

4. PACIFISM: Affirmation and Confirmation with Application!

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You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I tell you not to resist an evil person. But whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also (Matthew 6:38 NKJV).

When I began this little series on *PACIFISM: Is It Wrong For a Christian To Defend Himself?* I was aware (and actually wrote in the previous articles) that the subject has been hotly debated within the Church for generations. I knew there would be objections, and I genuinely mean it when I repeat that, I value very highly the responses from all those who do not agree with my understanding of this vexed and challenging question: This is a subject, I reiterate, where each individual conscience must be guided by the light God is pleased to give. It is no business of mine what your conscience says, and I ask for no less where my conscience finally lands.

It's good to be held to account for what I teach. Knowing that teachers of God's inspired Scriptures will be held to a higher standard, I can reassure my readers that your thoughtful responses have driven me to my knees (James 3:1). I have asked the Almighty Father to confirm whether my exegesis is in line with His Son's instructions, or whether I have been skewed. If awry, it would not be the first time I have been wrong, and it certainly won't be the last!

Well, as I was praying last evening, I suddenly remembered one of my favourite authors. Why hadn't I consulted what Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones says on the subject? I can't believe I hadn't looked up what he wrote on Matthew 5:38. (¹)

As I began reading his *Studies In The Sermon On The Mount (Matthew 5)* chapter 26 is headed, *An Eye For An Eye, And A Tooth For A Tooth.* (²) Reading on, my heart began to leap with joy and thanks to Yahweh God. Here was His Spirit's witness to my heart that I craved and had asked for.

I usually do not cite large sections from other books, but on this occasion and for the rest of this article, I am going to extensively share Dr Lloyd-Jones's thoughts on Jesus' discourse from this much misunderstood text from Matthew 5:38. He confirms everything I have so far written about pacifism, only far more thoroughly.

¹ DISCLAIMER: I do not endorse Dr Lloyd-Jones's strict Trinitarian Reformed Theology.

² Vol. 1, Inter-Varsity Press, London, 1959. (All blue text is Lloyd-Jones but the bold face is my emphasis.)

As always, **Lloyd-Jones** is a study in the masterclass of Biblical study and exegesis. He sets forth how the **eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth** teaching of Jesus is an illustration of the way in which Jesus' interpretation of the Mosaic law is contrasted with the perversion of it by the scribes and Pharisees. (I wrote as much in my previous articles).

Instead of upholding the original intent of the Mosaic legislation, the hypocritical leaders in Jesus' day were ignoring entirely the fact that this teaching was for the judges [magistrates] only. They made it a matter for personal application. Not only that, they regarded it, in their typical legalistic manner, as a matter of right and duty to have '**an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth**'. To them it was something to be insisted upon rather than something which should be restrained. It was a legalistic outlook which thought only of its rights ... (confirming again what I had written).

They were therefore guilty of two main errors at that point. They were turning a negative injunction into a positive one, and, furthermore, were interpreting it and carrying it out themselves, and teaching others to do so, instead of seeing that it was something that was to be carried out only by the appointed judges who were responsible for law and order.

Not understanding this general background, **Lloyd-Jones** deduces that Jesus' teaching that **I tell you not to resist an evil person** has been frequently misunderstood and caused great confusion. He even states that there is possibly no passage in Scripture which has produced as much heat and disputation as this very teaching which tells us not to resist evil and to be loving and forgiving.

Pacifism is the cause of much wordy warfare and it often leads to a spirit which is as far removed as possible from that which is taught and inculcated by our blessed Lord. Our writer wisely cautions again that this kind of injunction can only be understood truly if it is always kept in its context and setting.

At this juncture **Lloyd-Jones** reminds the Bible student of certain principles of interpretation which must be observed if we want to know the truth concerning these matters. Not leaving it to chance, he then iterates some of those principles here ...

1. We must never regard the Sermon on the Mount as a code of ethics, or a set of rules to cover our conduct in detail. We must not think of it as being a new kind of law to replace the old Mosaic law; it is rather a matter of emphasizing the spirit of the law. So that we must not, if we are in trouble as to what to do at a

particular point, rush to the Sermon on the Mount and turn up a particular passage ... **Is it not rather tragic that those of us who are under grace always seem to want to be under law?**

2. These teachings are never to be applied mechanically or as a kind of rule of thumb. It is the spirit rather than the letter. Not that we depreciate the letter, but it is the spirit we must emphasize.

3. If our interpretation ever makes the teaching appear to be ridiculous or leads us to a ridiculous position, it is patently a wrong interpretation ... nothing our Lord teaches is ever impossible ... [his] teaching was meant for daily life.

