

RESPONDING LIKE JESUS TO PERSONAL MISTREATMENT

Matthew 5:38-48 - "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' [39] 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. [40] And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. [41] And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. [42] Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you. [43] "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' [44] But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, [45] so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. [46] For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? [47] And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? [48] You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect."

At the beginning of this sermon Jesus talked about His disciples *shining like a distinct light in a dark place* - **Matthew 5:14-16** - "You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. [15] Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. The principle of *contrast* was so central and vivid in His mind. Perhaps the most visible difference in the eyes of our watching world is the attitude of the disciple to those who mistreat him. Because the reaction of the world is so *standardly* mean and vengeful, the disciple has his best chance to shine in love, patience and forgiveness. In fact, Jesus said that the love the disciples showed would be the badge by which they would be known - **John 13:35** - "By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." Today's text tells us exactly what *kind* of love witnesses so distinctly to Christ.

- 1) **THE OT LAW UNDER DISCUSSION WAS A JUDICIAL LAW** - It was legislated in the courts (**Exodus 21:23-25**) and enforced before judges (**Deuteronomy 19:15-21**). The purpose of this law, like most of the OT laws discussed in the Sermon on the Mount, was to *ensure proper justice among fallen people*. It would help criminals to think twice before committing crimes - they knew in advance there was a penalty to be paid and that it would be quickly meted out. It also helped protect weak or innocent people from those who would arbitrarily inflict too high a penalty for some accidental hurt or damage. In short, the law was given, in this temporary theocracy, to put limits on human sin.

This law ruled our *arbitrary vengeance for wrongs committed*. This is a very important point in understanding Jesus' words in His sermon. He came to *fulfill the original intent of the command of God not just to put a leash on human sin, but to change the motives and desires of our fallen hearts*.

- 2) **THE PHARISEES WERE USING THIS JUDICIAL LAW TO INSURE THEIR RIGHT TO GET EVEN IN PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS**. In other words, what the law was designed to *prohibit*, they were using it to *enforce*. They made sure they exacted their pound of flesh for any injury done to them, and without the law or the courts. To them, the law of an eye for an eye meant, "You spit on me and I can spit on you" - "You steal from me and I can steal from you", etc. They were randomly using the law to *settle old scores and get even with those they didn't like*.

It's this *spirit of retaliation* that Jesus was forbidding. He saw into their *hearts* as He sees into yours and mine. No use of the law could cover up their lack of conformity to the spirit Jesus had described in the beatitudes (**especially Matthew 5:9-11** - "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God. [10] "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. [11] "Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account."

- 3) **WE MUST REMEMBER THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN THE DISCIPLE'S BEHAVIOR IN HIS PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS AND THE CITIZEN'S BEHAVIOR UNDER JUDICIAL GOVERNMENT** - Both are talked about in the Scriptures and *different rules* apply to each, though with the same goal in mind:
 - a) **The disciple and personal relationships** - That is the subject Jesus is dealing with in the sermon on the mount. Notice that all of the commands given in **verses 38-49** are *one-on-one, personal "YOU" commands*. I must not take the task of striking back for personal mistreatment into my own hands. I am not in charge of sticking up for my own rights - no more than Jesus stuck up for His own rights on the cross.

This is the same teaching that Paul gives in **Romans 12:17-21** - "Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. [18] If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. [19] 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." [20] 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." [21] Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

The Christian isn't to take into his own hands what God has said is His job alone. The Christian doesn't *ignore wrong doing, pretending that it doesn't exist*. Rather, he has the faith to *understand and trust that God is ultimately in control, that all wrongs will be noted and justly dealt with*. The Christian can rely on the sovereign justice of almighty God because God doesn't ignore the sins committed by anyone in this life. The *cosmic eye-for-eye* takes place at the last judgement. Notice how Jesus underscores this in **Matthew 5:39** - "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." Whether or not I strike back, Jesus sees the person who strikes out as an *"evil person"*. None of the actions of this world go unnoted. All await judgement or reward.

- b) **The citizen and the law** - The Christian should have a passionate concern about justice for others - especially the weak or oppressed. *I'm to turn my own cheek, not my neighbor's cheek*. The Christian should support the *judging work of God in the form of law enforcers* **Romans 13:1-7** - "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. [2] Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. [3] For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, [4] for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer. [5] Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience. [6] For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are ministers of God, attending to this very thing. [7] Pay to all what is owed to them: taxes to whom taxes are owed, revenue to whom revenue is owed, respect to whom respect is owed, honor to whom honor is owed."

That is why, with the same concern for peace, Christian's should use *legal means to support justice for the unborn, the sexually harassed women, the rights of racial minorities against exploitation, etc*. This is the distinction that must always be kept in mind. I must have a passionate concern for the *legal protection of justice for others*. And I must *never use personal retaliation in the face of personal mistreatment*. It takes a fine-honed Christian conscience to remember the difference.

- 4) **WHY THE DISCIPLE DOESN'T STRIKE BACK IN REVENGE** - This patient, loving response isn't natural to any of us. There are specific truths that we must faithfully call to mind:
- a) **We are to model the kindness of God (Matthew 5:45)** - We were objects of God's kindness while we were enemies who disgraced His Name. We are not to have short memories.
- b) **We are to be mindful of future reward (Matthew 5:46-48)** - Jesus wasn't as embarrassed as we are to remind us of future reward for good deeds.
- c) **We are to remember the example of Jesus who suffered for our sins** - 1 Peter 2:21-23 - "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. [22] He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. [23] 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." Peter says Jesus didn't just die to provide *forgiveness*. He died to model the pattern for handling mistreatment.
- d) **This world won't be reached until they see how different the love of Jesus is in our hearts (Matthew 5:14-16)** - It's interesting that Jesus never said the world would be reached through our mass crusades. He held His highest hope in the *radically different lives of His disciples*. That, He said, was His doorway into the hearts of the world.