

# You Have Heard That It Was Said: An Eye for an Eye and a Tooth for a Tooth

## Matthew 5: 38-42

**DIG:** What was the original intent of an **eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth**? How was this commandment perverted? What qualities ought to replace those desires for revenge? When did Yeshua **resist evil**? Who should take care of personal revenge? Is Jesus teaching that believers should resist criminal actions against them?

**REFLECT:** Does **turning the other cheek** mean not standing up for yourself? What does it mean? What does **handing over your coat** represent? What purpose does going the extra mile for unbelievers serve? What does **give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you** mean? When is true righteousness put to the ultimate test? How can we live *holy* lives?

In the Nazarene's fifth example of true righteousness in contrast with that of the Pharisees and the Torah-Teachers, He teaches about not seeking revenge. Jesus uses hyperbole (exaggeration) to emphasize the attitude we should have toward those who either threaten or need something from us. This was an important lesson for the disciples of His day, and it's equally important for us today.

The Pharisees interpreted the Torah literally to mean it allowed retaliation and equal retribution (Exodus 21:24; Leviticus 24:20; Deuteronomy 19:21). So Messiah began His teaching with the words: **You have heard that it was said, "An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth."** At first glance, many people think this teaching is unbelievably harsh by modern standards. In the ancient world, however, **an eye for an eye** would have been extremely *merciful* (Matthew 5:38). The pagans at that time (and many today) believed that **vengeance** was an appropriate response to an injustice. In some cultures today, if you catch someone stealing from you - you cut off their hand. Now that's harsh! But the TaNaKh speaks of giving just compensation without disproportionate revenge. In fact, this verse *limits* revenge. The punishment needed to fit the crime (see my commentary on Exodus **Ea - A Life for a Life, an Eye for an Eye, Wound for Wound and Bruise for Bruise**). But the Pharisees twisted this commandment to sanction their personal **vengeance**. Paul would later write: **Vengeance is Mine says ADONAI, I will repay** (Romans 12:19). By taking revenge the Pharisees violated the righteousness of the commandment.

When we really look at the details of this commandment, it's clear that to literally achieve equal compensation is extremely difficult. **The Talmud debates some of these challenges by noting the differences between two people and even their two eyes. A common interpretation, therefore, was that monetary compensation was a universal solution. An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth meant a payment of money. The Torah declares:** You are to apply the same standard of judgment to the foreigner as to the citizen, because I Am ADONAI your God (Leviticus 24:22 CJB). **That means, a law that shall be the same for all of you (Tractate Bava Kama 83b).** What **Matthew** records here, is **Yeshua** affirming the Torah's emphasis on withholding personal revenge.<sup>535</sup>

Many have misunderstood the **Master's** teaching when **He** said: **But I tell you, do not resist an evil person (Matthew 5:39a).** Here **Jesus** refutes pharisaic Judaism's misinterpretation and forbids retaliation in personal relationships. **Christ** is not saying, as many have said, that **He** forbids taking a stand against **evil**, and it should simply be allowed to run its course. **Yeshua** and **His** talmidim continually opposed **evil** at every turn. In fact, **the Lord** resisted the **evil** of turning **His Father's house into a market** by making a whip out of cords, and driving all the Sadducees from the Temple courts, scattered the coins of the moneychangers and overturned their tables (John 2:15-17). Not only that, but we are to resist the devil (James 4:7; First Peter 5:9), and all the evil that he stands for and inspires (Mattityahu 6:13; Romans 12:9; First Thessalonians 5:22; Second Timothy 4:18). Both **Messiah** and Rabbi Sha'ul raised objections to unjust and unlawful treatment (John 18:22-23; Acts 16:37). Other Scriptures call for believers to protect life and uphold justice (Proverbs 24:11-12; Amos 5:15, 24).

However, the civil government is **God's servant for your good**, Paul says. **But if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They are God's servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer (Romans 13:4).** Peter commands: **For the sake of the Lord, submit yourselves to every human authority - whether to the emperor as being supreme, or to governors as being sent by him to punish wrongdoers and praise those who do what is good (First Peter 2:13-14).** So there is a larger principle looming when it comes to personal revenge. Justice must be done, but it must be left in the hands of **God** or the authorities ordained by **God**.

