

Other Misinterpretations of the Law Corrected by the Lord

Matthew 5:38-48

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 tell you not to resist an evil person. But whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also. ⁴⁰ If anyone wants to sue you and take away your tunic, let him have your cloak also. ⁴¹ And whoever compels you to go one mile, go with him two. ⁴² Give to him who asks you, and from him who wants to borrow from you do not turn away.*

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, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, ⁴⁵ that you may be sons of your Father 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 have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? ⁴⁷ And if you greet your brethren only, what do you do more than others? Do not even the tax collectors do so? ⁴⁸ Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect."*

Background Notes

Verse 43 is a good illustration of what's going on in Matthew 5: *"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy."* Notice that in most of your Bibles, the first part of the quotation 'You shall love your neighbor' is shown to be Scripture. It is from the Mosaic Law in Leviticus 19:18. However, the second part of this statement – *"and hate your enemy"* – is italicized in your Bibles. This shows that the phrase was not part of the Old Testament Scripture.

Adding to the Scriptures was typical of how many of the Jews of Jesus' day treated the Law of Moses. They would take a particular law and ignore the original intent of the law as God gave it, and then misinterpret the law by twisting it, or distorting it or adding to it, or subtracting from it so that the law would suit their own selfish purposes.

In verse 43, they reasoned that if the law said 'love your neighbor,' then you could certainly do the opposite and hate your enemy. But that's not what God intended! Notice that the Lord didn't say "It is written, you shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy," but rather, "**You have heard** that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'" The phrase "hate your enemy" was **not** written in the Mosaic Law or anywhere in Scripture - it was added! This was typical of the way many Jews of Jesus' day misinterpreted many of the laws of the Old Testament. So here in Matthew 5, in the Sermon on the Mount, the Lord corrected the wrong interpretation of a number of these laws that had been twisted, added to or taken out of context.

Notice that all the laws that the Lord corrected in Matthew 5 were **moral laws**. God's moral laws are good for all time, not just for Israel in the Old Testament under the Mosaic Law. While the ceremonial and civil laws of the Mosaic Law no longer apply to us as believers today, **the moral laws of God continue**. In fact, nine of the Ten Commandments are moral laws, and they're all essentially repeated in the New Testament under the Law of Christ.

Only the commandment to "remember the Sabbath" is ceremonial, and therefore it was not repeated in the New Testament for the Christian. Christians should observe the "Sabbath principle" of setting aside a day for rest and worship, but Christians are under no obligation to keep the Sabbath as Israel did under the Mosaic Law. And, by the way, Sunday is not the "New Sabbath" – Sunday is **the Lord's Day!**

Doctrinal Points

1. The command to "**Turn the other cheek**" does not mean to forget justice.

Verse 38 contains what has become known as the *Lex Talionis* – that's Latin for the "Law of Retaliation." However, "an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth" was never given in the Old Testament as a law for retaliation! It was given as a **limit for punishment** under civil justice (Deuteronomy 19). In other words, if you got mad on your job and punched your boss in the face, he could not bring you to court and have you beheaded. No, the limit of the punishment would be "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." The punishment must fit the crime. That was the intent of this law when it was given.

Over the years, however, the Jewish people had turned this law into a justification for personal revenge, or personal vendetta, or individual "tit for tat," and getting even with someone. "This is wrong!" said the Lord Jesus. That was not the original intent of this law!

But now "I say to you," said the Lord, as He corrected their misinterpretation of this law. When it comes to personal vendettas and feuds and all kinds of grudges, **don't take revenge!** Rather, turn the other cheek. If someone wants to sue you, even to taking the shirt off your back, give him your coat as well. And if an official forces you to carry something for a mile (as Roman officials did in those days), go two miles. Give to him who asks you and don't turn away from the person who wants to borrow from you (v42).

In applying this Scripture to our personal relationships today, how far do we carry the principle of "turning the other cheek"? Certainly we would carry it to the point of not allowing ourselves the "pleasure" of personal retaliation! The attitude of "I'll get you back" and "Wait till I get my hands on you" is not an option for the Christian. God promises us that He will take care of these problems in His own way (see Romans 12:19).

