

# An Eye For an Eye

This study is about one of the most misused and abused passages in the Sermon on the Mount. It is a familiar passage to both Christians and non-Christians. It is quoted in secular books, printed in magazines, criticized by some, and yet practiced around the world. The words of the passage are “An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.” These eleven words have been used to justify capital punishment, revenge, and angry hearts. The statement, “I do not get angry; I just get even” is a well-known phrase. Some would say, “I do not get angry; I just get an eye for an eye.” Ray Stedman describes an event that occurred in South Korea in March 1977. Two soldiers had hired a young man to cook and clean their rented house. These two soldiers liked to play practical jokes. So one day they put Vaseline on the stove handles. The next morning when the young man attempted to turn on the stove, his fingers slipped off the handles because of the Vaseline. On another occasion, the soldiers put a bucket of water over the door so that when he entered the house, he would get wet. One day they nailed his house shoes to the floor. As a result, he had to remove the nails in order to wear his shoes. The young man never said anything. He was quiet and peacefully did his job. Consequently, the soldiers started feeling guilty and finally apologized to the young man and promised to stop. So the young man asked, “No more sticky on the stove? No more water on the door? No more shoes to the floor?” When the two soldiers promised that they would stop, the houseboy said, “Okay, no more spit in the soup!” (Stedman, Ray. *How to Hug*. Sermon, March 20, 1977)

**REVENGE.** Revenge is everywhere. We see it in our children, adults, schools, politicians, between spouses, and in churches. Austin O’Malley once said, “Revenge is often like biting a dog because the dog bit you.” Yet, revenge can seem like fun as illustrated in the following event.

A story is told about an elderly lady who was driving a big, new, expensive car. She was preparing to back into a parallel parking stall when suddenly a young man in a small sports car quickly moved in front of her and backed into the parking space. The woman was angry and demanded to know why he had done that when he knew that she was trying to pull into that space. He responded by saying, “Because I’m young, and I’m quick.” The young man then left and entered the store. While he was in the store, the car that was in the parking space behind his car departed. The elderly lady pulled into the vacant parking space behind his car. When he came out of the store a few minutes later, he found the elderly lady using her new, big car as a battering ram. She was repeatedly backing up, moving forward and hitting his car. He was very angry and asked her why she was wrecking his car. Her response was, “Because I’m old, and I’m rich.” Revenge can be sweet. The woman enjoyed her revenge. Like

the story of the dog, she bit the young man because he bit her.

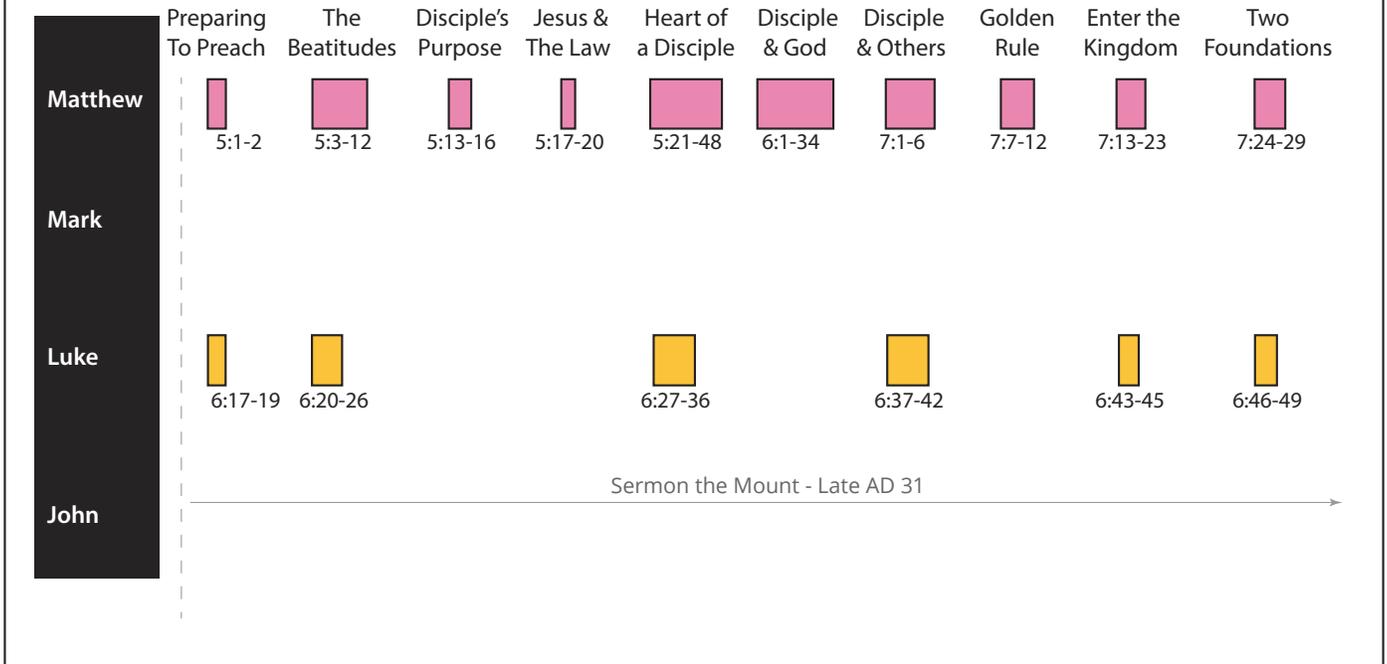
**PHARISEES AND REVENGE.** The Pharisees of Jesus’ time taught revenge. They apparently quoted Exodus 21:23-25 and then twisted it just as some do today.

