



The Sermon on the Mount Study  
**Bible Study Session 10**  
**Matthew 5:38-42: Topic 10.0**

Study By  
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**Greek NT**

5.38 Ἠκούσατε ὅτι ἐρρέθη, Ὁφθαλμὸν ἀντὶ ὀφθαλμοῦ καὶ ὀδόντα ἀντὶ ὀδόντος. 5.39 ἐγὼ δὲ λέγω ὑμῖν μὴ ἀντιστῆναι τῷ ποιηρῷ· ἀλλ' ὅστις σε ραπίζει εἰς τὴν δεξιὰν σιαγόνα σου, στρέψον αὐτῷ καὶ τὴν ἄλλην· 5.40 καὶ τῷ θέλοντί σοι κριθῆναι καὶ τὸν χιτῶνά σου λαβεῖν, ἄφες αὐτῷ καὶ τὸ ἱμάτιον· 5.41 καὶ ὅστις σε ἀγγαρεύσει μίλιον ἓν, ὑπάγε μετ' αὐτοῦ δύο. 5.42 τῷ αἰτοῦντί σε δός, καὶ τὸν θέλοντα ἀπὸ σου δανίσασθαι μὴ ἀποστραφῆς

**Gute Nachricht Bibel**

38 »Ihr wisst, dass es heißt: 'Auge um Auge, Zahn um Zahn.' 39 Ich aber sage euch: Verzichtet auf Gegenwehr, wenn euch jemand Böses tut! Mehr noch: Wenn dich jemand auf die rechte Backe schlägt, dann halte auch die linke hin. 40 Wenn jemand mit dir um dein Hemd prozesieren will, dann gib ihm den Mantel dazu. 41 Und wenn jemand dich zwingt, eine Meile mit ihm zu gehen, dann geh mit ihm zwei. 42 Wenn jemand dich um etwas bittet, gib es ihm; wenn jemand etwas von dir borgen möchte, sag nicht nein.«

**NRSV**

38 "You have heard that it was said, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' 39 But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; 40 and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; 41 and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. 42 Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.

**NLT**

38 "You have heard that the law of Moses says, 'If an eye is injured, injure the eye of the person who did it. If a tooth gets knocked out, knock out the tooth of the person who did it.' 39 But I say, don't resist an evil person! If you are slapped on the right cheek, turn the other, too. 40 If you are ordered to court and your shirt is taken from you, give your coat, too. 41 If a soldier demands that you carry his gear for a mile, carry it two miles. 42 Give to those who ask, and don't turn away from those who want to borrow.

**The Study of the Text:<sup>1</sup>**

**1. What did the text mean to the first readers?**

If the interpretive history of several of the previous premise/contrastive passages have posed challenges, this one in 5:38-42 comes close to being at the top of the list in presenting challenges to interpreters seeking to find legitimate application of Jesus' words.<sup>2</sup> Much of the Christian pacifist tradition lays claim to this passage as the cornerstone of its approach and viewpoint.<sup>3</sup> This position has not found acceptance by the vast majority of Christians, but it has found advocates periodically throughout most of Christian history. Regardless of one's feelings about pacifism, the passage merits serious attention to believer's living in a world saturated with violence and warfare. How are God's people supposed to respond to the violence they encounter in the world around them? This passage provides a window into Jesus' teachings regarding violence and how to respond to it inside the Kingdom of God.

**Historical Context:**

For one to be able to grasp the implications of this scripture text more accurately, an understanding of the social conditions of both the first century Roman empire and in particular that found in



<sup>1</sup>Serious study of the biblical text must look at the 'then' meaning, i.e., the historical meaning, and the 'now' meaning, i.e., the contemporary application, of the scripture text. In considering the historical meaning, both elements of literary design and historical aspects must be considered. In each study we will attempt a summary overview of these procedures in the interpretation of the scripture text.

<sup>2</sup>For a detailed treatment of the history of interpretation, see Ulrich Luz and Helmut Koester, "2.2.5 Fifth Antithesis: On Nonviolence (5:38-42)," *Matthew 1-7: A Commentary*, in the Hermeneia series, rev. ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 270ff.

<sup>3</sup>For an example see Walter Wink, "Christian Nonviolence," ZNet: The Spirit of Resistance Lives. An electronic copy of this study can be accessed at <http://cranfordville.com/Cranfordville/Resources.htm>. These are located under IBC Cologne/Bonn Bible Studies. The study is free and provided as a ministry of C&L Publishing, Inc.

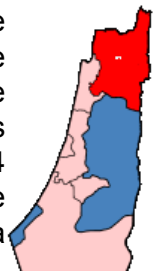
Palestine itself is necessary. These words of Jesus were given in a country under occupation by a foreign power that had zero tolerance for opposition to its dominance of the land and the people. This puts the historical context of these words in a dramatically different setting than would be found in most modern western countries where freedom to criticize and political opposition to the governing power is a constitutional right within prescribed limits. At the time of Jesus, Palestine was a sub-province of the Imperial Province in Syria called Iudaea, which meant it was under the direct control of the emperor.<sup>4</sup>

In theory the Mediterranean world at this point was living in the *Pax Romana* ('Roman peace') during this time. But for the Romans, peace (Latin *pax*) meant the elimination of all opposition. The Roman emperor typically used the superior military power of his armies to crush any and all groups opposing him and his military. Where the Romans occupied a territory only those holding Roman citizenship were protected by legal rights, which amounted to only a very small percentage of the population in the Mediterranean world. The vast majority of the people under the control of the Romans were completely at the mercy of the Roman soldiers occupying their territory. Brutality and violence were a way of life for these men and they cared little for the people they were suppressing and controlling. The only curb on them possible by the Jewish people was vigorous protest directly to the emperor by the Jewish leaders.