4. We must remember that if our interpretation of any one of these things contradicts the plain and obvious teaching of Scripture at another point, again it is obvious that our interpretation has gone astray. Scripture must be taken and compared with Scripture. There is no contradiction in biblical teaching.

Bringing this all together, let's consider our Lord's teaching on **Matthew 5: 38**: "**They say** 'an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth. **But I say**, do not resist an evil person.' What does it mean? We must inevitably start with the negative which is that this statement is **not** to be taken literally. There are always people who say, 'Now you must take the Scripture exactly as it is, and Scripture says **do not resist an evil person**. There you are; there is no more to be said.'

If such a method of interpretation is woodenly insisted upon, then we obviously will arrive at the ridiculous and the impossible. **Lloyd-Jones** then illustrates how some great religious minds, such as **Count Leo Tolstoy**, insist these words of Jesus be taken at their face value. He said that to have soldiers, or police, or even magistrates, is unchristian. He insisted that evil persons were not ever to be resisted, for that is Christ's unqualified teaching.

Such an approach to Biblical interpretation does not therefore admit any special conditions. Since policemen resist evil persons, and since soldiers, judges and law courts resist evil acts, we must not have them! Nor should there logically be any punishment for crime!

Although other Christian teachers do not go so far as this, for they still insist on law courts and punishments, yet they maintain that there should be no soldiers, no wars, no capital punishment, no killing of any wicked persons in any sense whatsoever.

KNOW WHERE TO START!

At this point, Lloyd-Jones advises that we must remember once more the whole context and connection of these statements [of Jesus]. We must not start with the sermon half way through. The order of Jesus' teaching is crucial. We don't start with Matthew 5:38 in this instance. We start with the Beatitudes. We start with those fundamental definitions and advance them.

Keeping this in mind, the first principle is that this teaching is **not for the nations or for the world**. Indeed we can go further and say that this teaching has nothing whatsoever to do with a man who is not a Christian.

So, to whom is Jesus speaking? He describes them in the Beatitudes. The first thing he says about them is that they are **poor in spirit**. That is, they are perfectly aware of their own utter inability, that they are sinners, and that they are totally helpless in the sight of a holy God. They mourn their lost and hapless condition. They know that within them lurks a fallen state which corrupts, spoils, mars everything.

Same goes for the **meek**. They have a mind which is the antithesis of the boastful, proud, self-promoting spirit of this age which 'knows it all'. And they have **a hunger and a thirst after righteousness**, a burning desire to promote the Kingdom of God.

Which is all to say, that Matthew 5:38 (and the similar injunctions about things like taking of oaths, sexual morality, etc.) is impossible for the man of the world, who is **dead in trespasses and sins ... and who walks according to the course of this world and [who is] controlled by the Prince of the power of the air (Eph.2:1f)**. Only the 'spiritual man' who is regenerated by the Spirit of God can fulfill Jesus' teaching.

Therefore to ask for Christian conduct from an individual who is not born again, let alone a nation or a group of nations or a world of nations, is both impossible and wrong.

For the world, and for a nation, and for non-Christians the law still applies. This is why God has ordained — and why we must believe in law and order. This is **why a Christian must never be negligent of his duties as a citizen of a State**. He knows that **the governing authorities are of God and are appointed by God (Rom. 13:1)**. The believer knows that lawlessness must be controlled, that crime must be kept within bounds, that it must be punished. **An eye for an eye** still holds until a man comes under the renewing grace of God in Christ Jesus.

WHERE THE MODERN CONFUSION ENTERS.

It is at this point that all this modern muddle and confusion has entered in.

And it enters in right from the cradle with the idea that children must not be punished when they go wrong. Recent generations are proving that it's not good enough just to 'love everybody and make them nice little people'. Children need law and order. They need to learn about justice. Lloyd-Jones unequivocally says modern soft teaching **is heresy!** For until the spirit of Jesus Christ enters into us, the law of **an eye for an eye** is necessary.

Repeat: **That is our first principle. Matthew 5:38 has nothing to do with nations or so-called Christian pacifism, Christian socialism and things like that. They cannot be based on this teaching; indeed they are a denial of it.**

Matthew 5:38 concerns the individual Christian **and nobody else.** It **applies to him only in his personal relationships and not in his relationships as a citizen of his country.**

All of my readers live in different countries, various nations, under different regimes. Thankfully, I live in the fantastic country of Australia. As a citizen of Australia, I have a certain relationship and responsibility to uphold its government and institutions — in so far as they reflect the wider principles of God's created order.

