

Radical, Selfless Love

Matthew 5:38-42

What is *Lex Talionis*?

In our passage (Matthew 5:38-42), Jesus gives a *fifth* example of kingdom righteousness, dealing with the area of retaliation. True to his pattern so far, he begins by rehearsing the law, in this case, the famous eye-for-an-eye law. Jesus is drawing from two similar passages in the Old Testament, Exodus 21:24 and Deuteronomy 29:21. Here's the one from the book of Exodus:

If people are fighting and hit a pregnant woman and she gives birth prematurely but there is no serious injury, the offender must be fined whatever the woman's husband demands and the court allows. But if there is serious injury, **you are to take life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise.**

Exodus 21:22-25

This kind of equal retribution law existed even before the time of Moses and became known in Latin as the *lex talionis*—the law of retaliation. On first blush, it sounds barbaric; on closer inspection, however, we realize that this is the basic principle upon which Western judicial theories are founded: that the punishment should be proportionate to the crime. This is one reason why lady justice is depicted holding a two-tray scale in her left hand. If the crime is on one tray, and the punishment on the other tray, both trays should be perfectly balanced.

The Kingdom Standard: Radical, Selfless Love

Jesus gives an even higher standard—one that actually turns that law on its head. “But I say to you, do not resist the one who is evil.” Who Jesus means by “the one who is evil” becomes clear in the following four examples: he or she is the one who has insulted, inconvenienced, or harmed, a follower of Jesus. When we view these examples as a whole, we see clearly the principle Jesus is teaching: we ought to replace selfish retaliation with radical, selfless love. This is not to say that the law of justice should be done away with; otherwise civilization would fall apart. But it is to say that the standard of Jesus' followers is much higher than this. It is an “ethic from beyond.”

Jesus' followers are those who have died to self, surrendered personal desire for revenge, and value something far greater than personal dignity, convenience, and possessions. They love God supremely, and others as themselves. They are able to “turn the other cheek,” and “go the extra mile” because the Spirit of God has radically transformed their hearts from loving self to loving others. After all, the first fruit of the Spirit is *love* (Galatians 5:22).

What Does This Mean for Us?

Some have taken this passage to mean that Jesus advocates pacifism. While the kingdom of heaven will one day be completely “pacific,” this is not Jesus' point, and we can easily get ensnared in debates, ignore the radical call to selfless love, and fail to see our desperate need for the Holy Spirit enable us to love in this way. Others have taken Jesus in a woodenly literal way, as if these four examples are four rules. Clearly, there are instances in which we *should* turn the other cheek, and allow ourselves to be defrauded. But in other cases, it would be *unloving* to give the person what they demand (this is most clear in the case of parenting young children). The determining factor is what would be *most* loving, most sacrificial, and we can never know what that is until we have Spirit-transformed hearts of love.

In a world that is, for now, a mix of the “kingdoms of this world” and the “kingdom of heaven” (see Revelation 11:15), it will take much spiritual discernment and genuine death to self

to decide how and whether to bring the law on our side (as Paul rightly did in Acts 22:25), or to “let ourselves be cheated” (2 Corinthians 6:7).

The essential thing is to be sure that, having trusted in Christ as Savior, we are now abandoning desire for personal revenge, and embracing in its place radical, selfless love.

After all, Jesus himself perfectly modeled all these examples of radical, selfless love. *He* turned the other cheek. *He* was stripped of his all garments. *He* was commandeered to carry a cross he should never have been crucified on. *He* gave to the one who asks of him.

And he did it all for *us*.

Questions for Discussion and Application

1. What is *good* about the *lex talionis*? What does this law assume about society and the human heart?
2. Did Jesus intend to do away with this law? Why or why not?
3. What voices in our hearts protest this principle of radical, selfless love?
4. Why does this point to our need for the Holy Spirit?
5. In which relationships do you need most to demonstrate this radical, selfless love?