

Is Retaliation Ever Okay?

Jeff Rogers / Lamplighter Bible Study
Matthew 5:38-42

So, what is a Christian supposed to do? Are we to be pawns only to be led to slaughter and abused without so much as a whimper? Are we to promote pacificism, object to military service, promote lawlessness, and the dismantling of police departments?

Throughout these six contrasts of the misguided interpretation of the religious elite, scribes, and Pharisees, Jesus contrasts what Moses taught in the law and the false teaching. He is emphasizing the spirit of the law and not just the letter of the law. The scribes and Pharisees distorted the clear teaching of Moses and Scripture to create the possibility of “meeting God’s standard.” That standard was man’s and not God’s.

Much of the same problem exists today; we measure our “righteousness” as cultural norms and by individuals deemed worthy of respect by their behaviors. As believers, we must anchor our beliefs and, therefore, our behaviors in the Scriptures and its plain teaching. James teaches us what causes “quarrels.” Don’t be fooled by the word quarrels; it should be understood as a battle within a war. It is a strong word! Notice what James, our Lord’s brother teaches,

James 4:1–2, *What causes quarrels [a battle within a war] and what causes fights [open clash between groups] among you? Is it not this, that your passions [unsatisfied cravings or desires] are at war [Romans 7:23; 1 Peter 2:11] within you? 2 You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask.*

When we are violated, perhaps even the perception of violation, our natural, human, fleshly tendency does not assume positive intent. Rather, we assume harm in some manner. A plan of retaliation is quickly formulated in our minds. This manner of revenge, usually with interest, is an extension of our innate selfishness. “When self-interest dominates, justice is replaced by vengeance.”

- Paul set aside his rights for the gospel's sake (**1 Corinthians 9:1, 1 Corinthians 9:4–6, 1 Corinthians 9:12**)
- When Paul’s anger got the best of him when he was violated, **Acts 23:1–5**,

I. What does the Law of Moses teach?

A. The Quotation

1. **Exodus 21:24-25**, *Eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, 25 burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe.*
2. **Leviticus 24:20**, *Fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth; whatever injury he has given a person shall be given to him.*
3. **Deuteronomy 19:21**, *Your eye shall not pity. It shall be life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot.*

B. The Purpose

1. Penalties ascribed by the law were meant as a deterrent to future crimes.
2. Penalties set limits on punishment, prevent excessive punishment and control vigilante justice.
 - a) **Genesis 4:23–24**, ... *I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for striking me. 24 If Cain’s revenge is sevenfold, then Lamech’s is seventy-sevenfold.*”

C. The Responsibilities

1. The civil government was responsible for carrying out trial and sentencing.
 - a) Exodus 21-23, exclusively lays out Israel’s civil law (as in A.1.)
 - b) The same is true for Lev 24 and Deut 19. (See Deut 19:18, Lev 24:14-16; Ex 21:22)
2. God restricts vengeance to Himself
 - a) **Deuteronomy 32:35**, *Vengeance is mine, and recompense, for the time when their foot shall slip; for the day of their calamity is at hand, and their doom comes swiftly.*’
 - b) **Romans 12:19**, *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.”*
 - c) **Hebrews 10:30**, *For we know him who said, “Vengeance is mine; I will repay.” And again, “The Lord will judge his people.”*

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3. Man's responsibility to enemy
 - a) **Proverbs 25:21**, *If your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat, and if he is thirsty, give him water to drink,*
 - b) **Matthew 5:44**, *But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,*
 - c) **Romans 12:20**, *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."*
 - d) Never does the OT allow a person to take the law into their own hands (**Proverbs 24:29**, *Do not say, "I will do to him as he has done to me; I will pay the man back for what he has done."*)

II. The Perversion by the Religious Elite.

- A. Jesus forbids personal retaliation; however, He does not teach an idle faith that allows evil to run amok.
 1. Resist the profaning of God's Temple (Matthew 21:12; John 2:15)
 2. Resist the devil (James 4:7; 1 Peter 5:9)
 3. Resist all that he stands for (Matthew 6:13; Romans 12:9; 1 Thess 5:22; 2 Tim 4:18)
- B. Paul resisted evil in the church:
 1. False doctrine and a watered-down gospel (Galatians 2:11).
 2. Wickedness in the church (1 Cor 5:13).
 3. Sin within the church (Matthew 18:15-17).
 4. Those who persist in sin. Paul (1 Tim 5:20).
- C. Government is to stand against evil (Romans 13:4; 1 Peter 2:13-14)

III. The Principle of Non-Retaliation

- A. **Dignity** – as image of God, men have the basic right to be treated with respect and dignity regardless of their station in life. In 5:39b, Jesus addresses how we handle the violations of our dignity.
 1. A slap was/is demeaning and contemptuous of acts (think Will Smith) (Jesus facing the cross)
 2. When personally treated or maligned, Jesus teaches us to "turn the other cheek." Turning the other cheek is symbolic of a non-avenging, nonretaliatory, humble, and gentle spirit (Matthew 5:3,5)
 3. Matthew 26:67-68; Isa 50:6, Luke 23:34; 1 Peter 2:20-23.
- B. **Security** – people wore tunics (shirt-undergarment) and cloaks (coat-outer garment). Clothing could be used as payment in a lawsuit, but coats had to be returned by sunset according to Mosaic law (Ex 22:26-27) It is the heart attitude Jesus is counseling should be present (pay more and not less to show remorse). Also, see 1 Cor 6:1-8)
- C. **Liberty** (5:41) – go with him two miles. Surrender more rather than personally retaliate.
- D. **Property** (5:42) – possessiveness indicates our fallen human nature. Not a foolish request but a genuine need.

IV. Facing Down Revenge and Retaliation

- A. **James 4:6–12**, *But he gives more grace. Therefore it says, "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." 7 Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. 8 Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. 9 Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. 10 Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you. 11 Do not speak evil against one another, brothers. The one who speaks against a brother or judges his brother, speaks evil against the law and judges the law. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge. 12 There is only one lawgiver and judge, he who is able to save and to destroy. But who are you to judge your neighbor?*
 1. Submit to God (7)
 2. Resist the devil (7)
 3. Draw near to God (8)
 4. Cleanse your hands (repent) (8)
 5. Be wretched, mourn, weep (9)
 6. Humble yourself before the Lord (10)
 7. Do not speak evil against one another (11)
 8. Remember, who you are, and Who the Judge is (12)