To further complicate matters, Palestine by this time had become a 'dumping ground' for the military governors, called either *Prefect* or *Procurator*, who were assigned to duty in Palestine. When sent to Judea for duty, one knew that his career in the military was soon 'going down the tube' and would be over. Consequently some of the worst military officers in the empire were sent to Palestine as duty stations, and this made for even more brutality imposed on the Jewish people. Only two interruptions to the military governor control of Palestine occurred during this time. Herod the Great ruled over Palestine from 4 BCE to 39 CE, and his grandson Herod Agrippa I from 41 - 44 CE. Both of these men, who ruled in behalf of the emperor, were notoriously brutal and thus the situation of the Jews in Palestine wasn't any safer under their control than it was under the Roman governors.

For one to advocate protest against the ruling Romans meant vigorous, brutal response by the Romans that normally ended in death. Although subsequent to the time of Jesus, the era of the three Jewish revolts against the Romans (AD 66-73; 115-117; 132-135) illustrate the normal response of the Romans to protest movements. Sepphoris, some six kilometers from Nazareth where Jesus grew up, had a vivid awareness of this trait of the Romans. In 4 BCE at Herod's death, the city rebelled against the Romans; the Roman army crushed the rebellion and sold many of its citizens into slavery.<sup>5</sup> Jesus was well aware of this history as a boy growing up in the nearby village of Nazareth.

It's one thing to talk about non-violence in a culture where freedom and relatively little violence



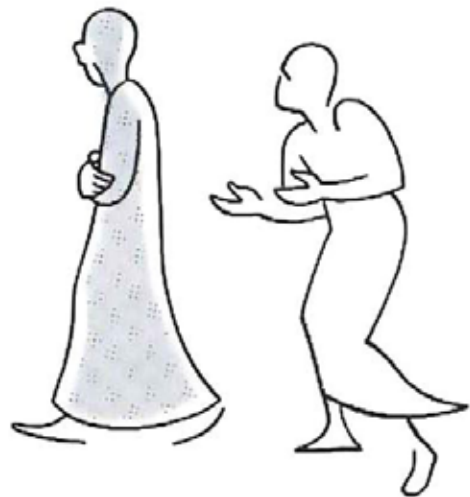
<sup>4</sup>In 6 CE Judea became part of a larger Roman province, called Iudaea, which was formed by combining Judea proper with Samaria and Idumea.[4] Even though Iudaea is simply derived from the Latin for Judea, many historians use it to distinguish the Roman province from the previous territory and history. Iudaea province did not include Galilee, Gaulanitis (the Golan), nor Perea or the Decapolis. The capital was at Caesarea[5], not Jerusalem which had been the capital for King David, King Hezekiah, King Josiah, the Maccabees and Herod the Great. Quirinius became Legate (Governor) of Syria and conducted the first Roman tax census of Iudaea, which was opposed by the Zealots.[6] Since Iudaea was not a Senatorial or Imperial province in its own right, but a sub-province of Syria, it was governed by a knight of the equestrian order, not a former consul or praetor of senatorial rank;[7] even though its revenue was of little importance to the Roman treasury, it controlled the land and coastal sea routes to the bread basket Egypt and was a border province against Parthia because of the Jewish connections to Babylonia. Pontius Pilate was one of these prefects, from 26 to 36 CE. Caiaphas was one of the appointed High Priests of Herod's Temple, being appointed by the Prefect Valerius Gratus in 18. Both were deposed by the Syrian Legate Lucius Vitellius in 36 CE." [source: "Iudaea Province: Iudaea," Wikipedia online]

<sup>5</sup>After Herod's death in 4 BCE, the city's largely Jewish inhabitants rebelled against Roman rule. The Roman army moved in, under the command of the Roman Governor in Syria, Varus. The Roman army completely destroyed the city and sold many of its inhabitants into slavery.[4]" ["Tzipori: History, Early History," Wikipedia online]

are present comparatively speaking. It's another very different thing to talk about non-violence in a setting where little or no freedom is present and brutal violence is a normal way of living. We live in the former; Jesus lived in the latter. Only Christians in places like Iran, Afghanistan and other places today where Christians are under heavy persecution can fully grasp the contextual setting of these words of Jesus. We can only imagine such an atmosphere and living condition.

**Literary Aspects:**

This pericope comes as the fifth of the six premise/contrastive passages in vv. 21-48. Additionally it stands as the second one in the second series of these six antitheses. One would be hard pressed, however, to trace any clearly definable logical progression in these six passages. They seem more randomly stitched together than anything else, most likely reflecting Matthew's work as an editor of the material from Jesus' teaching. The only observable logic seems to be between the second (adultery) and third (divorce), as well as the fifth (retaliation) and sixth (love for enemies), pericopes. More likely the six passages represent a selection of topics from the many that Jesus talked about and ones that seemed more relevant to Matthew's reading audience.



**Literary Form:**

As has often been the case, this passage contains the core premise (#52) and contrastive (#53a) declarations. And then expansion elements are added to the core contrastive declaration.

The introductory formula, "you have heard that it was said..." (Ἠκούσατε ὅτι ἐρρέθη) matches exactly the one in the second (v. 27) and sixth (v. 43) pericopes. The slightly reduced formula (Ἠκούσατε ὅτι ἐρρέθη, v. 38, from Πάλιν ἠκούσατε ὅτι ἐρρέθη τοῖς ἀρχαίοις, v. 33) exactly matches the pattern between the first (v. 21) and second (v. 27) pericopes.