**If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also (Matthew 5:39b).** This is not intended to turn us into wimps who are abused by the bullies of the world. **Jesus** is no wimp. The point here is that even if we are wronged, we have liberty in **Christ** and do not have to *demand* equal compensation. At the same time, however, it would be sinful if we let some gross injustice go unchallenged. As the Torah says: **Don't stand idly by when your neighbor's life is at stake (Leviticus 19:16b).** In fact, **Yeshua Himself** did not always **turn the other cheek**. When **Annas** the high priest questioned **Him** around 4:00

am on the morning of His crucifixion, one of the officials nearby slapped Him in the face. "Is this the way You answer the high priest?" he demanded. **If I said something wrong, Jesus replied, testify as to what is wrong. But if I spoke the truth, why did you strike Me** (see Li - **Annas Questions Jesus**)? The command **to turn the other cheek** calls for an attitude that refuses to return the insult or wrong done.

The character of **the LORD** demands *holiness* (**Matthew 5:48**) and justice. But far too often people demand their own personal rights at the expense of others. We need to ask ourselves, "Do I really need to push this, or would it be better for all involved if I dropped it?" Likewise, **if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well** (**Matthew 5:40**). In the context of His original hearers, the **coat** would have been the outer **garment** complete with the **tassels on the corners** as **ADONAI** commanded in **Numbers 15:38**. In ancient times, including the first century, the *tallit* was a **coat** or robe that men normally wore. After clothes stopped being made with **tassels on the corners**, Judaism created the modern *tallit* (prayer shawl) so that the command of Moshe could be carried out.<sup>536</sup> Since the outer **garment** was also an important means of protection from the elements, it was important not to take it from a brother overnight (**Deuteronomy 24:13**). Offering **your coat** to one who demands **your shirt** reflects a willingness to settle a dispute in a way that brings peace and reconciliation.

So these verses test us as we are given an opportunity to demonstrate our love for our neighbor. **And if a soldier forces you to carry his pack for one mile, carry it for two miles** (**Mattityahu 5:41 CJB**). Even if a pagan Roman soldier demanded you to **carry his pack for one mile** (as he could legally do under the Roman occupation), you could choose to demonstrate your relationship to **ADONAI** by carrying **it** an extra **mile**, by cheerfully doing more than was required.

The heart of **God** is for His people to be a sharing and generous reflection of **the Father**. Therefore, the general principle is **give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you** (**Matthew 5:42**). The implication is that the person who asks has a genuine need. We might not even be asked, but might recognize the need ahead of time. We are not required to carry out every foolish, selfish request made to us. Sometimes giving people what they want, but do not need, does more harm than good. **Yeshua** is not talking about a begrudging consent to a plea for help, but a willing, generous desire to help others.

**Jesus'** teaching true righteousness rather than revenge was - and still is - difficult to accept. This is one of those "easier-said-than-done" messages. It is only by the power of **the Ruach HaKodesh** that we can follow this teaching. But we are still human and can still fail. We can still say no to **God** and make it stick. Sometimes this teaching runs counter to all

that we, as fallen men and women, have in our hearts concerning how to relate to others. When someone rapes your twelve-year old daughter and she has a very difficult time trusting anyone ever again. When a drunk driver kills your spouse. When you're fired from your job months away from qualifying for your retirement pension because of petty jealousy. It is *then* that the words of **Yeshua** are put to the ultimate test. When we are hurt, whether verbally or physically, we feel justified in seeking revenge. This is not easy, and the bigger the hurt the harder it is.

But as we are conformed to the image of **Christ (Romans 8:29; Second Corinthians 3:18)**, **He** calls us to have the spirit of Abraham when he gave the best of his land to Lot; to have the spirit of Joseph when he embraced and kissed the brothers who had so terribly wronged him; the spirit of David who would not take advantage of the opportunity to kill Saul, who was trying to kill him; the spirit of Elijah to feed the enemy Assyrian army; the spirit that led Stephen to pray for those who were stoning him to death.<sup>537</sup>

**Jesus** concluded by saying: **be perfect, just as our Father in heaven is perfect (Mattityahu 5:48 CJB)**. **His** message demonstrated **Ha'Shem's** righteous standard, for **YHVH Himself** truly is the standard of righteousness. If we are to be righteous we must be as **God** is, **perfect**, that is, mature (Greek: *teleioi*) or *holy*. Murder, lust, hate, deception and retaliation obviously do not characterize **our Father**. **He** has not lowered **His** standard to accommodate our weakness; instead, **He** upholds **His** standard of absolute holiness. Though this **perfect** standard can never be met perfectly by us, when we trust in **God**, **His holiness** can be reproduced in our lives.

*Lord Jesus, I believe that through your cross you drew all people to Yourself. Help me to forgive, rather than condemn; to love, rather than criticize; to care beyond what I think is expected of me. In this way, I will grow in my love for You and for others.*<sup>538</sup>