

## Justice, Love, and Vengeance

Matthew 5:38–48<sup>i</sup>

### Justice.

There's an old adage that says that an eye for an eye is a fair, satisfying, and rapid way to a sightless, toothless world, and it sounds reasonable, until you stop to think about the alternatives. Imagine for example (and it isn't very hard), a law which said, instead of an eye for an eye,

...(as for) the male thief and the female thief, cut off (from the wrist joint) their (right) hands as a recompense for that which they committed, a punishment by way of example from Allah.<sup>ii</sup>

Perhaps worse still, imagine a law (and it isn't very hard), which states that stealing merchandise worth \$950 or less is a mere misdemeanor,

...which means that law enforcement probably won't bother to investigate, and if they do, prosecutors will let it go.<sup>iii</sup>

No, an eye for an eye is not a fair, satisfying, and rapid way to a sightless, toothless world. An eye for an eye is simply justice. An eye for an eye is the law of God in Exodus 21, Leviticus 24, and Deuteronomy 19. So, why did our text this morning say,

<sup>38</sup> "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' <sup>39</sup> 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. Matthew 5:38–39 ESV

Well, this is where the concept of sphere sovereignty that we explored last week comes in. God, who is sovereign and has authority over all, has granted a limited sovereignty to people in their various spheres of life: the church, the state, the family, and even the individual, among others. This authority is to be administered exclusively within the boundaries of each particular sphere, but each remains always under the rule of God Himself and the direction given us in His Law. So, one sphere cannot interfere in the authority and operation of another, and none can claim autonomy from God.

Imagine for a moment then, that you were living in ancient Israel, and your neighbor poked out your eye, or stole your lawnmower. Of course, it should go without saying that we're talking about more than eyes, cheeks, teeth, and tunics here. This would be an assault on you, or perhaps your family, and you'd probably be angry (it was a long way to the nearest Home Depot and that mower didn't come cheap after all), but what were you to do. Were you to rush over to your neighbor's home in a fit of pique and poke out his eye to get even? Or, in the case of the lawnmower, could you go down to the Jerusalem Walmart, smash a window, and take a big-screen TV in recompense?

In a word, no, and on more than one level, still no. In the latter example, it wasn't Walmart that stole your lawnmower, so Walmart doesn't owe you a lawnmower, never mind a TV. In

both examples, it was not, and is not, your job to obtain justice. That was, and is, the task appointed to the civil government. It is an authority granted by God within that sphere, and to intrude without authorization is at best vigilantism, and at worst just plain, old vengeance.

But this is fallen human nature 101, and every parent has seen this sort of thing in action, haven't we? Two toddlers are playing together well until one decides that he wants the toy currently in possession of the other, so he takes it. Incensed by the injustice, the aggrieved toddler takes it back, and to be sure this sort of thing never happens again, bonks his playmate over the head with it, and general mayhem ensues.

One child pokes his neighbor in the eye (accidentally of course), so his neighbor pokes him back. It's simple, frontier justice, right? But since the first poke was allegedly an accident, it's not justice at all, and it's not in the purview of the children to exercise it regardless. The situation requires the intervention of an outside authority—a mother or a father, in this case; whoever is running the household at the moment—to adjudicate the case and administer appropriate discipline. Just as the case of the (now) missing eye, or lawnmower requires the adjudication of the civil authorities, and is not to be settled by a confrontation in the street at high noon.

So, how were the Pharisees wrong in the way that they had taught the principle of “an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth”? I believe that they were taking a law that had been given to the civil magistrate—the state—and proposing it as a personal philosophy of life. They were saying, in effect, if you gouge out my eye, then I will gouge out yours; if you harm me, then I will harm you back. Whatever you do to me and mine, I will do to you and yours. It sounds like justice—it feels like justice—but they were appropriating a rule that belonged to a different sphere of authority and making it their own.

### Love.

Still, in contrast to this Pharisaical misappropriation of the Law of God, Jesus directed His followers to another Law, the one found in the passage that I read as a call to thankful living; Leviticus 19, verse 18, which says:

<sup>18</sup> You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD. Leviticus 19:17–18 ESV

Rather, to borrow a passage from later in the sermon on the mount:

<sup>12</sup> “...whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them...” Matthew 7:12 ESV

We know this as “the golden rule”, but Jesus went on to say,

...for this is the Law and the Prophets. Matthew 7:12 ESV

This is what it looks like to love your neighbor, even those neighbors whom we might count as enemies; those who strike us on the cheek, or force us to carry their baggage. In the words of Matthew 5:

<sup>39</sup> ...Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. <sup>40</sup> And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. <sup>41</sup> And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. <sup>42</sup> Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you. Matthew 5:39–42 ESV

Of course the emphasis is usually put on the first statement of the first clause, “**Do not resist...**” as if this summarized the whole bounden duty of the Christian. Some traditions have turned this into a way of life and imposed it, usually in a legalistic way, and usually on others, as if the ultimate answer to sin in the world is to ignore it. But Jesus identified the one who slaps you on the right cheek as, “the one who is evil...” *Our reaction* to another person’s sin doesn’t change the fact that it is sin; it is evil that we’re talking about here. More on that in a minute.