The expansion elements, which begin in verse 39b with 'instead...' provide a series of illustrations to exemplify the point of the contrastive statement, "Do not resist the evil one." Three of these are closely appended to the core statement as a part of the extended direct discourse, vv. 39b-41. The fourth and fifth illustrations in v. 42 go a different direction in terms of borrowing and lending, and broaden the application of the contrastive declaration in v. 39a. As such these serve to amplify what Jesus intended in the contrastive declaration of non-resistance.



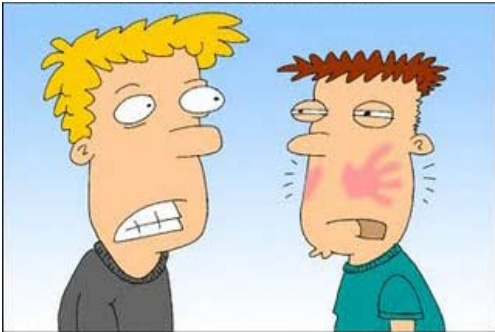
It is instructive to note Luke's use of some of these ideas in his version of the Sermon in Lk. 6:29-30, where he collapses the essential ideas of the fifth and sixth antitheses into a single expression.<sup>6</sup> In

picking up the nonresistance theme he envisions not the court scene in Matthew's account, but a robbery scene, which would have been more relevant to Luke's largely non-Jewish readership.<sup>7</sup> Clearly, these amplifications were selected by each gospel writer with his own



<sup>6</sup>Luke 6:27-36 (NRSV): "27 But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, 28 bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. 29 *If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. 30 Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again.* 31 Do to others as you would have them do to you. 32 "If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. 33 If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. 34 If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. 35 But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. 36 Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful."

<sup>7</sup>The clue signaling this is the reversal of the 'garment' (τὸν χιτῶνά) and 'cloak' (τὸ ἱμάτιον) references by Luke from Matthew's sequence. Matthew clearly has the Jewish legal court system in mind based on the Law of Moses (cf. Exod. 22:26-27 and Deut. 24:12-13). Also Matthew uses the legal terminology to sue (σοὶ κριθῆναι). Luke, however, uses the non-legal language 'from anyone who takes away...' (ἀπὸ τοῦ αἵρουτός σου), which clearly implies a robbery. Additionally, whereas Matthew adds the borrow/lend illustration in verse 42, Luke shifts to a begging motif in 6:30. The borrowing / lending motif is picked up by Luke in v. 34 and is appended to the emphasis on loving one's enemies. At the point in Matthew (cf. 5:46-47) different illustrations are used that are more applicable to a Jewish audience.



Thanks to Elizabeth Wagner 10-27-2003  
 I TOOK YOUR ADVICE ON TURNING MY OTHER CHEEK, BUT FORGIVING AND ESPECIALLY FORGETTING, MIGHT NOT BE SO EASY RIGHT NOW

distinctive target readership in mind.

The nature of the contrast between the premise declaration based on the *lex talionis* principle<sup>8</sup> in the Old Testament in Exod. 21:24, Lev. 24:20 and Deut. 19:21 is to push the matter between revenge and non-revenge, that is, action and non-action. The radicalism of Jesus' response to the Old Testament legal recourse must have been astounding to his listeners that day. And with the illustrations that applied his nonresistance demand to specific situations most Jews would have began grumbling about the impossible idealism of this Galilean teacher. Certainly, this set Him clearly apart from the teachings of the scribes and Pharisees who looked for legal excuses in the Mosaic Law for Jews to retaliate against their Roman overlords.

**Literary Setting:**

The literary setting of 5:38-42 is that of being the fifth antithesis pericope of the six in verses 21-48. No clear logical connection between the fourth pericope, vv. 33-37, on oath making and this pericope can be discerned. Some insight may possibly be gleaned from the counterpart in 6:22-23 (cf. diagram on the right) with the emphasis on the light of the body being the eye:

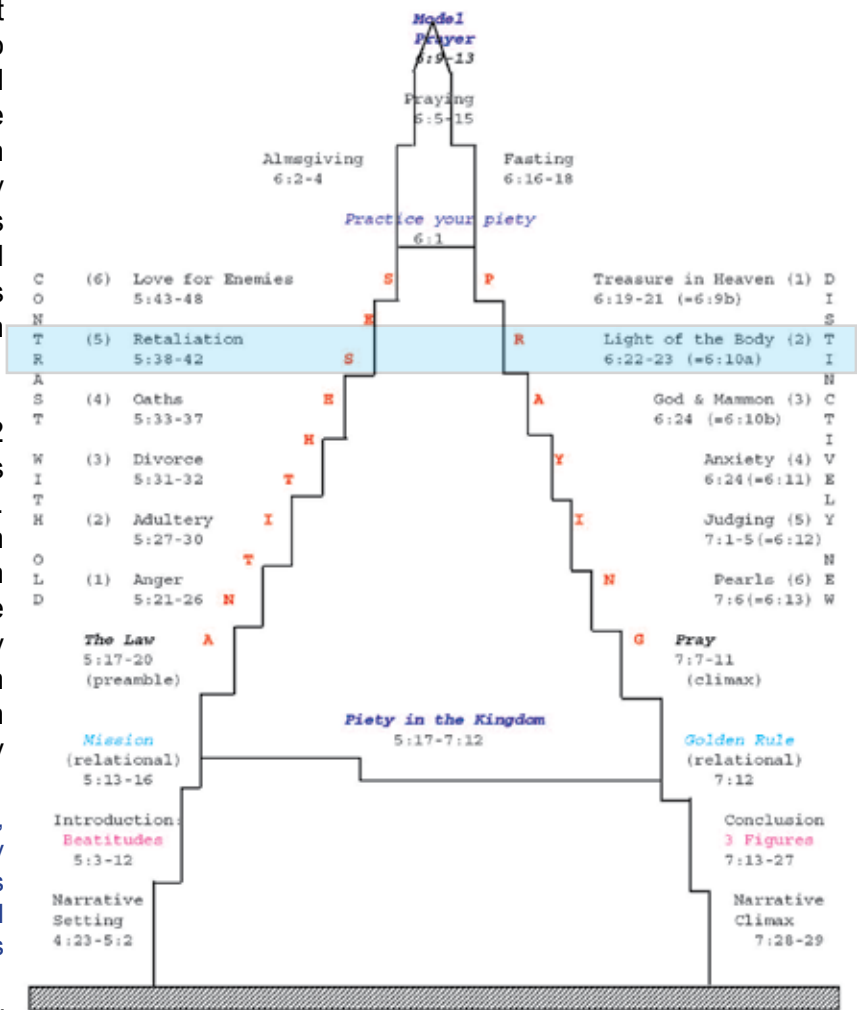
“The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light; but if your eye is unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!”

