

DIFFICULT LESSONS FOR DIFFICULT TIMES

Jesus' teachings in Matthew chapter five were, as usual, poles apart from what we practice as men of flesh who are guided only by our carnal nature. It should be remembered that many of the laws of God, and as a consequence, the teachings of Jesus, have been misused, abused, and totally misunderstood by the Jews of His time and later by succeeding generations even to the present day — not only by the Jews, but by men in general, and therefore Jesus' teachings in Matthew five are no exception.

Matthew 5:38-42 has been used (or better, misused) to advocate total pacifism. Since the end goal is total pacifism then, of course, any form of retaliation against wrongful assault or vindictive harm would be considered “unchristian” — and the end of that kind of thinking would mean that any law or enforcement of laws pertaining to the quelling and prevention of harm by evil doers would also be against Jesus' teachings — IF indeed that is what He was teaching, but that theory does not hold up, to proper line upon line and precept upon precept as a sound biblical doctrine.

It appears, however, when taking both the context and its proper placement with the other teachings of Scripture, that Jesus was teaching His disciples how they should respond to being wronged which was to be completely different from the way in which they would normally respond in the flesh — or as carnal men.

Normal response when “in the flesh” is to demand one’s rights when wronged, mistreated, insulted, or marginalized by others — but in God’s kingdom the proper response is to relinquish those rights. When Jesus used the phrase “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,” it was in reference to Exodus 21:24, Leviticus 24:20, and Deuteronomy 19:21. In those settings God established a code of law which is the law of retribution. We have seen this explained as “tit for tat” or “quid pro quo” (Latin for “something for something”). In other words, the punishment should fit the crime — to prevent excess punishment based on personal vengeance.

God set forth how the Jewish nation of Israel was to handle conflict and disputes among themselves. God, in those sections of the law, made provision for magistrates, judges, courts, and certain authorities who were to preside over, enact and administer those laws in order to handle such matters. The concept of “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth” was meant to serve as a guide for how the civil law system was to operate. The nutshell of the principle was to prevent individuals from exacting punishment which went beyond whatever wrong had been done to them. It was not a license to seek revenge, but a code to prevent a more severe reaction than the original infraction.

This law, and the principle of it, had become perverted by the Jewish religious leaders and used as a basis to justify an individual’s license to seek revenge against any who might have

wronged them. Instead of using the principle of “an eye for an eye” as a proper and fair response to prevent cruelty and unfairness, which was enacted by God, they had turned it into a license for personal revenge.

Jesus makes reference to the principle “Do not resist the one who is evil.” Clearly, here, Jesus is not teaching that His disciples were to simply allow evil to do as it pleased in their presence. If that were the case, then we would not have witnessed Jesus confronting the moneychangers in the temple — His hands would have never held a whip nor His voice raised in condemnation of those men who made His house a den of thieves.

It is apparent that Jesus is instructing His disciples that they are not to follow the errant teachings of the religious leaders who perverted the “eye for an eye” principle and used it in their own personal relationships to justify themselves for taking revenge. What Jesus really forbids in this “lex talionis” (law of retribution) is the desire to get one’s “pound of flesh” when someone wrongs them. In order to fulfill what Jesus taught, one had to live in a manner contrary to their culture and their own human nature and to not demand their rights, but to relinquish them in order to be a part of God’s kingdom.

When Jesus specifically mentions the “right cheek” that probably doesn’t imply that one is being struck by a “left-handed slapper.” (if open-palmed, then only a left-handed person facing you can give your cheek a slap on the right side).

In that day, as it is today, most people were right-handed so a person slapping you on the “right cheek” who is right-handed could only accomplish that feat by a back-handed slap of their right hand to your right cheek. To a Jew that is a great form of an insult (it is kin to the slap of someone challenging another to a duel). That kind of backhanded slap to the face was not so much to inflict bodily harm as to assault a person’s dignity. It is in such situations when Jesus’ teaching must become our response — as difficult as that might be!

Jesus goes on to say that if anyone sues you for your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. I hardly think that Jesus is teaching that if someone sues you unfairly that you are to allow him to do so and not only give him what he is asking for, but to allow him to take it and then offer him even more. The real implication in this setting is that if a person is being sued for a legitimate reason (repayment of an owed debt) and to show your true repentance for faulting on a contract to another to give him extra to relinquish any bitterness that might be felt for one’s own doing. In Exodus 22:26-27 it states that if one takes his neighbor’s cloak in a pledge, he shall return it to him before the sun goes down, for that is his only covering, and it is the cloak for his body; in what else shall he sleep?

Jesus went on to teach His disciples, “And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles.”

The Romans had adopted what was originally a Persian idea and developed a system in which a Roman soldier could

conscript a person to carry his pack. But the law limited that conscripted service to carrying the load for no more than one mile. We see that practice come into play when Jesus was carrying His cross to Golgotha to be crucified and the Roman soldiers conscripted Simon of Cyrene to carry the cross for Him.

We can only imagine how a Jew would feel when a hated Roman soldier demanded that he carry his heavy pack for a mile. The Jew would be carrying the very weapons for those who had made him a captive in his own land and those weapons could be used against him and his fellow Jews if they rebelled against Roman authority. Yet, Jesus taught for the individual to not only go the mile, but to go another mile also (See Galatians 6:10). Jesus' teaching here was a hard lesson, but one that the people of His kingdom must learn in order to please Him — go beyond what is demanded and do that which shows forth the grace of God in your life!

—jlg—