*But if there is any further injury, then you shall appoint as a penalty life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise.*  
(NASB) Ex. 21:23-25

They twisted the meaning of the passage to satisfy their own hearts. For example, Rabbi Judah is quoted as saying, “If he smacked him, he pays two hundred zuz. If it is with the back of the hand, he pays him four hundred zuz. If he (1) tore at his ear, (2) pulled his hair, (3) spit on him, (4) pulled off his cloak, or (5) pulled apart the hairdo of a woman in the marketplace, he pays four hundred zuz. This was the governing principle: “Everything is in accord with one’s station [in life].” (Mishnah Baba Qamma 8.6). It was no longer an eye for an eye, but money for an eye. It was money for a tooth, money for a hand, and money for a foot. The religious

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## Sermon on the Mount



leaders had twisted and changed God's law in order to make money. But worst of all, they did not even understand the passage.

**GOD'S CONCEPT.** If we look closely at Exodus 21:22-25, we discover that God was not encouraging anyone to take revenge for one's self. The verses that come before and after the passage, the context, are about judicial or legal actions that should occur when someone commits a crime against another person. That is, God had said that there should be a penalty for any crime we commit. God was establishing a judicial system and determining the punishment for offenses. Nations do the same thing through presidents, kings, dictators, legislatures, or some other governmental agency. Exodus 21:22-25 is nothing more than a summary.

*But if there is any further injury, then you shall appoint as a penalty . . . (NASB) Ex. 21:23*

Deut. 19:18-21 established the same principle. The passage tells us that God wants judges to make the decision regarding an eye for an eye or a tooth for a tooth. There

should be a trial, witnesses, and a judicial decision. The decision does not belong to a victim, a relative, or a friend. It belongs to a judge. Here is the passage.

*The judges shall investigate thoroughly, and if the witness is a false witness and he has accused his brother falsely, then you shall do to him just as he had intended to do to his brother. Thus you shall purge the evil from among you. The rest will hear and be afraid, and will never again do such an evil thing among you. Thus you shall not show pity: life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot. (NASB) Deut. 19:18-21*

God was establishing a legal and judicial system in Exodus 21:22-25 and Deut. 19:18-21. Deut. 25:1 is another example,

*If there is a dispute between men and they go to court, and the judges decide their case, and they justify the righteous and condemn the wicked . . . (NASB) Deut. 25:1*

**RIGHT AND LEFT CHEEK.** So we should not be surprised that Jesus rebuked them for violating this command

also. Jesus' next statement in the Sermon on the Mount was another correction of the teaching of the Jewish religious leaders.

You have heard that it was said, "AN EYE FOR AN EYE, AND A TOOTH FOR A TOOTH. But I say to you, . . ." (NASB) Matt. 5:38-39a

In the next four verses Jesus uses four examples to illustrate the error of the religious leaders' teaching.