But the emphasis in 6:22-23 is mainly to amplify the prayer petition, “Your



**The Literary Structure of the Sermon on the Mount**

Matthew 4:23-7:29



Source: Lorin I. Cranford, *Study Manual of the Sermon on the Mount—Greek Text* (Fort Worth: Scripta Publishing Inc., 1988), 320. Adapted from Guntor Bonkamm, “Der Aufbau der Bergpredigt,” *New Testament Studies* 24 (1977-78): 419-432.

<sup>8</sup>Two spellings of this Latin term will surface in the literature: 1) *lex talonis*, and 2) *lex talionis*, which is more commonly used. The latter is considered the correct spelling in most English language dictionaries.

kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven," in 6:10. A prayer for God's will to be done is meaningless if one is not 'enlightened' properly with the divine light giving understanding of God's will. To be sure, ignorance of God's will not only make our prayer hypocritical but leaves us vulnerable to reacting to human aggression against us with revenge and retaliation.

**Literary Structure:**

One more the block diagram of the passage in English translation of the original Greek text provides a helpful way to grasping the flow of ideas, as well as the inner relationship of the ideas found in these verses:

|    |      |                                                          |                                                                                                                                |                                                  |              |
|----|------|----------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|--------------|
| 52 | 5:38 | <b>You have heard</b>                                    | that it was said,                                                                                                              | an eye for an eye<br>and<br>a tooth for a tooth. |              |
|    |      |                                                          |                                                                                                                                |                                                  |              |
|    | 5:39 | But                                                      |                                                                                                                                |                                                  |              |
| 53 |      | <b>I say to you,</b>                                     | Do not resist the evil one;<br>instead,<br>whoever may strike you<br>on your right cheek,<br>turn to him also the other cheek; | 1) Contrast<br><br>2) Insult                     |              |
|    | 5:40 |                                                          | and<br>to the one wanting to sue you<br>and<br>to take your coat,                                                              |                                                  |              |
|    |      |                                                          | give to him also your cloak;                                                                                                   | 3) Court                                         |              |
|    | 5:41 |                                                          | and<br>whoever would force you to go one mile<br>go with him two miles.                                                        | 4) Roman                                         |              |
| 54 | 5:42 | <b>to the one asking you give,</b>                       |                                                                                                                                |                                                  |              |
|    |      | and                                                      |                                                                                                                                |                                                  | 5) borrowing |
| 55 |      | <b>the one wishing to borrow from you do not refuse.</b> |                                                                                                                                |                                                  |              |

The arrangement of ideas is reasonable clear. The premise declaration is set forth in statement 52 and comes directly from the Septuagint text of the Old Testament. Jesus' response is found in statements 53-55 and fall into two segments. First comes the contrastive declaration, 1). Then follows several illustrations, #s 2) - 5). These apply the contrastive declaration to specific situations where the *lex talionis* principle would have been invoked under Jewish law. This is particularly true for the first three illustrations.

**Exegesis of the Text:**

**Premise declaration (v. 38):** "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth'" (Ἦκούσατε ὅτι ἐρρέθη, Ὁφθαλμὸν ἀντὶ ὀφθαλμοῦ καὶ ὀδόντα ἀντὶ ὀδόντος.).

Jesus clearly refers back to the Old Testament legal principle of *lex talionis*. This is stated clearly in several passages in the legal codes of the Old Testament:

**Covenant Code: Exod. 21:23-25.** "If any harm follows, then you shall give life for life, **eye for eye, tooth for tooth**, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe." (ἐὰν δὲ ἐξεικονισμένον ἦν, δώσει ψυχὴν ἀντὶ ψυχῆς, ὀφθαλμὸν ἀντὶ ὀφθαλμοῦ, ὀδόντα ἀντὶ ὀδόντος, χεῖρα ἀντὶ χειρός, πόδα ἀντὶ ποδός, κατακάυμα ἀντὶ κατακάυματος, τραῦμα ἀντὶ τραύματος, μώλωπα ἀντὶ μώλωπος.)

**Priestly Code: Lev. 24:18-20.** "Anyone who kills an animal shall make restitution for it, life for life. Anyone who maims another shall suffer the same injury in return: fracture for fracture, **eye for eye, tooth for tooth**; the injury inflicted is the injury to be suffered." (καὶ ὅς ἂν παύξῃ κτήνος καὶ ἀποθάνῃ, ἀποτεισάτω ψυχὴν ἀντὶ ψυχῆς, καὶ ἐὰν τις δῶ μῶμον τῷ πλησίον, ὡς ἐποίησεν αὐτῷ, ὡσαύτως ἀντιποιηθήσεται αὐτῷ· σύντριμμα ἀντὶ συντρίμματος, ὀφθαλμὸν ἀντὶ ὀφθαλμοῦ, ὀδόντα ἀντὶ ὀδόντος· καθότι ἂν δῶ μῶμον τῷ ἀνθρώπῳ, οὕτως δοθήσεται αὐτῷ.)

