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MINISTRIES

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Do Not Resist the One who is Evil (Matthew 5:38-42)

How should we respond when someone wrongs us? In Matthew 5:38-42, Jesus—or Yeshua, as he is called in Hebrew—offers a surprising answer to that question. He references a commandment found in the Torah, and then proceeds to explain how he expects his followers to respond when they are slapped, sued, and mistreated. He says, “[Do not resist the one who is evil.](#)”

This teaching from Yeshua, which includes ideas like turning the other cheek and walking a second mile, is well known and quite controversial. This passage has often been interpreted as an example of Yeshua contradicting or undermining the Law of Moses. Also, many have understood this passage to imply that Yeshua wants his followers basically to be pushovers and to let bullies walk all over them. But is that really what Yeshua is saying?

In this teaching, we will look at Matthew 5:38-42 in light of its cultural and historical context, which will shed some light on what Yeshua means when he says not to resist the one who is evil.

Let’s jump in:

Matthew 5:38-42

[You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ 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. And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you.](#)

The first thing to note about this passage is that Yeshua is contrasting his teaching with what his audience has heard about “[an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.](#)” Before we get into the details of Yeshua’s teaching, what exactly is “[an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth](#)”?

The Law of Just Compensation

“[An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth](#)” is a quotation from the Torah, and it refers to the principle of

just compensation for loss, or as it is known in Latin: *lex talionis*. Here is one place in the Torah where the quote is found:

Exodus 21:23-25

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

(See also *Leviticus 24:20*; *Deuteronomy 19:21*)

The idea here is that if you injure someone's eye, you must compensate them for the value of that eye. Significantly, except in the case of "life for life"—that is, capital punishment for murder—this law was not intended to be taken literally. The Torah does not call for physical mutilation. That wouldn't make sense from a legal perspective. How would literally poking out someone's eye make up for losing your own eye? Instead, the loss was usually assigned monetary or some other value, which was then paid to the victim (See Jay Sklar, *Leviticus*, ZECOT (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2023), 660-661).

For example, immediately following the "eye for an eye" passage in Exodus 21:23-25, the Torah states that if a master injures his slave's eye or tooth, he does not recompense that injury by literally losing his own eye or tooth; instead, he recompenses that injury by letting the slave go free (Exodus 21:26-27). This indicates that the expression "[eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth](#)" is not meant literally; it is a metaphor for expressing just and fair compensation for loss. Our modern judicial system is actually based upon this same principle. For instance, if you are injured in a car accident because someone rear-ended you, the law does not require that the person who hit you have the back of their car smashed and be given physical injuries to match yours. The law requires that you be compensated with money to heal your injuries and repair your car.

What is important to recognize about this law is that, contrary to popular assumptions, it is not about getting personal vengeance. It is not about hurting someone because they hurt you. In fact, the Torah elsewhere explicitly prohibits taking personal vengeance:

Leviticus 19:18

[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 [YHWH].

The point of "eye for an eye" is actually to *prevent* personal acts of vengeance. It does this in two ways: first, the law must be applied within the judicial system. If someone kills your sheep, you cannot personally go steal his sheep to make up for it. If you desire compensation for your loss, you must bring the matter to the judges, who then decide the appropriate punishment and restitution. Second, the law restricts the amount of compensation a person could demand to be proportional to the value of the actual loss. For example, if someone kills your sheep, you can't take their entire herd, their ox, their grain field, and their firstborn child as compensation. You can only seek the value equivalent to the lost sheep.

So, this is a *very good* principle—and again, it forms the foundation of our own modern judicial system. "Eye for an eye" is ultimately about justice under the law. It's about preventing vigilante acts of vengeance, holding people responsible for their actions, and requiring guilty parties to make things right with those whom they wronged.

