

Matthew 5:38–42 (ESV)

Retaliation

³⁸ “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’

- 1) Jesus is still dealing with the oral tradition here.
 - a) One might assume again that this oral tradition is equally as strong in its specificity as the written.
 - b) Looking at portions of the Torah which address this, we find a large number of specifics:

Exodus 21:23–25 (ESV)

²³ But if there is harm, then you shall pay life for life, ²⁴ eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, ²⁵ burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe.

Leviticus 24:19–20 (ESV)

¹⁹ If anyone injures his neighbor, as he has done it shall be done to him, ²⁰ fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth; whatever injury he has given a person shall be given to him.

Deuteronomy 19:18–21 (ESV)

¹⁸ The judges shall inquire diligently, and if the witness is a false witness and has accused his brother falsely, ¹⁹ then you shall do to him as he had meant to do to his brother. So you shall purge the evil from your midst. ²⁰ And the rest shall hear and fear, and shall never again commit any such evil among you. ²¹ Your eye shall not pity. It shall be life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot.

- 2) This last passage in Deuteronomy has a rather unique spin.
 - a) If you are a false witness and plan to take vengeance wrongly on your brother; if you are found out, it will backfire on you.
 - b) In other words, if I say “my brother broke my arm” when in truth someone else did or I accidentally did it myself, then, instead of the brother you are accusing having his arm broken you would have your other arm broken!
- 3) Obviously, the written law is very specific in what it says about how things are to be done.
 - a) The consensus here is that even early on, this was not an actual physical punishment.
 - b) Rather it was mostly a monetary assessment against the offending party.
 - i) It was assessed on a case-by-case basis and normally tied to one’s ability to work – i.e. a hand would be a more costly loss than perhaps a tooth or an eye.
 - c) We get an idea in the last reading in Deuteronomy that the purpose of this might be to rid evil from among the people.
 - i) Severe punishment can have a real teaching effect on folks.

Here is the question we must first answer. Is this meant for the individual? In other words, if you poke me in the eye am I to then poke you in the eye (demand specific monetary compensation)?

- d) In the LABC, Bruce Barton comments and I think lends some right perspective to this:

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While the law sounds severe to us, in its time it set guidelines against what may have been escalating personal vendettas among people. The principle of retribution, *lex talionis*, gave judges a formula for dealing with crime. That is, “Make the punishment fit the crime.” The law limited vengeance and helped the court administer punishment that was neither too strict nor too lenient.¹⁰

(the *lex talionis*, Latin for “law of retaliation”)

- 4) In other words, this functioned as a judicial principle, administered by courts.
 - a) It was meant to limit retaliation and ensure proportional justice.
- 5) According to Josephus, by Jesus’ day, these punishments were commonly interpreted as monetary compensation, not literal mutilation (Josephus, Ant. 4.280; later Mishnah Bava Qamma 8).
 - a) Later, in the Mishnah, there are specific formulas for making the required calculations,
- 6) In essence, verse 38 says the Torah shows things being mediated through legal tradition, not vigilante revenge.
- 7) One further thing that really plays into what Barton was saying is the first part of verse 21.

Your eye shall not pity.

- 8) You would almost think that was a contradiction to mercy.
 - a) However, when one thinks of this from the perspective of judicial guidelines, it is the judge who is to show no pity.
 - b) Again, the punishment is to fit the crime.
- 9) Now, what does Jesus say about all this?

Matthew 5:39–42 (ESV)

Retaliation

³⁹ 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. ⁴⁰ And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. ⁴¹ And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. ⁴² Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you.

10) Let’s start with a couple of questions.

Is Jesus’ perspective here in verses 39 to 42 the same as what the oral traditions and the Torah state in verse 38?

- a) The answer is NO they are not.
 - i) Torah is a judicial principle.
 - ii) Jesus is showing the kingdom ethic.
- 11) The very first thing Jesus says here in the NASB translation is “do not to show opposition against an evil person.”

¹⁰ Bruce B. Barton, *Matthew*, Life Application Bible Commentary (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1996), 102s.

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- a) Most other translations say resist.
- b) However, the verb translated “resist” is often used for legal or forceful opposition, not passive disagreement.
 - i) This can also be paraphrased as, “Do not retaliate against an evildoer.”
- c) Jesus is not correcting a misunderstanding of the Torah here.
- d) He is changing how we as radical disciples are to respond to personal wrongs.

We very seldom, if ever actually get slapped, it is not very likely that we will be sued by someone to take our clothes, or have someone demand that we carry their belongings for a mile.

So, how do we implement Jesus’ teachings – what is required of us?

- 1) When we look at this next passage and apply what it says, we have a very good explanation as to how Jesus intends for us to accomplish the very thing we have been talking about ...