**Deuteronomic Code: Deut. 19:21.** "Show no pity: life for life, **eye for eye, tooth for tooth**, hand for hand, foot for foot." (οὐ φείσεται ὁ ὀφθαλμὸς σου ἐπ' αὐτῷ· ψυχὴν ἀντὶ ψυχῆς, ὀφθαλμὸν ἀντὶ ὀφθαλμοῦ, ὀδόντα ἀντὶ ὀδόντος, χεῖρα ἀντὶ χειρός, πόδα ἀντὶ ποδός.)

The concept of *lex talionis* was widely understood in the ancient world, as W.D. Davies and Dale Page 5 of Bergpredigt Study

Allison illustrate:<sup>9</sup>

The *lex talionis*, which appears in the ancient code of Hammurabi, is to be found not only in Jewish texts outside the OT (11QTemple 61:10–12; Jub. 4:31–2; LAB 44:10; SB 1, pp. 337–41)<sup>48</sup> but also in early Christian texts (cf. Apoc Pet 7–17).<sup>49</sup> It in fact lies behind the NT's so-called 'sentences of holy law'. 1 Cor 3:17 reads, 'If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him'; and in Mk 8:38 Jesus is recorded as having said, 'Whoever is ashamed of me and of my words ... of him will the Son of man be ashamed'. There is, however, no genuine contradiction between the rejection of the *lex talionis* and a belief that eschatological punishment will fit the crime. What Jesus rejects is vengeance executed on a personal level. He still assumes that God, the only wise and capable judge, will, in the end, inflict fitting punishment on sinners (cf. Rom 12:14–21). So the law of reciprocity is not utterly repudiated but only taken out of human hands to be placed in divine hands. Compare Rom 12:19: 'Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God'.

The intent of the principle was to restrain uncontrolled human passion seeking revenge, and thus it imposed a limitation on ancient Israelite practice. By the time of the New Testament era, however, it had been re-interpreted to allow for getting revenge.<sup>10</sup> By shifting the OT code to exact money fines for alleged injury,<sup>11</sup> Jewish practice turned this principle into a source of money-making. It is this practice that Jesus will target in his response.

**Contrastive declaration (v. 39a):** "But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer" (ἐγὼ δὲ λέγω ὑμῖν μὴ ἀντιστῆναι τῷ πονηρῷ).

The core response of Jesus seems clear, although radical, at first glance. When opposed, the ancient Jew would strike back, although in Jesus' day by hitting his enemy's pocketbook, rather than with physical action. Jesus forbid such practice by disciples in the Kingdom of Heaven. The opponent is defined as an evildoer (τῷ πονηρῷ).<sup>12</sup> Although the term could refer to the devil, as usually in Matthew, or to the concept of evil, the context strongly points toward an individual who has done something wrong against the person.

Jesus does not reject the principle of *lex talionis* set forth in the Old Testament. Instead, He forbids His disciples seeking revenge when they suffer wrongdoing. Vengeance and 'revenge' are actions that God alone is justified in taking. Paul reminds us in Rom. 12:19, "Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.'" Thus Jesus is best understood here to be responding to the contemporary use of the Old Testament principle for seeking revenge against one's enemies, and not in opposition to the concept of *lex talionis* itself. Although not clear in the Greek construction here, each of the expansion elements individualizes the 'you' to a single person, thus making it clear that a major thrust of Jesus' words is to individual disciples and their reaction to wrongdoing. But, as Luz and Koester underscore,<sup>13</sup> a collective application to the Christian community is equally relevant. This theme certainly flows out of the eighth beatitude on persecution in 5:10-12.

One should also note that this emphasis has little if any application to political force used by

<sup>9</sup> W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew* (London; New York: T&T Clark International, 2004), 538.

<sup>10</sup> "The law of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth is mentioned in Exodus 21.24; Leviticus 24.20; and Deuteronomy 19.21; its original intent was humanitarian, to prevent unrestrained blood vengeance (Gen 4.23 is an example). However, its purpose was later reversed, and people began to appeal to it primarily as the means of making their own claims prevail." [Barclay Moon Newman and Philip C. Stine, *A Handbook on the Gospel of Matthew*, Originally Published: *A Translator's Handbook on the Gospel of Matthew*, c1988., UBS helps for translators; UBS handbook series (New York: United Bible Societies, 1992), 147.]

<sup>11</sup> Compare Josephus' depiction of this in the first Christian century: "He that maimeth any one, let him undergo the like himself, and be deprived of the same member of which he hath deprived the other, unless he that is maimed will accept of money instead of it (30) for the law makes the sufferer the judge of the value of what he hath suffered, and permits him to estimate it, unless he will be more severe." [*Antiquities of the Jews*, 4.8.35]

<sup>12</sup> The Greek τῷ πονηρῷ has been translated in different ways: 'an evildoer' (NRSV; NCSB); 'an evil person' (NASB; NKJV; NIV; NLT; NCV; TNIC; NfRV); 'an evil man' (BBE); 'him that is evil' (ASV); 'the one who is evil' (ESV; RSV); 'someone who wrongs you' (TEV); 'wenn euch jemand Böses tut' (GNB); 'wenn man euch Böses antut' (Hoffnung für Alle) 'a person who has done something to you' (CEV); 'evil' (KJV; Douay-Rheims); 'dem Übel' (LB 1545, 1984); 'dem Bösen (= der Bosheit)' (Menge-Bibel); 'den, der euch etwas Böses antut' (Neue Genfer Uebersetzung).