Before we move on, there is one more point worth mentioning: despite the great wisdom of legal principles like "eye for an eye," the reality is that we still live in a fallen world full of injustice. Justice is often out of reach in this world because of sin, corruption, and oppression. The Torah itself

acknowledges this reality and promises that one day God himself will vindicate his people. God assures us that recompense belongs to *him*, and that we can trust that *he* will repay in his timing (Deuteronomy 32:35; cf. Romans 12:19). So, even in the Torah itself, there is this notion that justice is out of reach in our fallen world and that God is the ultimate provider of justice. Hence, we can trust God to vindicate us instead of thinking that we must take matters into our own hands.

With that said, let's get back to Yeshua's teaching on this topic.

“But I say...”

After quoting the “eye for an eye” principle from the Torah, Yeshua starts his teaching with “[But I say.](#)” In doing so, he contrasts his teaching with what his listeners have heard about “[an eye for an eye.](#)” This contrast has led some to conclude that Yeshua's teaching here actually opposes the Torah. Andy Stanley's comments on this passage are representative of this perspective:

[W]e can't begin to imagine how *unbiblical* this sounded to first-century Jews whose entire Scriptures were built on an ethic to the contrary...Jesus wasn't simply contradicting their Scriptures. His teaching stood in stark contrast to their entire history!

—Andy Stanley, *Irresistible: Reclaiming the New that Jesus Unleashed for the World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2018), 106-107

Is Yeshua really contradicting the Torah in this passage? Actually, according to the context, that idea is impossible.

Several verses earlier, Yeshua explicitly prohibits his listeners from thinking that he came to abolish the Law and Prophets (Matthew 5:17). If we interpret Matthew 5:38-42 to mean that Yeshua is contradicting or undermining the Torah, then we are violating his direct order in verse 17, when he said that we shouldn't think that he came to do such a thing. Yeshua did not come to nullify or oppose the Torah but instead came to “fulfill” it—that is, fully do and teach the Torah. As Craig Evans remarks:

Jesus can hardly claim to fulfill the Law (Matt 5:17) if he then contradicts it.

—Craig Evans, *Matthew*, NCBC (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 120-121.

So, Yeshua is *not*, in fact, contrasting his teaching with the Torah itself. What is he contrasting then? He is contrasting his teaching with the teachings of the scribes and Pharisees. He is not opposing the Torah; he is opposing the scribes' and Pharisees' inferior interpretations of the Torah. That is what is meant by the expression, “[You have heard that it was said.](#)” As Steven Stiles writes:

[W]hen the Matthean Jesus refers to what the crowds have “heard” (ἠκούσατε), he is quoting the Torah as it is insufficiently interpreted by the scribes and Pharisees. This “distorted” interpretation of the Torah produces a righteousness that is insufficient for entering the kingdom of Heaven (Matt 5:20).

—Steven James Stiles, *Jesus' Fulfilment of the Torah and Prophets* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2023), 113

The fact that Yeshua is contrasting his teachings with the Pharisees' teachings is evident from the

overall context. Right before he goes into his antithetical sayings—that is, his “You have heard it said...But I say” teachings in verses 21-48—he condemns the inadequate righteousness of the Pharisees in verse 20. He then follows his antithetical sayings with yet another condemnation of the Pharisees’ “righteousness” in Matthew 6:1-18. Hence, it seems clear that Yeshua is opposing the teachings of the Pharisees, not the Law of Moses. The point of his antithetical sayings is to reveal that the scribes and the Pharisees are the ones who abolish the Torah by misapplying it; in contrast, Yeshua *fulfills* the Torah by explaining what it means to fully live it out (Matthew 5:17).

How did the Pharisees misapply this law of “eye for an eye”? It’s difficult to know for sure, but we can infer some things about their teaching from the text itself. For instance, some scholars suggest that the Pharisees took this principle out of its judicial context and used it as justification for pursuing personal acts of vengeance (Charles H. Talbert, *Matthew*, PCNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010), 85-86). That is to say, if someone slaps you, they taught that you have the legal right to immediately slap them back (Matthew 5:39). If that is correct, then such an idea opposes the very purpose of the law, which was to *prevent* acts of personal vengeance by requiring that punishment and recompense be administered by Israel’s judges. Furthermore, using this law to pursue personal acts of vengeance not only distorts the purpose of “eye for and eye” but also explicitly violates Leviticus 19:18: “**You shall not take vengeance.**”

