

THE REAL MEANING OF THE LAW GOVERNING INJURY MATHEW 05:38–42

Introduction

This law has been used and misused, excused and abused down through the centuries. Man has often used the law to treat others as he wished. But Christ has changed the law. He says that the Christian is not to render evil for evil; he is not to bear a grudge or seek revenge. He must go beyond and forgive. However, the Christian has the right to avoid and resist evil for security's sake (Note Rom. 12:18).

- I. The law (v. 38).
- II. The real meaning: do not retaliate (v. 39).
- III. The ideal behaviour (vv. 39-41).
- IV. The great Christian ethic: give and help meet the needs of people (v. 42).

I. *Mathew 05:38 Retaliation to Limit Vengeance*

This law is often thought to be justification for retaliation (Exo. 21:24; Lev. 24:20; Deu. 19:21). It has been misused and abused. However, God's purpose for the law was to show mercy and to limit vengeance. In antiquity, men killed for the most minor of offenses. For example, if a person was injured accidentally, a whole family or village was subject to be killed in retaliation. Thus, this law was the beginning of mercy in a merciless society. It limited retaliation to an equivalent injury. Several facts show the merciful aspect of the law.

1. The law was not a command that had to be executed. It was a law that *allowed* a person some justice *if he wished*. He did not have to insist upon.
2. The law was given to the courts to guide the judges in the execution of justice. It was not given to individuals to take vengeance on others.
3. The law could be satisfied with money or some other ransom or payment deemed just (Num. 35:31). However, no ransom was to "be accepted for the life of a murderer." The murderer was to pay with his life.

Thought 1. The law was given to control the irresponsible and unregulated passions of men: to control evil and to limit retaliation and revenge. The law was given as a restraint, as a deterrent (1) to the criminal or person who would do evil; and (2) to the victim, lest he inflict a more terrible vengeance than what the crime deserved.

Exo 21:24 *Eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot.*

Lev 24:20 *Fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth. As he has injured the other; so he is to be injured.*

Deu 19:21 *Show no pity: life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot.*

II. *Mathew 05:39 The Message of Christ Regarding Retaliation*

Christ says this: the law really means that a person is not to retaliate. However, a person must understand what Christ is saying.

1. Christ is not saying “do not resist an evil person” — ever. Christ Himself resisted evil people. (1) He drove out the money exchangers from the temple (Mt. 21:12; Mk. 11:15), and (2) He resisted the punishment of the High Priest (Jn. 18:22-23). Paul, the apostle, also resisted evil (see Acts 16:35f; 22:25; 23:3; 25:9-10). The point is: Jesus and Paul followed the new law, “do not resist an evil person.” They observed the spirit of the new law, but they were not enslaved by it. There are times when evil persons should be resisted. (Rom 12:18)
2. Christ is saying “do not resist an evil person,” that is, do not seek evil for evil; do not bear a grudge or resent those who have mistreated you. Do not seek revenge or look for a chance to retaliate. But forgive, go out of your way to help those who do evil against you. Such an attitude is the only way to ever reach them for the Kingdom of Heaven (Mt. 4:17; 5:3, 10, 19, 21. Prov. 20:22; 24:29; 25:21-22.)

Thought 1. A Christian is not to be a revengeful person. He is not to be known as a person who holds a grudge.

Thought 2. Revenge consumes. It can *eat up* a person’s inner being.

- 1) It can consume a person’s mind — be the focus of all his thoughts. A person can be so obsessed upon revenge that he does nothing but think about retaliation.
- 2) It can consume a person’s emotions — cause all kinds of emotional problems. A person can be so engrossed in revenge that he becomes....
 - self-centred (harbours how great a wrong has been done to him)
 - withdrawn • self-pitying • paranoid
 - destructive (strikes out at other persons and other things)

Mat 5:39 “But I tell you; Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.”

Rom 12:17 Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody.

1 Th 5:15 Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always try to be kind to each other and to everyone else.

2 Tim 2:24 And the Lord’s servant must not quarrel; instead, he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful.

1 Pet 3:9 Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult, but with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing.

Lev 19:18 “Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbour as yourself. I am the Lord.”

Prov 20:22 Do not say, “I’ll pay you back for this wrong!” Wait for the Lord, and he will deliver you.

Prov 24:29 Do not say, “I’ll do to him as he has done to me; I’ll pay that man back for what he did.”

III. **Mathew 05:39–41 How to React to Offenders**

The ideal behaviour: Christ shared three very practical illustrations, teaching the Christian how to treat those who do him wrong.