<sup>13</sup> "In Matthew's sense this antithesis also applies to the church. The individual to whom the words in vv. 39–42 are addressed lives in a fellowship,<sup>53</sup> and the demand to renounce force is valid in this fellowship. The history of the community is a history of suffering, persecutions, scourging, and dying (23:34). Experiencing violence is real for them; renouncing resistance is a concrete task. Here Jesus' own behavior in his passion is their model. Jesus commands the disciple who rushes to help him with his sword to put it away (26:51–54). Jesus too was slapped but he did not resist (26:67). Matthew tells his story as that of the "humble king" (βασιλεὺς ... πραύς) who modeled nonviolence in his passion and was led through it by God to the resurrection. Here—and only here—is for him the chance and the possibility of nonviolence. [Luz - Koester, *Hermeneia*.]

governmental authorities. These instructions were given to disciples and their community of faith as guidelines to be followed. For the church to insist on the government adopting these guidelines moves beyond the boundaries of the intention behind the words of Jesus.<sup>14</sup> Thus Tolstoy's interpretation that these words of Jesus were intended to do away with all police and military forces have no validity at all. The only 'political' tones legitimately drawn from this statement pertains to His disciples striking back in revenge at persecution from either the Jewish or Roman governmental authorities. Both Jesus' word here and His example before Pilate strongly condemn such actions.

What Jesus did intend can be seen from the four illustrations given in the expansion elements.

**Expansion Element 1 (v. 39b):** "But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also;" (ἀλλ' ὅστις σε ῥαπίζει εἰς τὴν δεξιὰν σιαγόνα σου, στρέψον αὐτῷ καὶ τὴν ἄλλην).

The scenario envisioned here in Matthew is an insult of another person in ancient Jewish society. The slapping on the 'right' cheek by right handed individuals in that world meant slapping with the back of the hand rather than with one's palm. Thus, the depiction of insult. Donald Hagner explains as follows:<sup>15</sup>

The first illustration refers to someone striking "the right [δεξιάν] cheek." This is apparently more than merely a physical slap of the cheek (for this imagery see Lam 3:30). The specifying of the right cheek (which is lacking in the parallel in Luke 6:29) may mean a blow with the back of the hand (assuming the striker is right-handed), and thus make the personal insult even more serious (cf. *m B. Qam.* 8:6). στρέψον αὐτῷ καὶ τὴν ἄλλην, "turn to that person the other cheek," means to avoid retaliation (a perspective already found in Prov 20:22; 24:29; at Qumran, cf. 1QS 10:18-19) and instead to put oneself intentionally in a condition of continuing vulnerability. Jesus, of course, supremely modeled this attitude in the passion narrative (cf. 26:67-68; 27:30; 1 Pet 2:23). For the place of similar teaching in early Christian parenthesis, see Rom 12:19, 21; 2 Cor 11:20; and 1 Thess 5:15, where since vengeance is the Lord's (cf. Deut 32:35), one should not render evil for evil.

Luke 6:29 contains a parallel, but with some modifications: "***If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt.***" Matthew's insertion of 'right' cheek seems to clearly define the situation as a backhanded slap intended as an insult. Quite interesting is the parallel of both Matthew and Luke to the depiction of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah 50:4-9.

4 The Lord God has given me the tongue of a teacher, that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word. Morning by morning he awakens — awakens my ear to listen as those who are taught. 5 The Lord God has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious, I did not turn backward. 6 ***I gave my back to those who struck me, and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard; I did not hide my face from insult and spitting.*** 7 The Lord God helps me; therefore I have not been disgraced; therefore I have set my face like flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame; 8 he who vindicates me is near. Who will contend with me? Let us stand up together. Who are my adversaries? Let them confront me. 9 It is the Lord God who helps me; who will declare me guilty? All of them will wear out like a garment; the moth will eat them up.

Jesus both taught us and then set the example of non-retaliation that we as His people are to follow.

**Expansion Element 2 (v. 40):** "and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well;" (καὶ τῷ θέλοντί σοι κριθῆναι καὶ τὸν χιτῶνά σου λαβεῖν, ἄφες αὐτῷ καὶ τὸ ἱμάτιον).

The second scenario envisions a legal court situation in which a person is sued for non-payment of a debt. Among ancient Jews, the men wore two basic garments. The outer garment (τὸ ἱμάτιον) was a piece of heavy cloth resembling a robe or a cloak, cf. the Roman toga. It was also used somewhat like a blanket for sleeping at night. According to Exod. 22:26-27<sup>16</sup> and Deut. 24:12-13,<sup>17</sup> this garment could not be taken away from the individual for



<sup>14c</sup>Matthew was not thinking primarily of a political application of renouncing force. Of course it is also true that one may not exclude the political area. It is touched on in v. 41 just as the legal area is touched on in v. 40.<sup>54</sup> It is above all true, however, that renouncing force for the church is not an internal concern of a conventicle but a demand and an offer to all people. Thus nonviolence and surrendering one's rights determine the community's behavior toward the world, as an example of lived discipleship, that may make people begin to praise the Father (5:16)." (Luz-Koester, *Hermeneia*)

<sup>15</sup>Donald A. Hagner, vol. 33A, *Word Biblical Commentary: Matthew 1-13*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 2002), 129.

<sup>16</sup>Exod. 22:26-27 (NRSV): "If you take your neighbor's cloak in pawn, you shall restore it before the sun goes down; for it may be your neighbor's only clothing to use as cover; in what else shall that person sleep? And if your neighbor cries out to me, I will listen, for I am compassionate."