But what about the situation in which a thief breaks into my house, beats up my family and completely cleans the place out? Should I "turn the other cheek"? Should I not try to defend myself and my family? Should I "go the extra mile" and show him the cash I have hidden on the top shelf of the closet?! Should I help him load my belongings into his truck? No, of course not! Remember that the **context of this Scripture** concerns **personal revenge** and retaliation, not the matter of defending our homes or families in an assault or theft.

The context is **not** about justice when civil laws are broken. A thief must be brought to justice before the state. The state, under God, is still to operate on the principle of "an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth." In no way did the Lord change that principle of civil law. You can imagine the crime and chaos that would result if our civil courts operated on the principle of "turning the other cheek"!

Remember that as Christians we are citizens of the state as well as citizens of Heaven. We are responsible to see that civil justice is carried out in regard to the thief. It would be irresponsible by the laws of the state (as well as encouraging evil) if we were to "just forget about it."

What about the person who knocks at my door and asks for a contribution for himself, or for an undeserving "charity," or an unscriptural cult? Here again the **context of Scripture** is very important to the proper understanding of the Lord's command in verse 42. The Lord didn't advocate that we become "easy marks" for solicitors, or give indiscriminately of our time and money to every freeloader who comes along. (See 2 Thessalonians 3:10-12.) The Lord was speaking against the type of selfish and miserly spirit that was exhibited by the scribes and Pharisees. When confronted with persons in real need, the Jewish leaders gave grudgingly and reluctantly - if they even gave at all. This type of giving should not characterize the growing Christian. We are to help all who ask for our assistance, as long as their request is not contrary to the Scripture.

The command to "*Turn the other cheek*" does not mean to forget justice!

You can read an essay entitled, "Turning the Other Cheek" on our website.

2. The command to "*Love your enemies*" does not mean to forsake justice.

We've already seen that many of the Jews of Jesus' day were misinterpreting the law of "love your neighbor" to justify hating their personal enemies. The Lord Jesus said that was not the intent of the law. But then the Lord went further: "*But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you*" (v44). He told them that they should **love** their enemies, **bless** those who cursed them, **do good** to those who hated them, and **pray** for those who misused and persecuted them!

How far should we carry this verse and application today? Should we let people get away with crime? Should our nation follow this command and love terrorists, or love foreign nations that want to destroy us? No! The command to “Love your enemies” was not given in the context of forming a policy for national defense! We should go to Romans 13 for that context. There we see that a national government is given the right to defend its country and its citizens.

The command to “Love your enemies” in the Sermon on the Mount was given in the context of **personal** enemies – those who badmouth you or step on you and take advantage of you. If we are citizens of the Kingdom, with the Lord’s help, we should be able to rise above these things and show love to our personal enemies.

Believers should do more than just to show love to their friends. As the Lord said, even the tax collectors or unbelievers show love to their friends and to those who say nice things about them (v46)! But as believers, we are different. As sons and daughters of our heavenly Father, we are to imitate Him. *“That you may be sons of your Father 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...”* (v45).

So we shouldn’t pull this Scripture out of context and sweep crime under the rug, or let terrorists get away with murder, or take a pacifist position when it comes to national defense.

The command to love your enemies doesn’t mean to forsake justice.

Practical Application

Let’s aim for perfection!

“Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect” (v48).

“That’s impossible!” you say. True! No one can be perfect as God is perfect. But we wouldn’t expect God to lower His standards and tell us, “Be seventy-five percent perfect!” Or, “Just do the best that you can.” We wouldn’t expect God to say that, and God doesn’t say that! God doesn’t lower His divine standards. We should aim for perfection every time.

The word “perfect” includes the idea of maturity. God wants to see us grow and mature as children in His family. We should aim to treat other people as God treats them - with patience, with love, and with long-suffering - even those people who hate us or dislike us.

Think of the supreme example of our Lord Jesus. His example is certainly not easy for us to follow, and we will never be flawless, but the Lord will help us to follow His example. Let’s aim for perfection!