As we’ve mentioned, Yeshua is not undermining “eye for an eye” in Matthew 5:38-42; he is correcting its misapplication. As Dale Allison writes:

[W]hereas Matt. 5:38-42 concerns personal acts of vengeance by one wronged, Deuteronomy speaks to judges about how to administer the law. It is true that 5:40 refers to the court, but Jesus is not here delivering laws for the court to follow. He is rather speaking about interpersonal relations and declaring that it is illegitimate for his followers to apply the *lex talionis* to their private problems. So he is not overthrowing the principle of equivalent compensation on an institutional level.

—Dale C. Allison, *The Sermon on the Mount: Inspiring the Moral Imagination* (New York, NY: Crossroad, 1999), 93.

So, we are not to misuse the Torah to justify personal acts of vengeance. How then does Yeshua tell us to respond when we are wronged?

Do Not Resist

Yeshua begins his teaching by saying, “**Do not resist the one who is evil.**” He then provides some examples to illustrate this principle: turning the other cheek, giving your cloak, going the extra mile, and giving to the one who begs. Before we delve into each of these examples, we must ask: what does Yeshua mean when he says, “**Do not resist the one who is evil**”? Is Yeshua telling us to be pushovers and to just surrender to evil? Not at all.

When Yeshua says “do not resist,” he means do not respond *in the same manner*. As the three examples he gives will demonstrate, Yeshua is not saying that you must allow evil to happen without any opposition whatsoever. Rather, he says to stand against your oppressor in such a way that you don’t become an oppressor yourself. You are to counter evil *with good*. As the apostle Peter puts it:

1 Peter 3:9

Do not repay evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary, bless, for to this you were called, that you may obtain a blessing.

The apostle Paul says the same thing:

Romans 12:17-21

Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay,” says the Lord.” To the contrary, “if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.” Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

1 Thessalonians 5:15

See that no one repays anyone evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to everyone.

This is Yeshua’s point. As a member of the Messiah’s kingdom, the way to address evil and receive justice is not to resort to personal acts of vengeance. It is to overcome evil with good and to trust that God will bring about justice in his own perfect way. That is precisely what Yeshua says several verses earlier—as we suffer for doing good, we are earning heavenly rewards. As promised in the Torah, God is the one who vindicates us:

Matthew 5:11-12

Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, **for your reward is great in heaven**, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Let’s explore the three illustrations Yeshua gives and see how they accomplish this goal of overcoming evil with good:

Matthew 5:39

But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.

Is Yeshua saying that we cannot defend ourselves when someone attacks us? While this verse has often been taken that way, that’s not actually the point. Yeshua is not talking about a fight between two individuals. If he were, we would expect him to describe a fistfight, not a slapping match. In the ancient world, slapping someone was a customary insult to a person’s honor—it was intended to humiliate and degrade them in the eyes of others (John G. Cook, “Matthew 5.39 and 26.67: Slapping Another’s Cheek in Ancient Mediterranean Culture,” *Journal of Greco-Roman Christianity and Judaism* 10 (2014): 68–89). That is the scenario Yeshua describes here.

So, how does Yeshua tell his followers to respond to such an insult to their honor? Again, they are not to respond *in the same manner*. They are not to slap back to try to regain some sense of honor for themselves in the world’s eyes. However—and this is important—they don’t cower in shame either. They don’t accept the insult. Instead, *they reject the entire premise* of the insult. How do they do that? By boldly inviting their offender to slap them again, showing that their honor does not depend upon whatever their offender does to them. Here is how Craig Keener explains the significance of this response:

In the case of an offense to one's personal dignity, Jesus not only warns the offended disciple not to retaliate, but suggests that the disciple indulge the offender further. By freely offering one's other cheek, one demonstrates that one does not value human honor. In a sense, this could constitute a form of resistance by showing contempt for the value of the insulter's (and perhaps the onlookers') opinions...Even in a society obsessed with honor and shame (e.g., Sir 1:30), a disciple must be so secure in his or her status before God that he or she can dispense with human honor. Such a person need not avenge lost honor because this person seeks God's honor rather than his or her own.