<sup>17</sup>Deut. 24:12-13 (NRSV): "If the person is poor, you shall not sleep in the garment given you as F61 the pledge. 13 You shall give the pledge back by sunset, so that your neighbor may sleep in the cloak and bless you; and it will be to your credit before the Lord your God."

any length of time, even if given in pledge. The second garment, a tunic (χιτών), was worn underneath and next to the skin. Usually made of linen or of wool, it was more comfortable. The Jewish man might lose one of these garments in debtor court, but not both. Jewish tradition would not permit him to lose all his clothes because of indebtedness.

Jesus asks His disciples to forego their legal rights as Jewish men to give up both garments. Clearly Jesus is again using hyperbole to make a point dramatically, since nakedness would land him back in court and imprisonment, as Davies and Allison assert.<sup>18</sup> The implementation of the principle is illustrated in Paul's instructions to the Corinthians about going to court in lawsuits.<sup>19</sup>

Luke 6:29,<sup>20</sup> on the other hand, asserts the same essential principle but envisions an entirely different scenario. By reversing the reference to the two garments Luke shifts the situation from a uniquely Jewish setting to that of a robbery, which his non-Jewish readers could more easily understand. Robbery, especially of travelers, was very common, and such is illustrated by Luke in his recounting Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan in 10:25-37.<sup>21</sup>

**Expansion Element 3 (v. 41):** "and if anyone forces you to go one mile,<sup>22</sup> go also the second mile" (καὶ ὅστις σε ἀγγαρεύσει μίλιον ἓν, ὑπάγε μετ' αὐτοῦ δύο.).

The third scenario envisions a situation in Palestine where the conquering Romans could compel Jews into forced labor at will.<sup>23</sup> For an example, see the forced duty of Simon of Cyrene to carry the cross of Jesus to Calvary.<sup>24</sup>

Jesus' words urge surprising generosity by the disciple, that will most likely provide opportunity

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<sup>18</sup>As the literal observance of Mt 5:40 would land one in prison for exposure, it is manifest that we have in the command to give away inner and outer garments the arresting illustration of a principle, not a rule to be literally and rigidly followed (so Augustine, *De serm. mont.* 1:20:62-8; contrast Chrysostom, *Hom. on Mt.* 18:2; χιτώνα becomes μαφόριον in Ps.-Clem. Hom. 15:11, perhaps to avoid the offence of nudity). Crossan (v) fittingly speaks of 'case parody' [W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew* (London; New York: T&T Clark International, 2004), 538]

<sup>19</sup>1 Cor. 6:1-8 (NRSV): "1 When any of you has a grievance against another, do you dare to take it to court before the unrighteous, instead of taking it before the saints? 2 Do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if the world is to be judged by you, are you incompetent to try trivial cases? 3 Do you not know that we are to judge angels — to say nothing of ordinary matters? 4 If you have ordinary cases, then, do you appoint as judges those who have no standing in the church? 5 I say this to your shame. Can it be that there is no one among you wise enough to decide between one believer and another, 6 but a believer goes to court against a believer — and before unbelievers at that? 7 In fact, to have lawsuits at all with one another is already a defeat for you. Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be defrauded? 8 But you yourselves wrong and defraud — and believers at that."

<sup>20</sup>Luke 6:29 (NRSV): "If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and **from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt.**"

<sup>21</sup>Luke 10:30 (NRSV): "Jesus replied, 'A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead.'"

<sup>22</sup>The *mile* referred to is a Roman mile (equal to 4,854 feet or 1,478.5 meters). Many translations have apparently maintained the literal mile, even in situations where the metric system is employed. However, in place of *one mile ... two miles* GeCL translates: 'a far distance... twice as far.' *One mile* was presumably the distance a Roman soldier could force a Jew to carry his equipment. What is important here is not the exact distance, but the relation between *one mile* and *two miles*. Even if readers do not know exactly how far a mile is, they may well seize the intent of what Jesus is saying even if 'mile' is translated literally. Nevertheless, many translators have said 'one kilometer' and 'two kilometers' simply to avoid introducing an unknown word, 'mile.'" [Barclay Moon Newman and Philip C. Stine, *A Handbook on the Gospel of Matthew*, Originally Published: *A Translator's Handbook on the Gospel of Matthew*, c1988., UBS helps for translators; UBS handbook series (New York: United Bible Societies, 1992), 147.]

<sup>23</sup>5:41—which would be impossible on the lips of a Zealot or political revolutionary—presumably envisions a situation in which civilians are compelled by Roman soldiers to do their bidding and carry their equipment (cf. Mk 15:21). We may thus compare Epictetus, *Diss.* 4.1.79: 'If there is a requisition and a soldier seizes it (your ass), let it go. Do not resist or complain, otherwise you will be first beaten, and lose your ass after all'. In the gospels, however, prudent considerations are not mentioned. As Manson, *Sayings* wrote, 'the first mile renders to Caesar the things that are Caesar's; the second mile, by meeting opposition with kindness, renders to God the things that are God's' (*Sayings*, p. 160)." [W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew* (London; New York: T&T Clark International, 2004), 538.]

<sup>24</sup>Mark 15:21 (NRSV): "They [=the Roman soldiers] compelled a passer-by, who was coming in from the country, to carry his cross; it was Simon of Cyrene, the father of Alexander and Rufus." Also Luke 23:26 (NRSV): "As they led him away, they seized a man, Simon of Cyrene, who was coming from the country, and they laid the cross on him, and made him carry it behind Jesus."



for witness to the gospel. We are to reach out positively, rather than negatively, to everyone, even our supposed enemies.

**Expansion Element 4 (v. 42):** “Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you” (τῷ αἰτοῦντί σε δός, καὶ τὸν θέλοντα ἀπὸ σοῦ δανίσασθαι μὴ ἀποστραφῆς).