But first, a couple of things. To begin with, it’s worth noting that even here in The Sermon on the Mount, there are limits. Jesus did not say, “Turn the other cheek, and then offer your backside as well.” He did not say, “If anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak, and your car and your house as well.” He did not say, “If anyone forces you to go one mile, drop everything and carry his stuff all the way to Rome.” In each case, He commands us to go *just a little* farther than required. And as for,

<sup>42</sup> Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you. Matthew 5:39–42 ESV

there are limits on this too. We cannot let people tear this passage screaming and bleeding from scripture, taking advantage of individuals and of the church. Yes, Jesus did say,

<sup>42</sup> Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you. Matthew 5:39–42 ESV

but He also said, through the Apostle Paul, in 2nd Thessalonians 3:

<sup>10</sup> ...If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat. <sup>11</sup> For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies. <sup>12</sup> Now such persons we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living. <sup>2</sup> Thessalonians 3:10–12 ESV

This is why it’s so important to always interpret scripture with scripture. The words of Jesus in Matthew 5 are not something greater that supersedes the word of the Lord in 2nd Thessalonians. The Lord is the speaker in both passages and we have to keep this in mind.

It’s also worth noting that the examples given in verses 39 – 42 involve a relatively low level of personal insult and offense, and are, to some extent metaphors. Jesus did not say, “If anyone gouges out your left eye, offer up the right as well”, any more than He was literally commanding people to put out their eyes and chop off their hands in verse 29 and 30.

Even to the extent that we might take these things more literally, being slapped on the cheek is not being assaulted with a fist, or a baseball bat, or a Bowie knife; being forced to go a mile out of your way may mean an hour of your life but it is not the same as being sold into slavery. In each of these instances, Jesus instructs us to bear certain minor offenses against ourselves as a matter of simply loving not only our neighbor, but our enemy as well. For,

<sup>43</sup> “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’  
Matthew 5:43 ESV

(this was probably a hyper-literal take on the passage we read from Leviticus). “But I say to you,” Jesus went on,

<sup>44</sup> ...Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, <sup>45</sup> 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. Matthew 5:43–45 ESV

As Paul wrote in Romans, chapter 12:

<sup>14</sup> Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Romans 12:14 ESV

And,

<sup>17</sup> Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. <sup>18</sup> If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Romans 12:17–18 ESV

So, love your neighbor as yourself. Love those who do not treat you as they themselves would like to be treated; and love even your enemy, praying for him, and proclaiming the grace of God in the hope that he too will come to receive salvation and life in Christ. In each and every case,

<sup>12</sup> “...whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them...” Matthew 7:12 ESV

### Vengeance.

But one more thing, well, two. First, these commands are given to us as individuals and apply to the sphere of personal responsibility. They are not given to the state. Contrary to what some have tried to say in the past, if a foreign power bombs its capital, or torpedoes its fleet in a surprise attack, or crashes airplanes into its towers, the proper response of the state is not to turn the other cheek.

The state has the responsibility under God to defend her citizens, even to the point of prosecuting a just war. Those veterans who stormed the beaches and delivered Europe in 1944 and 45 need not repent for resisting evil, nor do those who took out Osama Bin Laden. “Do not resist an evil person” does not apply to governments, or to those who are acting in obedience to them.

In addition, these commands should never be interpreted to mean that one person, suffering at the hands of an evil person—that’s how Jesus described it; remember?—should not seek amelioration of the problem by petitioning for aid from another sphere. The child

who has been clobbered over the head by a sibling should turn to his parents for intervention. An abused spouse should not hesitate to call the police, nor should a citizen whose home has been burgled.

But what if there is no magistrate around and I see my enemy coming at me with a sharp stick and evil intention? Then it is biblical and appropriate to use reasonable force in defense of myself, and of others who may be harmed. A husband and father is not required to stand idly by, wringing his hands and praying while an evil person harms and abuses his wife and children. In the sphere of his family, it is actually his duty to do all he can in their defense.

Does this reflect a lack of love? No, it is simply the justice required by the very same law that requires us to love our neighbors as ourselves. Because loving our neighbor does not mean allowing him to get away with whatever crimes and sins he might be inclined to commit. Loving our neighbor at the personal level will sometimes mean seeking to restrain his evil, and it will always mean calling him to repentance.

See, Paul wrote in Romans 12:

<sup>19</sup> 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." Romans 12:19 ESV

One of the ways the Lord accomplishes this is through the sphere of civil authority, because in the very next chapter, Paul wrote that the ruler

<sup>4</sup> ...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. Romans 13:3-4 ESV

So, there's that. More importantly, if we would truly love our enemies, and those who would harm and persecute us, then we must, above all, pray for them, and proclaim the gospel and the grace of God to them, seeking their salvation, because a day is coming when the Lord Jesus will be revealed from heaven

<sup>7</sup> ...with his mighty angels <sup>8</sup> in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. 2 Thessalonians 1:7-8 ESV

Then,

<sup>9</sup> They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might... 2 Thessalonians 1:9 ESV

This is something that all of us deserve, so, now is the time to extend grace and forgiveness. Now is the time to tell others of salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. Now is the time to proclaim that He is Lord over all, and to call those who love us *and those who don't* to turn to Him in faith, and find the eternal and abundant life that only He can give.

<sup>2</sup>...now is the accepted time... 2 Corinthians 6:2 NKJV

Paul wrote.

...now is the day of salvation. <sup>2</sup> Corinthians 6:2 NKJV

So, if you are hearing this today and thinking, “That’s me.” Then right here, right now, turn to Jesus in faith. Believe that He carried your sin to the cross, that He died for you, and that He has been raised up for your salvation, then be baptized (if you have not already been) in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and join with all the people of God everywhere in proclaiming that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

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- i All Scripture citations unless otherwise noted, *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016).
  - ii al-Maa'idah 5:38, “The Hadd Punishment for Theft - Islam Question & Answer.” 2001. Islamqa.info. January 25, 2001. <https://islamqa.info/en/answers/9935/the-hadd-punishment-for-theft>.
  - iii Ohanian, Lee. 2021. “Why Shoplifting Is Now de Facto Legal in California.” Hoover Institution. August 3, 2021. <https://www.hoover.org/research/why-shoplifting-now-de-facto-legal-california>.