Here is His first illustration.

But I say to you, do not resist an evil person; but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also. (NASB) Matt. 5:39

After reading this verse, do you wonder why Jesus referred only to the right cheek and not to the left cheek? If you are curious, note that the gospel of Luke tells us that either during the Sermon on the Mount or some later time Jesus included the other cheek too - any cheek!

Whoever hits you on the cheek, offer him the other also; and whoever takes away your coat, do not withhold your shirt from him either. (NASB) Luke 6:29

When I was about thirteen years old, a boy slapped me on my right cheek. Being a young Christian and remembering Jesus' words, I offered my left cheek to the boy. He promptly slapped my left cheek. Since then I have sometimes wondered how he felt. I did not understand what Jesus was saying.

Dr. J. Vernon McGee states that an Irishman was once slapped on the cheek just as I was. So the Irishman offered his other cheek. It was slapped so hard that he fell to the ground. When the Irishman got up, he hit the man with his fist and knocked him to the ground. When the Irishman

was asked later why he did that, he answered that God did not tell him what to do after he offered his other cheek! The Irishman missed Jesus' message too! Jesus was not encouraging us to be defenseless.

**JESUS' MESSAGE.** So what was Jesus' message? A clue to the answer is found in the example of an apostle in Acts 22:25. As we come to this passage, it is important to note that the Apostle Paul had just been taken prisoner by some Roman soldiers and was being prepared for punishment. Here is what happened to Paul.

And as they were crying out and throwing off their cloaks and tossing dust into the air, the commander ordered him to be brought into the barracks, stating that he should be examined by scourging so that he might find out the reason why they were shouting against him that way. But when they stretched him out with thongs, Paul said to the centurion who was standing by, "Is it lawful for you to scourge a man who is a Roman and uncondemned?" (NASB) Acts 22:23-25

*R*evenge is death to our fragile human love. Revenge belongs to God and not to us.

What was Paul's response? He did not turn the other cheek but challenged their

actions against him. "Is it lawful for you . . ." to do this? He did not turn his "left" or "right" cheek. Paul did not respond as I did or the Irishman. He kindly asked a question, "Is it lawful?" He was telling them that he was a Roman citizen. According to Roman law, it was illegal to punish a Roman citizen without a trial.

So if someone hits your nose, are you supposed to offer your other nose? After a person hits your right and then your left cheek, do you offer him/her your right cheek and start all over again? Was Jesus encouraging husbands to allow some man to rape their wives and then offer the rapist one of their daughters?

The example of the Apostle Paul defending himself tells us that Jesus was not encouraging us to allow others to take advantage of us. Nor was Jesus encouraging you to let someone murder your son or daughter and then offer him

your husband. It is clear in the Old Testament that God was establishing a legal system and not a law for personal revenge.

Jesus was not encouraging us to be victims. He was encouraging us not to seek personal revenge. He was openly disagreeing with the Pharisees and scribes.

**TUNIC AND COAT.** Jesus' second illustration is about the clothes we wear,

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

The Greek word for "tunic" refers to a person's undergarment, and the Greek word for "cloak" refers to a heavier outer garment which was worn on top for warmth. The tunic was like a long shirt, but it was not underwear. Jesus' illustration assumes that His listeners were in a legal battle with someone who wanted to sue them in a court of law for their tunic. If the opponent won, the one who lost would be standing in the court in their undergarments. Who would sue someone for his or her clothes? Yet, that is Jesus' illustration.

Most of us would be angry and furious if we had to leave the court with nothing on but our undergarments. But Jesus says, "Do not seek revenge." Instead, give him/her your coat too! What is Jesus' message? Do not seek revenge!

**SECOND MILE.** Jesus third and final example is as follows:

*If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. (NASB) Matt. 5:41*

The Greek word for "mile" is MILION. It refers to the Roman mile which was measured as 1,000 steps. Historical evidence says that it was common in Persia for men to be stopped from their work and ordered to carry mail to the next mail stop. The Persians would deliver mail from one location to another by horse. If they needed help to deliver the mail, they could order someone to do it.