I also have more intimate and personal relationships with my family, and neighbours and friends, and of course, in my church fellowship. Putting this teaching in the starkest of terms, we must repeat that: **Our Lord's teaching concerns the behaviour of the Christian in his personal relationships only; indeed, in this saying [of Jesus] the Christian's relationship to the State is not even considered or mentioned.** Here we have nothing but the reaction of the Christian as an individual to the things that are done to him personally.

With regard to the Christian's relationship to the State and his general relationships, there is ample teaching elsewhere in the Scriptures. If you are anxious about your relationship to the State or your attitude as a citizen do not stay with the Sermon on the Mount. Rather go to other chapters that deal specifically with that subject, such as **Romans 13** and **1 Peter 2**. So that if I am considering my duty to the State in the matter of going into the Forces, I do not find the answer here. I must look for it elsewhere. And yet how often, when a man's duty towards the State is being considered, this passage is quoted. I suggest it has nothing whatsoever to do with it.

THE QUESTION OF KILLING IS NOT FOUND HERE!

The next principle which controls our interpretation of this subject is clearly, that **the question of killing and taking of life is not considered as such in this teaching, whether it be regarded as capital punishment, or killing in war, or any other form of killing.**

The context is that our Lord is considering this law of the Christian's personal reaction to the things that happen to him. Ultimately, of course, it will cover the whole question of killing, but that is not the principle that he puts in the forefront.

Therefore, to interpret this paragraph in terms of pacifism and nothing else is to reduce this great and wonderful Christian teaching to a mere matter of legalism. And those who base their pacifism upon this paragraph ... are guilty of a kind of heresy. They have dropped back into the legalism of the Pharisees and scribes; and that is an utterly false interpretation.

WHAT IS THE POSITIVE LESSON TAUGHT HERE?

Concluding his chapter, **Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones**, as in all of his Bible teaching, finishes with his application: **What, then, is taught here? ... We could discuss the Christian in terms of the State and war and all these things. But that is something very much easier than that which the Lord Jesus Christ asks us to face here. What he asks you to face is yourself, and it is very much easier to discuss pacifism than to face his clear teaching at this point. What is it?**

I suggest that the key to it is to be found in **verse 42. 'Give to him who asks you, and from him who wants to borrow from you do not turn away.'** That is most important. As you read this paragraph, your first feeling when you come to **verse 42** is that it should not be there at all. **'You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.'** But I tell you not to resist an evil person. But whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also.' That is the theme, resisting evil, and therefore these questions of war and killing and capital punishment seem to arise. But then he goes on to say: **'If anyone wants to sue you and take away your tunic, let him have your cloak also. And whoever compels you to go one mile, go with him two.'**

Then suddenly: **'Give to him who asks you, and from him who wants to borrow from you do not turn away.'** At once we feel like asking, What has this question got to do with resisting evil and not hitting back, or with fighting and killing?

How does this come in? There we are given a clue to the understanding of the

principles our Lord is here inculcating. He is concerned the whole time about the question of the 'self' and of our attitude towards ourselves. He is saying in effect that if we are to be truly Christian we must become dead to self. **It is not a question of whether we should go into the Army or anything else;** it is a question of what I think of myself, and of my attitude towards myself ...

It works out in the following respects. I must be right in my attitude towards myself and the spirit of self-defence that immediately rises when any wrong is done to me. I must also deal with the desire for revenge and the spirit of retaliation that is characteristic of the natural self.

Then there is the attitude of self towards injustices that are done to it and towards the demands that are made upon it by the community or the State. And finally there is the attitude of self to personal possessions. Our Lord is here unveiling and exposing this horrible thing that controls the natural man — self, that terrible legacy that has come down from the fall of man and which makes man glorify himself and set himself up as a god.

He protects this self all along and in every way. But he does it not only when it is attacked or when something is taken from him; he does it also in the matter of his possessions. If another wants to borrow from him, his instinctive response is: 'Why should I part with my goods and impoverish myself?' It is self the whole time.

The moment we see that, there is no contradiction between **verse 42** and the others. It is not only a connection, it is an essential part of it. The tragedy of the Pharisees and scribes was that they interpreted **an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth** in a purely legal manner or as something physical and material. We still do that. We reduce this amazing teaching just to the question of capital punishment, or whether we should take part in war. 'No,' says Christ in effect, 'it is a matter of the spirit, it is a matter of your whole attitude, especially towards yourself; and I would have you see that if you are to be truly my disciples you must become dead to yourself — deny yourself and all rights to yourself and take up your cross and follow me.'

Thank you good doctor and teacher for your confirmation, affirmation and application of what I have expounded on the subject of the Christian and pacifism. May God grant us each one to be led by His Spirit as we seek to anticipate the coming of His kingdom in which **grace will reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord (Rom. 5:21)**. Amen to the glory of God!

