of a Christian with a real need, we must not callously turn them away; to the best of our ability we should assist them liberally and magnanimously. We must be cheerful givers. As with all these illustrations, it is important that we interpret them within the broader teaching of Scripture. If we do not do this, then this passage could be used as a proof text for indiscriminate giving and the subsidizing of wickedness. It would be immoral for a Christian to hand money over to a drunkard or drug addict so he could feed his wicked addiction. Paul says that if a man is not willing to work, then he should not eat (2 Thess. 3:10). He instructs younger widows to be cared for by their families so they will not be a burden to the church (1 Tim. 5:16). If believers (literally in every single case) had to give money to those who asked, then they themselves would soon be in poverty and would be unable to help anyone. Obviously, our Lord is speaking against a selfish, harsh, arrogant refusal. We should be kind and give in the proper circumstances instead of causing unnecessary strife by responding obnoxiously. Let us lend with love and compassion in the name of Christ. “A good man deals graciously and lends; he will guide his affairs with discretion” (Ps. 112:5).