1. Accept physical injury: It is the right cheek that is slapped. This says something that is often overlooked. The person who slaps with his right hand has to strike with the back of his hand in order to hit someone’s right cheek. Hitting someone with the back of the hand has always been considered more insulting. Throughout history it has been used to symbolize a challenge to duel. It showed contempt and bitterness. Christ is clearly making His point: the believer is not to retaliate against the most terrible insults or bitter contempt — not even against threats of bodily harm. Turning the other cheek is difficult. It means a person does not challenge, resent, avenge, retaliate, or enter a legal action against an attacker; but he prepares for another slap and bears it patiently. He lets it pass and accepts it. He forgives and trusts the matter to God. There is the knowledge that God will work all things out for good as the person goes about his life and service for God.

Thought 1. Many a person has his cheek slapped. A “slap in the face” can come by insult, criticism, rumour, abuse, threat, or physical attack (2 Cor. 11:20)

Thought 2. Submission is sometimes the way to overcome (Prov. 25:21-22).

Thought 3. The believer who endures shameful treatment shall reap eternal glory. (Mt. 5:10-12.) They are promised great rewards.

- a. The Kingdom of Heaven — now.

⇒ They experience a special honour (Act. 5:41).

⇒ They experience a special consolation (2 Cor. 1:5).

⇒ They are given a very special closeness, a glow of the Lord’s presence.

⇒ They become a greater witness for Christ (2 Cor. 1:46).

- b. The Kingdom of Heaven eternally (Heb. 11:35f; 1 Pet. 4:12-13)

Luke 6:29 *If someone strikes you on one cheek, turn to him the other also. If someone takes your cloak, do not stop him from taking your tunic.*

1 Cor 13:7 *It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.*

Eph 4:2 *Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.*

Eph 6:9 *And masters, treat your slaves in the same way. Do not threaten them, since you know that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favouritism with him.*

Col 3:13 *Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.*

2 Tim 2:25 *Those who oppose him he must gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth.*

2. Accept property injury. The tunic (chiton) referred to was the inner garment. The cloak was the long robe-like outer garment. William Barclay says that Jewish law allowed a man's tunic to be given as a pledge, but the cloak could never be taken. The reason was simply that a man would have a number of tunics (under clothing), but he might have only one cloak (*The Gospel of Matthew*, Vol.1, p.165) (Exo. 22:26-27). Christ's point strikes at the heart of the matter. A Christian is not to be consumed with fighting over property and disputing rights. He is not to retaliate just because he has the right. The believer forgets self and forgets property and rights, and he lives for God and for the salvation of others.

Thought 1. Giving one's cloak is difficult. It means that a believer does not defend, stand up, or dispute the taking of his property. He forgives, and he gives more to the person who takes. He even gives his tunic if necessary. A believer doesn't get tied up and occupied with his rights and privileges in or out of court. He has time only to go about his duties and responsibilities. He is tied up and engrossed with living to the fullest for Christ, reaching out to a world lost and consumed with disputes and needing the peace which only God can bring.

Thought 2. The world is full of division and disputes, bitterness and hatred, quarrels and wars. It is a divided world because individuals are self-centred. The Christian must be a person of peace, a person who keeps his mind upon God, not upon self. He must deny the world and the things of the world.

Thought 3. Sometimes recovering or fighting for one's property costs more than giving it up and purchasing more.

Thought 4. When does a person fight for his rights? There are some factors to consider:

- the damage being done to himself;
- the damage being done to his family.

Mat 5:25 *"Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you are still with him on the way, or he may hand you over to the judge, and the judge may hand you over to the officer, and you may be thrown into prison.*

Mat 5:40 *And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well.*

1 Cor 6:1-2 *If any of you has a dispute with another, dare he take it before the ungodly for judgment instead of before the saints? Do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if you are to judge the world, are you not competent to judge trivial cases?*

2 Tim 2:23-26 *Don't have anything to do with foolish and stupid arguments, because you know they produce quarrels. And the Lord's servant must not quarrel; instead, he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Those who oppose him he must gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth, and that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will.*

Prov 25:8 *Do not bring hastily to court, for what will you do in the end if your neighbour puts you to shame?*

Thought 5. Some steal property and some even use the law to do the greatest injustices. They twist the facts, stretch the truth, exaggerate, slander, lie — do anything to justify themselves to get what they want. They injure and take, and their conscience bothers them little. Their word and oath matter little.

Thought 6. A believer is not to be tied up and consumed with disputes over property, that is, rights and privileges and possessions. Disputes paint a person as divisive, as a disputer who is worldly-minded.