—Craig Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 198

As we can see, Yeshua does not advocate for his followers to just surrender to evil. Rather, this response is a way of *standing against* an oppressor without adopting their tactics. Moreover, it effectively undermines an oppressor's effort to insult you because, as a member of the Messiah's kingdom, your honor does not depend upon worldly systems of honor and shame. Your honor is determined by God, who has promised heavenly rewards to those who are reviled on account of the Messiah (Matthew 5:11-12). Turning the other cheek is saying, "Your attempt to shame me means literally nothing." It is saying, "I am not defined by your insults; I am defined by who God says I am. Hit me again—I want my heavenly rewards!"

So, far from being a pushover, in this historical context, turning the other cheek is an act of defiance. It entirely flips the script. And since this customary insult would be public, think about the impact this might have upon the crowd. Your response could potentially cause others to second-guess the legitimacy of the world's value system as well. You could imagine them thinking, "Yeah, this person is a nut, but maybe he has a point. Why should we let some bully determine our honor?"

The next example continues this theme of opposing injustice by undermining it entirely. Let's continue:

Matthew 5:40

And if anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well.

What is Yeshua describing here? Well, in ancient times, unless you were wealthy, you typically only owned one set of two types of garments: a tunic, which was your inner garment, and a cloak, which was your outer garment. What is interesting is that there is a commandment in the Law of Moses that relates to this illustration. The Torah states that if a poor person gives you their cloak, their *outer* garment, as a pledge for repaying a debt, you must return it to them by the end of the day—even if they weren't able to pay you back. This was because the cloak was also used as a blanket at night. Hence, this law was intended to ensure the well-being of the poor:

Exodus 22:26-27

If ever you take your neighbor's cloak in pledge, you shall return it to him before the sun goes down, for that is his only covering, and it is his cloak for his body; in what else shall he sleep? And if he cries to me, I will hear, for I am compassionate.

(See also Deuteronomy 24:12-13)

In Matthew 5:40, Yeshua describes a scenario where someone sues to take your *inner* garment because the Torah prevents them from permanently taking your outer garment. According to Craig Keener, this

illustration is purposely ridiculous and “almost humorous” (Craig Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 198).

That is, Yeshua’s original listeners would have found it absurd that someone could be so greedy and spiteful as to sue for a tunic. That’s like suing someone for their underwear! It would seem that someone who would do this type of thing is just wanting to hurt you, and they are using the legal system to do that.

How does Yeshua say to respond? Instead of expending all your time and resources fighting just to keep your tunic, he says to not respond in the same manner. He says to give them your outer garment as well. But what would that mean if you did that? It would mean that you would be standing there completely naked while your accuser holds all your clothes. And this is in a public courtroom! So, everyone who sees this would be astonished at how unjust the whole situation is. It exposes—apologies for the pun—the whole unjust system that would allow such a thing, and makes an absolute mockery of it. Could you imagine what people seeing this would think? “Look at this poor guy! That jerk took everything from him! That’s just wrong.”

Again, this illustration is intentionally shocking and absurd; it highlights the injustice behind greed and exploitation. The response advocated by Yeshua undermines the value system of the world without adopting the same unjust tactics used by those who mistreat others.

Let’s move on to the next example:

Matthew 5:41

And if anyone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles.

While this might seem vague to modern readers, Yeshua’s original listeners would have understood exactly what he was referring to. Here, Yeshua refers to the legal right of Roman soldiers to compel citizens to carry their equipment for one mile (G.H.R. Horsley, *New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity, vol. 1: A Review of the Greek Inscriptions and Papyri published in 1976* (Australia: The Ancient History Documentary Research Centre, 1981, 36-45).