Historical evidence that the Romans commanded citizens to perform similar services is missing, except for one passage in Matthew. Matthew 27:32 tells us that Simon Cyrene was

ordered by some Roman soldiers to carry Jesus' cross.

So Jesus' message was simple. If someone legally orders you to do something for him or her, then do not have a hateful, revengeful heart. Instead do something extra for him. Do not seek revenge, but show him God's love.

**GIVE YOUR MONEY.** Jesus' fourth example is about money.

*Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you. (NASB) Matt. 5:42*

If someone asks for money, give it to him. I taught this passage recently to a group of people. Afterward someone approached me and asked for \$5,000. He was not serious but having fun. But what should I have done if he had asked for \$50,000? What should I have done if he was serious and had asked for my house and all the money that I had in my bank account? Should my wife and my children go hungry? How does the following verse answer these questions?

*But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever. (NASB) 1 Tim. 5:8*

The answer is that Jesus was establishing a principle. He was not teaching that we should allow someone to take advantage of us. Instead He was telling us to give to those who have needs. Give and do not deny. Lend and do not expect anything in return. Jesus wants us to be willing to lend and not expect anything in return. The gospel of Luke records these words from Jesus,

*Give to everyone who asks of you, and whoever takes away what is yours, do not demand it back. (NASB) Luke 6:30*

**CONCLUSION.** What has been Jesus' message? It is summarized in Romans 12 this way,

*Never pay back evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all men. If possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men. Never take your own revenge, beloved,*

but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written, “VENGEANCE IS MINE, I WILL REPAY,” says the Lord. “BUT IF YOUR ENEMY IS HUNGRY, FEED HIM, AND IF HE IS THIRSTY, GIVE HIM A DRINK; FOR IN SO DOING YOU WILL HEAP BURNING COALS ON HIS HEAD.” Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. (NASB) Rom. 12:18-21

Sir Francis Bacon said, “A man who studies revenge keeps his own wounds green.” Revenge is death to our fragile human love. Revenge belongs to God and not to us.

A true account is told of a young girl in South Africa who was seized in the woods by a man, an enemy, of her father. This man cut-off both of her hands as an act of revenge and sent her home bleeding. The young girl survived. Many years later a poor man came to her home asking for help. Instantly the girl knew him. He was the man who had cut-off her hands. The girl fed him and cared for him. Her arms were draped with a cloth so that it was not obvious

that her hands were missing. After the man had finished his meal, she removed the cloth covering her wrists and said to him, “I have my revenge!” Those were the words that he had spoken to her when he cut off her hands. The man was overwhelmed and stunned. Then she told him that she was a Christian. She had shown him the love of God (Foster, Elon. 6000 Sermon Illustrations. pp. 562-563).

That is how Jesus wants us to respond. He does not want us to practice an eye for an eye or a tooth for a tooth. We are to forgive. But Jesus is also not teaching us to ignore crime and to let sin grow.

We will close with a quote from John Mac Arthur,

The only person who is nondefensive, nonvengeful, never bears a grudge and has no spite in his heart is the person who has died to self. To fight for one’s rights is to prove that self is still on the throne of the heart. The believer who is faithful to Christ lives for Him and, if necessary, dies for him (Rom. 14:8). It is impossible to live for self and for Christ as the same time.

George Mueller wrote, “There was a day when I died, utterly died to George Mueller and his opinions, his preferences, and his tastes and his will. I died to the world, to its approval and its censure. I died to the approval or the blame of even my brethren and friends. And since then I have studied only to show myself approved unto God. “

That is the spirit Jesus teaches in this passage, a spirit all men fail to possess apart from saving grace. It is the

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spirit of Abraham manifested when he gave his best land to his nephew Lot. It is the spirit of Joseph when he embraced and kissed the

brothers who had so terribly wronged him. It is the spirit that would not let David take advantage of the opportunity to take the life of Saul, who was then seeking to take David’s life. It is the spirit that led Elisha to feed the enemy Assyrian army. It is the spirit of every believer who, by the Holy Spirit’s power, seeks to be perfect even as our heavenly Father’s perfect (v. 48) (MacArthur, John. New Testament Commentary, Matthew 1-7, p. 336).