3. Accept any forced burden. In antiquity, the citizens of a conquered country could be enlisted into *forced service* (aggarevein) by the conquerors in any way deemed necessary. A citizen could be compelled to carry water, supplies, anything. Christ is saying that if a believer is forced to go a mile, he should go twice as far. Again, rights — even the rights of liberty — are not the primary concern of the believer. The believer's primary concern is people and their burdens — reaching and relieving their burdens in obedience to God. Going a second mile is difficult. It means a person does not become bitter and resentful, grumbling and griping, complaining and criticizing, self-pitying and begrudging. It means a person forgives and serves and offers more service. He sets his mind and heart on reaching out to the offender by helping more and more. Such action will more likely reach the offender for the Kingdom of Heaven. It will certainly help bring the Kingdom of Heaven closer to this earth.

Thought 1. Some go well beyond reason in insisting and impressing, in compelling and enforcing their will. Others even enslave. Such a thing exists within families, friendships, businesses, nations — everywhere.

Thought 2. There are times, of course, when a person is not to submit to the will of another. There are definite commands governing morality and injustice in the Bible.

Thought 3. The believer's concern is people and their burdens (Gal. 6:2). The believer is to bear the burdens of people, serving them and helping all he can. His purpose is to fulfil the law of Christ which is the law of love, and thereby to help bring the Kingdom of God to this earth through their conversion.

John 13:34-35 “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”

Gal 6:2 Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfil the law of Christ.

1 Cor 13:4 Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud.

Col 1:11 Being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, and joyfully.

Titus 3:2 To slander no one, to be peaceable and considerate, and to show true humility toward all men.

James 3:17 But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.

1 John 3:23 And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us.

IV. Mathew 05:42 Borrowing and Lending

The great Christian ethic is to give. Christ has pointed it out clearly: a Christian is to help those who have need, and he is to readily help. Christ allows no excuse. The picture is simple: when someone asks, the Christian gives and does not *turn away*. However, the Bible does not say to give without discretion. “Good will come to him who is generous and lends freely, who conducts his affairs with justice.” (Psa. 112:5). Giving is always to be done with discretion (Psa. 112:5). Two things should be looked at and studied to see if a person should or should not give:

First, the effect upon the receiver must be studied. Will it encourage laziness and shiftlessness, idleness and license?

Second, the ability of a person to give must also be studied. He must give and give and learn to give more and more — ever learning to trust God. It is not by chance that people come to the believer for help. They are either aware of the believer's interest and compassion or are brought by God. When brought by God, they are brought both for the growth of the believer and for the benefit of the needful. However, the believer must realistically know his ability to give and how much God wants him to give, and if the person requesting help has a real need.

The point is: the believer is to live in “eager willingness” — a willingness to give and to lend (2 Cor. 8:11-15 esp. 11). He does not live for this earth and world. He lives for

God and for heaven. His citizenship is in heaven, from where he looks for the Saviour (Phil. 3:20). Any concern he has for this world and its possessions is only for meeting the necessities of life and for helping others. He exists for ministry, helping and giving to those who have need. In fact, Scripture is clear; the believer is to work for two reasons: to meet his own necessities and to secure the means to help those in need.

***Eph 4:28** He who has been stealing must steal no longer; but must work, doing something useful with his own hands, that he may have something to share with those in need.*

***Thought 1.** A cheerful giver is loved by God in a very special way.*

***2 Cor 9:7-8** Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work.*

***Thought 2.** Giving should be done personally. Jesus Christ is a Person; He is related to persons. Therefore, He expects every believer to be personally involved in the lives of others just as He Himself is. Too many feel their obligation to give is over when they have given through official channels. But this is not the case with Christ. He demonstrated that the believer is to get personally involved in helping others.*

***Thought 3.** Giving should be handled in such a way that the dignity of the receiver is restored. The humiliation experienced by the needful is often unbearable.*

***Thought 4.** Lending can help the person who borrows. It can teach him (1) to trust God more, and (2) to learn how to be more industrious. The borrower has to *get to it* in order to pay back what is loaned.*

***Thought 5.** It is better to be misled by a *professional beggar* than to miss helping a truly needful person.*

***Luke 3:10-11** “What should we do then?” the crowd asked. John answered, “The man with two tunics should share with him who has none, and the one who has food should do the same.”*

***Luke 12:33** Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will not be exhausted, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys.*

***Acts 20:35** In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’*

***Rom 12:13** Share with God’s people who are in need. Practice hospitality.*

***Gal 6:10** Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.*

1 Tim 6:18 *Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share.*

Heb 13:16 *And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.*

Prov 25:21 *If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat; if he is thirsty, give him water to drink. ■*