

Jesus and Retaliation

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Introduction.

As we all know, human beings are creatures of appetite. There's a little animal inside each one of us that wants to do what it wants to do, regardless of consequences. When we see food, we want to eat it. When we see some beautiful object, we want to possess it. When someone makes us angry, we want to strike back at them, verbally or even physically. Hopefully, we come into the world blessed with parents who will train us out of always listening to our appetites. People who aren't trained, or who don't listen to their trainers, usually end up in prison. We must have self-control.

However, as Christians, we are called to exercise control over our appetites to an even greater extent than is necessary to abide by the laws of man. We know that we are also governed by the laws of God, which speak more broadly than any human code ever devised. Sometimes, what God tells us to do comes easily. We can all think of sins that have never tempted us in the slightest. However, sometimes what God calls us to do is very difficult, and we can find a command that just about all of us will find intimidating in the words of Jesus in Matthew 5:38-42.

If we take the words of Christ at face value here, we are literally never allowed to resist an evildoer, no matter how extreme the provocation. According to this reading of the text, if someone breaks into our house at night to rob us, we should help them out by filling pillowcases full of loot for them to carry off. That makes most people want to re-read the text. For instance, I can remember my own mother insisting to me that "Turn the other cheek" did not apply to bullies, that I was supposed to hit them back instead. Sadly, I don't think that's a terribly good reading either. So what are we supposed to do with the passage? Let's look at some possible answers as we consider Jesus and retaliation.

Defining the Principle.

It should help us to clear up a lot of the confusion if we start out by defining the principle that's at work here. We know what the text says, but what does it mean? We get a glimmer when we look at the context of Jesus' words. When He says, "You have heard", He's referring back to three passages in the Law of Moses that use the eye-for-an-eye language. We see a good example of these passages in Deuteronomy 19:18-19, 21. The first thing that's apparent about this passage is that it speaks in a judicial, not a personal, context. This is about what judges are supposed to do to the man who bears false witness against his neighbor. He's supposed to be punished with the same punishment he was seeking for another. In fact, EVERY use of the eye-for-eye language in the Old Law is in some kind of judicial setting.

This is strange, because Jesus isn't speaking to an audience of judges. He's not agitating for a reform of the Jewish judicial system. Instead, he's telling a group of ordinary folks that THEY shouldn't seek an eye for an eye. From this, we can infer how the meaning of the Deuteronomy text had drifted by the time of Jesus. Instead of just leaving retribution to their judges, the Jews had become accustomed to taking personal vengeance. This doubtless led to all sorts of duels and blood feuds and every other kind of unpleasantness, and it is personal vengeance that Jesus is forbidding.

His words are colored further by Paul's message in Romans 13:1-2. This comes in the middle of a fairly lengthy discussion of personal vengeance and the role of government, but it highlights the core point of that discussion—that Christians are to subject themselves to the government at all times. This has two main applications for us. First, it means that we don't get to take the law into our own hands. If someone slugs me because they didn't like the sermon, I don't get to come after him and slug him back. If someone fraudulently cleans out my bank account, I don't get to break into his house and steal his plasma TV to compensate myself. Instead, punishment of wrongdoers is the government's job.

However, because it is the government's job to maintain public order, and we are required to be subject to the authorities, that means that we have to help the government do its job. Let's say someone slugs me, and I think that turning the other cheek means not only that I can't slug him back, but also that I can't report him to the cops. Because I haven't turned the lawbreaker in, he goes free. This creates two problems. First, he is still able to slug somebody else the next time the mood strikes him, so my silence has endangered another innocent man. Second, I have thwarted the government, which is God's chosen instrument of justice. Scripturally speaking, that can't be the right answer. What Jesus is saying, then, is that we must not strike back ourselves. It is the government that is the agent of retribution.

What Christians Must Do.

However, this doesn't mean that the turn-the-other-cheek passage is a warm, fuzzy, happy passage, especially for disciples in the first century. The government is supposed to protect us, but what happens when the government itself is the agent of wrongdoing? We learn what Christians must do in those circumstances primarily from the writings of Peter. First, even when the law is unjust in its application to us, it is still our responsibility to follow the law. Consider Peter's words in 1 Peter 2:18-20. This, of course, refers to slaves, people who are legally the property of another. To our twenty-

first-century mentality, slavery is obviously wrong, but Peter does not tell Christian slaves to take up arms against their masters or even to run away. Instead, they are to submit, because submission is what the law requires of them. This submission must continue even when the slaveowners are cruel and beat them for no good reason. In that circumstance, the slave must literally turn the other cheek, because the slaveowner's actions are perfectly legal.

