

***No 7 An eye for an eye makes us all blind Matthew 5:38 to 42***

Jesus is giving his disciples teaching that will help them understand their place in his kingdom and in their world. This the fifth statement where he uses the idea of antithesis to make his point. You have heard this statement but I need to tell you what it really means. Such were the distortions that had been placed on OT teaching that their true meanings and intentions had been lost in a cloud of traditions.

You will find the ‘eye for an eye’ statement in the OT. (Deut 19:20 & 21, Exod 21:23 to 25, Lev 24:18 to 20). At first reading it sounds brutal but in many ancient societies, punishment was out of proportion to the sin committed. The ‘lex talionis’ (as it is called) was imposed by civil authorities and civil courts to protect the public, punish offenders and deter crime. It was never meant to be administered by individuals.

1. How easy is it to drift into a spirit of revenge when someone has hurt you?

What’s the best way to counter it?

How do we deal with it when it won’t go away?

The idea of the ‘lex talionis’ was that no individual should try to avenge a wrong because the victim was too biased and her/his judgement may well lead to personal retribution far in excess of what was deserved. It is interesting to read an OT version of this

***‘Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbour as yourself. I am the Lord.***

***Leviticus 19:18***

I wonder how many of you thought that ‘love your neighbour’ was NT in origin.

1. Does this mean we should never respond to a person who has done us wrong?

Should we seek a third party to resolve the problem?

Are some disputes impossible to solve?

In Jesus’ day there were plenty of people who wanted revenge - not least those who had been oppressed by their Roman occupiers. Jewish people felt powerless to get back at the Romans. But Jesus said

***‘Do not resist an evil person’ (5:39)***

It is, therefore, not the disciple’s personal responsibility to set themselves against the offending person. Their first responsibility is to reverse the dynamic of the situation from taking to giving.

1. The evil person has attempted to take from us - Jesus is asking us to give to the offender by serving him or her. Even when they are abused, they must think of ways to advance the kingdom of heaven and its influence on earth.

Is this just too hard?

Are we allowed some measure of response to a person who has damaged us?

Jesus then gives four everyday illustrations to illustrate how they can serve those who offend them. The first is being struck on the cheek. It is not so much the pain we should think about here but insult that has offended a person’s honour. Turning the other cheek places a person in a position of public or personal indignity and vulnerability.

1. Is this too much to ask?

What pressure does it place on the offender?

Talk about times when you have tried to turn the other cheek?

Does turning the other cheek give the impression that Christians are doormats?

The second illustration is a legal setting. A disciple is being sued for a very basic garment, a tunic. This was a very basic garment worn next to the skin – it looked a bit like a nightshirt. Jesus said you should give him your cloak – a much more essential garment. When a cloak was given as a pledge it had to be returned before sunset. The poor used it as a sleeping cover.

1. It takes time to absorb this radical teaching. Jesus is saying that if someone demands something basic from you, you should give it to them as well as giving them something even better?

So, if you have a dispute with your neighbour over a piece of land, you are to offer them more land than they are demanding.

Is this just?

Is it too demanding?

What effect might it have on the difficult neighbour?

The next one has a military flavour. In the days of occupation, it was not unknown for the Roman army to requisition local people to be their porters. (Remember Simon of Cyrene in Mt 27:32) If ordered to go one mile, they should ***willingly*** go two.

1. What does this say about how we should care for one another?

The last one relates to ‘uncomfortable’ people – people who pester you to beg or borrow from you. The words used here imply that it is likely such a person may find it difficult to repay you. Jesus’ words suggest that, even if you may suspect that the person may not be poor, you are to give them what they ask for. The parallel passage in Luke (6:35) takes it further when it says we are to give to our enemies.

It should be noted that the OT gives low status to people who fall into debt because of their own laziness (Proverbs 6:1 to 11) and regards those people who consistently seek loans and never repay them as wicked people.

1. But we are to give freely to anybody who seeks assistance. How does this teaching change our view on refugees and asylum seekers and to those in our own country who are genuinely poor?

Jesus lived out this radical principle and became a vivid example to his followers – he gave himself?

Has living in a consumer led society dulled our understanding of what Jesus is teaching in this passage?

What steps should we take to change?