So, Roman soldiers could literally just force someone on the side of the road to drop whatever they were doing and walk a mile carrying the soldier’s stuff. And we actually see this in the gospels, where the Romans compelled Simon of Cyrene to carry Yeshua’s cross (Matthew 27:32). Understandably, the Jewish people at this time criticized this practice and considered it utterly degrading, and it was (See sources cited in Craig Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 199-200).

What a depressing reminder to the Jews in this time that they were under Rome’s thumb—that they were powerless. And you could certainly imagine some ways that you could try to get personal vengeance in this situation. How about waiting until the guard isn’t paying attention, taking out a knife, stabbing him, and running away? Undoubtedly, there were many Jews who had that exact thought—that they could perhaps look for their opportunity to use violence to restore some sense of dignity for themselves. We know of at least one Jewish group at this time—the Zealots—who often *did* try to fight against Roman rule in Judea by using violence. However, this approach doesn’t really solve the problem. In fact, it often creates more problems, as we see with the First Jewish-Roman War in 66-73 AD, which led to countless deaths and the Second Temple’s destruction.

So, how does Yeshua tell his followers to respond to this situation? Once again, within the original cultural context, his teaching undermines the entire system. Instead of stopping at the one mile required by Roman law, Yeshua instructs his followers to go *a second mile*. Why? Because doing this goes beyond what oppressed Roman citizens are required to do for the soldiers over them. To put it another way, Yeshua says that his followers are not to behave like oppressed citizens. Going two miles instead of the one required by Roman law is something that you would only do for someone you cared about—someone who is an equal. Yeshua effectively turns this legal obligation for oppressed citizens into a *voluntary* and loving action performed by an equal.

This response is not being a pushover, and it's not taking personal vengeance. It is undermining the unjust system entirely. Yeshua is saying that you are not defined by how the Roman soldier treats you. You are defined by who God says you are. Your status in this world is irrelevant because you are a member of the kingdom, and you are earning heavenly rewards through your love and good deeds. Also, think about the witness this provides to the Roman soldier, you are humanizing him as well. You are stepping outside of the worldly "oppressor vs. oppressed" mentality. Suddenly, this soldier doesn't see you as an angry citizen who hates him and would try to kill him given the chance. You are treating him as a human, not a Roman soldier. You are treating him the way you treat a friend. There is no "oppressor vs. oppressed" hierarchy in God's kingdom. Everyone is made in God's image and has immense worth.

Let's move on to the final verse in our passage:

Matthew 5:42

Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you.

This last example is straightforward. Yeshua expects his followers to be generous and to value people more than their wealth or possessions. He says the same thing in the next chapter (Matthew 6:25-33): don't be anxious about what you will eat, drink, wear, and so forth. God is the ultimate provider of your needs. He is the ultimate provider of justice. Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness. Seek the heavenly rewards.

Conclusion

Yeshua's point in this passage is not to undermine the Torah, and it is not to say that we should be pushovers. His point is that when we are mistreated, we should not respond by mistreating others. When we are insulted, wrongfully sued, treated like pack animals, or imposed upon, we should not respond in kind. We recognize that we live in a fallen world, and we are not guaranteed justice in this age. And repaying evil with evil only perpetuates the problem of injustice. So, what do we do? Yeshua has given us a way out: the kingdom of heaven. Yeshua calls his people to kingdom life and kingdom values. We do not fight against injustice by adopting the tactics of the world. Instead, we fight by overcoming evil with good, earning heavenly rewards in the process. Regardless of our status in this world, we are members of the kingdom, and God is the perfect judge who promises to bring about true justice in his timing. His kingdom will come, and his will shall be done.

As we reflect upon Yeshua's teaching in Matthew 5:38-42, the questions for us are the following: do we want to perpetuate the injustices in the world by repaying evil with evil, or do we want to contribute to God's kingdom coming to earth? Are we more concerned with our status in this world, or our status in the kingdom? Do we want the earthly reward, or the heavenly reward? You are a member of the kingdom—so, live like it.

We pray you have been blessed by this teaching.

Remember, continue to test everything. Shalom!

For more on this and other teachings, please visit us at www.testeverything.net

Shalom, and may Yahweh bless you in walking in the whole Word of God.

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