Matthew 5:43–48 (ESV)

Love Your Enemies

⁴³ “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ ⁴⁴ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵ 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. ⁴⁶ For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? ⁴⁷ And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? ⁴⁸ You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

- 2) To begin, let’s look at the actual scripture behind what Jesus is saying:

Leviticus 19:18 (ESV)

¹⁸ 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.

- 3) As to enemies, Torah says very little but from what it does say one can rule out the oral tradition of “hate your enemies.”

Exodus 23:4–5 (ESV)

⁴ “If you meet your enemy’s ox or his donkey going astray, you shall bring it back to him. ⁵ If you see the donkey of one who hates you lying down under its burden, you shall refrain from leaving him with it; you shall rescue it with him.

Leviticus 19:34 (ESV)

³⁴ You shall treat the stranger who sojourns with you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God.

Proverbs 25:21–22 (ESV)

²¹ If your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat,
and if he is thirsty, give him water to drink,

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- 22 for you will heap burning coals on his head,
and the LORD will reward you.
- 4) The Leviticus 19:18 passage begins with a couple of words that more or less frame the intention – vengeance and grudge.
 - a) What this is saying is someone does something wrong to you, you should not try to “get them back” so to speak.
 - i) Not really “love your enemies” but, not really “hate them either.”
 - b) It also says that even though you do not get them back (take vengeance)(obey the first part) you must also not hold whatever it was against them (a grudge).
 - c) This may also be between two people who are “neighbors,” not necessarily “enemies.”
 - 5) Looking at Exodus 23:4–5 we see an absolute contradiction of the hate your enemies statement.
 - a) Even if someone hates you, if you see him in need, you are to help him.
 - 6) Additionally, of interest is that the Lev 19:34 passage is really about non-Jews.
 - a) Obviously, by the time of Christ, there has been a radical departure from the Torah requirement.
 - 7) From the oral tradition, these folks had the black and white idea of love your neighbor and hate you enemy.
 - a) At this point, we need to say a few more words about the Pharisees, the oral tradition, and the general population.
 - b) First, the Pharisees were not hated by the average Jew, to the contrary, they were actually liked.
 - c) Though some of what the Pharisees taught was difficult, some of it – like this – was really easy.
 - i) It is much easier to love your neighbor whom you like and hate your enemy than to actually go out of your way to help someone who hates you.
 - 8) Then, Jesus heads down the road again; **“But I say to you ...”** shocking the audience with this radical change to what they were thinking was right back to how God really wants them to be.

Love your enemies, pray for those who persecute you...

- 9) He makes several comparisons that would also shock these listeners.
 - a) Evil/good, righteous/unrighteous, tax collectors, Gentiles.
 - b) The idea being that these folks do what is normal (ordinary) and that is NOT what God is requiring!
 - i) He is requiring the extraordinary!
- 10) Let’s start with some focus questions. **No need to answer** these first couple of questions out loud but here goes...

How many “personal” enemies do you have?

If you could ask them, would they agree with your assessment that they are your enemy?

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Or is it just that you consider them to be your enemy?

- a) That begs another couple of questions and opens this up for discussion.

If the answer is that they would not or might not consider you an enemy, then why do we consider them enemies?

Does that change the way we should implement what Jesus is saying here?

11) The point I would make here is that we need be sure that we

DO NOT LET OUR DISLIKE OF A PERSON OR AN OFFENCE WE PERCEIVE THEY HAVE COMMITTED AGAINST US MAKE US THINK THEY ARE OUR ENEMIES.

- a) In this case, we have made a person an enemy because of the way we feel or want to feel (our perceptions) – not that they are an enemy by their own desire.

12) Simply put, just because we dislike someone, we cannot think of them as an enemy.

- a) They may not look at us that way at all.

i) In fact, they may even think highly of us **but** because of something they did we look at them as enemies.

- b) Obviously, in a case like this the problem is ours, not theirs.

13) I think I would use the term here perhaps as “**Perceived Enemies.**”

14) Now, for the true enemy. This is someone who is out to cause us physical, mental, or harm our lives in some other way – it’s real!

- a) These are the people Jesus is really talking about.

- b) Now, the problem is we are still the ones who must deal with them but in the way that Jesus prescribes – love them and pray for them.

So, the question might be, should we deal with real enemies and perceived enemies any differently? If so, how?

15) Jesus completes this passage with a rather daunting statement ...

⁴⁸ **Therefore you shall be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.**

- a) The word used here indeed has “perfect” as one of its meanings.

b) However, in this case, according to BDAG the preferred rendering might be “being fully developed in a moral sense”¹¹, also, possibly just complete in a moral sense.

- c) Obviously not a measure of sinlessness or any other such unattainable goal.

d) Instead, it is simply saying that if we do as Jesus says, we will have the same attitude of love and caring for our neighbor and for that matter our enemy as does God.

Do we ever think of ourselves as being complete in a moral sense?

If not, why not?

¹¹ William Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 996.