



A Systematic Expository Study of the Word of God

Special Study: **LIVING WITHOUT REVENGE OR RETALIATION**
Matthew 5:38-42

These verses have been misunderstood, misinterpreted and misapplied by different groups of people. Old-time Pharisees misunderstood verse 38 while modern-day pacifists have misinterpreted verse 39. Not having **“the Spirit of Christ”** (Romans 8:9), many people are misled as to the proper response to verse 40. Reading and trying to interpret without **“the mind of Christ”** (1 Corinthians 2:16), there is much confusion on verse 41. Not controlled or constrained by **“the love of Christ”** (2 Corinthians 5:14), the borrower and the giver misuse verse 42.

It is necessary to have the Spirit of Christ, the mind of Christ and the love of Christ in order to properly understand and appropriately apply these messages in our lives. It is of great importance also to study the life of Christ so as to learn how He applied these words in His life. The life of Christ is a perfect interpretation, a perfect commentary of this portion and every portion of the Sermon on the Mount. It is also important and very helpful to know what Christ has said in other passages of Scripture so as not to make Him contradict Himself. The interpretation of Matthew 5:38-42 must agree with Christ's instructions in Matthew 18:15-17; Luke 17:3,4; Matthew 10:16,23; Luke 10:1-4; Matthew 15:25,26.

MISINTERPRETATION OF THE LAW OF RETRIBUTION

Matthew 5:38; Exodus 21:22-25; Leviticus 24:19-22; Deuteronomy 19:15-21; Esther 3:5,6; Judges 15:1-8; 1 Samuel 22:9-19; Leviticus 19:18; 1 Samuel 24:4-6,16-22; Job 31:28-30.

“Ye have heard that it hath been said, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.” This was given to the judges in Israel so as to maintain justice, law and order in the nation. The main intent of this Mosaic legislation was to control excesses and restrain crime. The punishment was made to fit the crime and not to be in excess of it. This law, given to be administered in the proper courts of law, worked far more equitably than the system of fines. The system of fines allows rich men to offend with comparative impunity but this law was a great check on the criminal tendencies of the poor and the rich alike.

The Pharisees and scribes ignored the fact that this law was for the judges only. They made it a matter for personal application. They removed the law from its context and setting and gave licence to their followers to revenge and retaliate. We must remember that even the Old Testament did not give this enactment to the individual, but rather to the judges. The vengeful spirit is contrary to the Spirit of Christ. Christ demands that our personal relationships be ruled by the spirit of love and not by the rule of law.

MANIFESTATION OF A LIFE WITHOUT RETALIATION

Matthew 5:39; Proverbs 20:22; 24:29; 25:21; Romans 12:17-21; 1 Thessalonians 5:15; 1 Peter 2:20-23; 3:9-12.

“But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil.” It is necessary to **“rightly divide the word of truth”** here. Just as verse 38 is not given to individuals to take laws into their hands, so also verse 39 is not given to regulate the relationships between citizens and the government, children and their parents, learners and their teacher, disciples and their master, employees and their employer or the wife and her husband (Romans 13:1-7; Mark 7:9-13; Matthew 16:21-23; Ephesians 6:5-8; 5:28-31). Also we need to understand that from the life of Christ, our perfect Example, to **“turn the other cheek”** is not to be interpreted or observed literally. **“And when He had thus spoken, one of the officers which stood by struck Jesus with the palm of his hand, saying, Answerest Thou the high priest so? Jesus answered him, If I have spoken evil, bear witness of the evil: but if well, WHY SMITEST THOU ME?”** (John 18:22,23). Let us also note that **“resist not evil”** does not mean that we are to deliberately expose ourselves to danger (John 8:59; Matthew 10:23; Acts 12:5-18).

In Christ's teaching, **“that ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also”**, He was directing us to be dead to self and not seek to retaliate or revenge whatever persecutors or neighbours do.

THE MASTER'S MODEL OF LOVE AND RIGHTEOUSNESS

Matthew 5:40-42; 5:6,20; 1 Corinthians 6:1-7; Romans 12:19; Proverbs 3:27,28; Deuteronomy 7:3; 1 Kings 21:2-4; Matthew 7:6; 20:23; 1 Timothy 5:8; Luke 6:35,38; Galatians 6:9,10.

Matthew 5:40-42 instructs us to live a life of practical love, peace and righteousness. It is God's will and this is Christ's way "**that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty**" (1 Timothy 2:2). God's Word teaches the believer to maintain a life of righteousness in his relationship to the government, to members of his family, to brethren in the church and to neighbours and enemies in the world. These different relationships are often addressed in different passages of Scripture. If we take a verse of Scripture out of its context of controlling our attitude towards enemies and persecutors and apply it to our family or fellowship relationships, our interpretation would be false and misleading.

Matthew 5:40 relates to an adversary engaged in a law suit, not a thief or a robber. Matthew 5:41 is not referring to a neighbour but an officer with authority from the government (Matthew 27:32; Mark 15:21). Matthew 5:42 directs us to give of what belongs to us. We cannot give others what does not belong to us. We are to give generously to the poor and the needy. There is no encouragement here or in any other passage of Scripture to give anything to a covetous man who is asking only to feed his lust.

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