Thankfully, we don't have to deal with slavery today, but there are certainly times when Christians have to deal with legal oppression. In Matthew 5, Jesus mentions lawsuits, and when we are on the receiving end of a legal action we don't understand, the judgment can seem fully as unjust as a slap in the face. Even then, even when we feel like we've been done wrong by the court system, it is still our responsibility to obey and cooperate with its decision.

Jesus' words require us to turn the other cheek in any interactions with an unjust government, but He speaks with particular force about the way that Christians are supposed to endure government persecution. Peter talks about this in 1 Peter 4:12-14. Once again, this isn't much of a concern for us, but it was a very real concern for Christians 2000 years ago, and still is for Christians in other parts of the world today. How do we take it when the government punishes us for being disciples? Other religions have different answers to this. When the prophet Mohammed, founder of the Muslim faith, was persecuted religiously and driven out of Mecca, he responded by gathering an army in Medina, returning to Mecca, and conquering his persecutors. Even today, many Muslims don't have a problem with striking back against a government that they feel is impeding their religious rights. However, that's not the Christian answer. Jesus Himself was tried, condemned, and executed by a hostile government, and from beginning to end, He offered no opposition. Both the pages of the book of Acts and traditional histories chronicle the deaths of other martyrs for Christ, none of whom tried to raise rebellion against the government that was killing them. That refusal to resist is what God expects.

What Christians May Do.

However, when we are faced with injustice, there are things that we may do. First of these is that when we are oppressed, we may use all the legal rights at our disposal to protect ourselves from the oppressor. We see Paul doing this in Acts 22:25. When he traveled throughout the Roman Empire, Paul had the advantage of legally being a citizen of Rome itself, rather than a citizen of one of the provinces of the empire. Among other things, this meant that he could not legally be punished by the Romans without a trial first. This came into play in Acts 22 because a Roman centurion was about to have Paul whipped so that Paul would tell him why a riot had started. Even though the centurion was acting under the authority of the Roman government, Paul was able to use his rights as a Roman to protect himself.

In similar fashion, God permits us to use our rights as American citizens today. If someone commits a crime against us, even though we cannot take vengeance ourselves, we are justified in having them prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law. Likewise, if someone wrongs us in a business context, we have the right to file suit, provided, of course, that we aren't suing another Christian. We can even use the law to protect ourselves from the government. For instance, if some government official tried to shut us down as a church and tell us that we couldn't worship together anymore, we could legitimately appeal to our rights under the First Amendment as a way to continue worshiping. In short, Jesus' injunction to turn the other cheek does not keep us from the exercise of our rights as members of a free society.

Second, even when the government is hostile to us and is persecuting us for our faith, we have the right to hide or flee. In Acts 9:23-25, we see Paul doing both. Although Luke's account doesn't make it quite clear here, we know from 2 Corinthians that the Jews who were seeking to kill Paul were doing so with the backing of Aretas, the ruler of Damascus. Even though Paul had done nothing wrong, the government was oppressing Him. However, in response to this government oppression, he didn't have to turn the other cheek and wait meekly to be killed. Instead, the law of Christ permitted him to escape so that he could continue preaching the word. We have the same right today.

However, this is a right we have only in cases of religious persecution. If we rob a bank and are tried for it, we don't have the right to jump bail and flee to Chile before the sentence is handed down. Nor can we flee from a judgment that we believe is unjust. If our spouse divorces us and is granted custody of the children, even if he lied like a rug to get them, it would be ungodly for us to grab the kids and flee to another state in defiance of the court. In that situation, we don't have the right to resist the government, even when it is heaping injustice upon us. We must submit.

Finally, though, no matter what the situation is, when we are being wronged by the government, we have the right to speak out against it. Look at the example of Jesus in John 18:22-23. This passage is important both for what we see Jesus doing and what we don't see Him doing. First of all, notice that Jesus is not striking back, even when the evil and injustice of His enemies is clear. In the garden of Gethsemane, when Peter, at least, was willing to fight against the mob that was arresting Jesus, Jesus told His disciples to put up their swords. When the high priest's officer strikes Him, Jesus doesn't kick the officer in the shins. In that sense, at least, we do see Him turning the other cheek.

However, Jesus certainly does express His opinion of what's happening. Even while He submits to being struck unjustly, He points out the injustice. This was not a whine or a complaint. However, Jesus made the wrongness of what was occurring quite clear. As Christians, when we are oppressed, we have every right to do the same.