

What Does the Bible Teach About Revenge?

(Compiled by Paul R. Blake from an article by Keith Sharp)

Introduction:

A. Matt. 5:38-42

1. After texts on judging, no other instruction of Jesus has resulted in greater anxiety and misunderstanding than this passage.
2. Jesus was contrasting what the Jewish teachers taught the people (verses 20-21, 27, 33, 38, 43); He was also pointing to the end of the Old Covenant (verses 17-19).
3. Lev. 24:19-20 - The oldest principle of simple justice known to man. It is known as the Lex Talionis, or the principle of "like for like."
 - a. "The law of retaliation, whereby a punishment resembles the offense committed in kind and degree." (Oxford Dictionary)
4. It is part of the earliest surviving code of laws, the Code of Hammurabi, ruler of Babylon from 2285 to 2242 B.C. (Barclay. 1:160)

B. It is both the right and responsibility of civil government to administer this justice (Rom. 13:3-4).

1. When rulers fail to do so, crime is rampant (Ecc. 8:11).
2. The judge who fails to administer such justice neither fears God nor regards man (Luke 18:2-5).

C. Moses never intended this principle as a license for unlimited personal revenge, but as a guide to judicial equity.

1. Prov. 20:22, 24:29, 25:21; Rom. 12:17-21
2. It was not required that one avenges; it was required that one limits his vengeance. God briefly allowed it under the Law of Moses. He removed it entirely under the Law of Christ
3. In some cases under the Law of Moses, compensation was recommended instead of maiming - Num. 35:29-34

I. WHAT SAYS THE SCRIPTURES?

A. Christ teaches "resist not evil."

1. Is this a demand that Christians must passively submit to any and all sorts of physical violence?
2. Must one watch a maniac kill his family and destroy his property, without lifting a finger to resist?
3. Is this an injunction against Christians serving in the armed forces or on a police force?

B. 70 years ago Bryan Vinson, Sr. preached an outstanding lesson on the Christian and civil government ("Dual Citizenship"), defending the right of a Christian to bear arms for his government. A young preacher foolishly jumped brother Vinson in the aisle before other members after services, contending the Lord demands total non-resistance on the part of Christians. Brother Vinson simply inquired of him, "If a vicious criminal broke into your house and attacked your wife, would you come to her aid?" The young preacher's retort was, "Why, that's totally irrelevant!" His flabbergasted wife standing beside

him quickly replied, "I don't think it's irrelevant!" If the passage demands complete passivity, thus eliminating service in the armed forces and police forces, it also eliminates any defense of one's own family and property. If not, why not?

- C. The Scriptures are truth (John 17:17), and truth is always consistent with itself.
 - 1. Luke 17:3; John 18:22-23 - Verbal resistance is still resistance.
 - 2. Acts 22:22-29, 23:12-24, 25:9-12; Eph. 5:11 - Apostolic examples
- D. Kept in context, Jesus is discussing vengeance (verse 38). "Resist not evil" is an absolute prohibition against personal vengeance and an attitude of resentment as the result of wrong suffered.
 - 1. When a Christian suffers wrong, he should not "vow to get even" or seethe in resentment - Rom. 12:17-21
 - 2. He should do good to the evil-doer and leave vengeance to the Lord.
- E. God has at least three means of accomplishing this vengeance.
 - 1. The punitive power of civil government, which involves the police officer Rom. 13:3-4.
 - 2. Christ Himself, as God in ancient days, still "rules in the kingdom of men, and gives it to whomever he will" - Dan. 4:17; Rev. 19:15 - and this involves the use of armed forces.
 - 3. God will reap final and complete vengeance in the last judgment of all men (Rev. 20:11-15).

II. WHAT DID JESUS TEACH?

A. Four examples:

- 1. Matt. 5:39 - The term translated "slaps" means "strike with the open hand, esp. in the face, slap" (Arndt & Gingrich. 741). This harmonizes with the fact that a right handed person would hit another person on the right cheek by slapping him with the back of the hand.
 - a. In all ages, a "slap on the face" has been regarded as the greatest of insults, but it does not imperil one's life.
 - b. 1Kings 22:24; Lam. 3:30; John 19:3; 2Cor. 11:20
 - c. Lesson One: When wicked people heap upon us the lowest and meanest insults, we must not retaliate in kind - 1Peter 2:18-24
- 2. Matt. 5:40 - The "tunic" denoted "the inner vest or under garment" (Vine. 1:198). Even the poorest of Jews would usually have a change of tunics (Barclay, Ibid). But the "cloak" was "an outer garment, a mantle" (Vine, Ibid) The Jew would usually possess only one such garment and used it both as a robe by day and a blanket by night (Barclay, Ibid). The law forbade keeping this cloak as a pledge for debt overnight (Ex. 22:26-27; Deut. 24:12-13).
 - a. Lesson Two: This is a case of judicial injustice. It does not forbid the Christian's use of the court in self-defense. It does teach that, even should one use the courts to rob us, we should not seek vengeance. Be rather willing to lose that which by right should not be taken from you than to seek personal vengeance.
 - b. 1Cor. 6:7

3. Matt. 5:41 - Palestine was an occupied country. At any moment a Jew might feel the touch of the flat of a Roman spear on his shoulder, and know that he was compelled to serve the Romans, it might be in the most menial way (Barclay, Ibid). The Romans had erected "mile posts," markers at intervals of one mile, and a Jew could be compelled to carry a load for a soldier in this occupying army for one mile, but no more. Jesus taught Jews seething in anger under this hated, foreign power to do more than they require; carry their burden two miles.
 - a. Lesson Three: This is a case of government oppression, subjection to arbitrary military power. But the Christian is to submit to arbitrary, even tyrannical power, with cheerfulness. Rather than seeing how little we can cooperate and still get by, we should exceed demands.
 - b. 1Peter 2:13-15
4. Matt. 5:42 - Did the Master teach an unlimited benevolence with our material goods to the point of bankruptcy and poverty? Do we have to give anything asked of us?
 - a. The Lord himself promised, "If you ask anything in My name, I will do it" (John 14:14). Yet, He refused to grant Paul's request to be healed because his infirmity helped the Gospel (2Cor. 11:8-9)
 - b. James informed others their prayers were not heard because they asked through improper motives (James 4:3).
 - c. The Law of Moses taught that one should lend to poor Jews and not to charge them interest and not to expect to be fully repaid.
 - d. Lesson Four: Jesus went further and told them to lend with no expectation of repayment and not to distinguish between friends and enemies, brethren or outsiders, and not resent or get even when not paid.
 - e. This is of course qualified by other passages that teach on giving to the Lord and supplying the needs of our families.

Conclusion:

- A. Our Lord does not demand that we be passive in the face of harm and danger.
 1. He does allow us to protect our lives, our family and our property.
 2. He does not forbid us to serve in the military or police forces.
- B. But, Christ does command us not to seek personal vengeance for wrongs.
 1. We must be willing to bear the grossest insults,
 2. The greatest legal injustice,
 3. The most arbitrary power,
 4. And the needs of the poor without resentment or personal vengeance.
- C. The standard is high and difficult, but if we would be partakers of the righteousness of His kingdom, we must comply.