Although some commentators mistakenly see the two lines of this saying as envisioning two separate scenarios, the more accurate view is that here we have two synonymously parallel lines describing a single situation, that of borrowing and lending in ancient Judaism.<sup>25</sup> Again, because Luke is not writing to a Jewish audience, his parallel in 6:30a<sup>26</sup> depicts the scenario differently as a request from a beggar. In ancient Judaism strict rules governed the lending of money, as numerous Old Testament passages declare.<sup>27</sup>

The relation of this example as illustrative of Jesus’ contrastive declaration to the Old Testament principle of *lex talionis* is not clear. Donald Hagner (*WBC*) is most likely correct in his assessment:

This verse takes further the line of thought in the preceding verses by teaching a charitable response to all who may ask for something or who may ask to borrow. In these illustrations, it is no longer a matter of response to mistreatment, or even to forced conduct, but to straightforward requests. Again, OT precedent can be found (cf. Deut 15:7–8). The only other passage in the NT where the verb δανίζειν (“to borrow, lend”) occurs is in Luke 6:34–35 (material that finds no parallel in Matthew), where the point is emphasized that one should lend to those from whom one does not expect to receive repayment. And this teaching occurs in connection with the command to “love your enemies,” which is the form of Matthew’s next antithesis. Quite probably, then, the present verse teaches not simply to give and lend but to do so even to one’s enemies, to those from whom one has no hope of repayment. This interpretation is consistent with both preceding and following contexts in Matthew.

What can we conclude from these words of Jesus? Several things come to mind. **First**, these words provide no basis for (Christian) pacifism as often urged and practiced. Other biblical texts may possibly point this direction, but not these words in 5:38–42. To be certain, by them we are urged to be a non-aggressive people of God who refuse to strike back at our enemies. But these teachings provide no source of governmental legislation for society in general. In the Sermon, Jesus was talking to His disciples, not governmental leaders. He laid down principles for each to live by, and that collectively as the church of Christ to follow. These words were not intended for sinful society in general or for legislative guidelines to be imposed on society in general. By His disciples living by these principles they provide dramatic witness to the difference that comes to one genuinely in the Kingdom of Heaven, that is, authentically under the rule of God in their day to day living.

**Second**, these words continue the theme of the last beatitude on persecution in 5:10–12.<sup>28</sup> In the violent world of Jesus’ day, life posed dangers daily and certainly injustices. From the conquering Romans could come violent oppression at any moment. Such a tense atmosphere moved people to tension in their relationships. Given the Jewish legalistic system of retaliation, the tendency was to strike back at those whom one could ‘safely’ take vengeance against, namely other Jews. Jesus took a different direction both

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<sup>25</sup>τῷ αἰτοῦντί σε δός.<sup>62</sup> This and the next line are in synonymously parallelism and for Matthew constitute only one example, not two (cf. Lührmann (v), p. 418). Observe the parallelism between 5:42 and 40; both have in common τῷ + participle + σοί/σέ + main verbal command. Did. 1:5 has: παντὶ τῷ αἰτοῦντί σε δίδου. So also Lk 6:30, without the article. As Luke does not like πᾶς + participle without article (Jeremias, *Lukasevangelium*, p. 144), it must come from Q. Matthew then dropped the παντὶ because it would detract from the parallelism between 5:40 and 42 and because it would seem to imply an indiscriminate giving, a mindless benevolence that would do more harm than good (cf. Did. 1:6; Basil, *Ep.* 150:4). In line with this last point, Matthew’s aorist (‘give’) is more cautious than Luke’s present tense (‘continue giving’). (Augustine, we may observe, avoided the implication of indiscriminate giving by remarking how the text says not to give everything asked for but only to give to everyone who asks; *De serm. mont.* 1:20.67.)<sup>63</sup> [Davies-Allison, ICC.]

<sup>26</sup>Luke 6:30 (NRSV): “Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again.” (παντὶ αἰτοῦντί σε δίδου, καὶ ἀπὸ τοῦ αἵροντος τὰ σὰ μὴ ἀπαίτει.)

<sup>27</sup>Compare Exod 22:25; Lev 25:36–7; Deut 15:7–11; Prov 28:27; Eccles 4:1–10; 29:1–2; Tob. 4:7; T. Job 9:1–12:4; T. Zeb 7:2; Heb 10:34. Mt 5:42 = Lk 6:30 was originally no doubt isolated. It does not really fit its present context well, which is about revenge and love of enemies; and in 5:42 the disciple is no longer a victim. Furthermore, there is an independent variant in *Gos. Thom.* 95, and it is bound to nothing before or after: ‘If you have money, do not lend at interest, but give to the one who will not be able to give it back.’ [Davies-Allison, ICC.]

<sup>28</sup>Matt. 5:10–12 (NRSV): “10 Blessed are those who suffer for doing what is right. The kingdom of heaven belongs to them. 11 “Blessed are you when people make fun of you and hurt you because of me. You are also blessed when they tell all kinds of evil lies about you because of me. 12 Be joyful and glad. Your reward in heaven is great. In the same way, people hurt the prophets who lived long ago.”

in his teaching and in his own practice. Don't take matters into your own hands. Trust God to rectify the wrong, for 'vengeance' is His business. Note James' words echoing Jesus here as he address first the abusing wealthy (v. 6) and then believers (vv. 7-11) in Jas. 5:6-11 (NRSV):

6 You [=the rich] have condemned and murdered the righteous one, who does not resist you.

7 Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. 8 You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near. 9 Beloved, do not grumble against one another, so that you may not be judged. See, the Judge is standing at the doors! 10 As an example of suffering and patience, beloved, 7 take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. 11 Indeed we call blessed those who showed endurance. You have heard of the endurance of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful.

**Third**, what Jesus advocates is demanding, very demanding! When wronged, the easiest response is that dictated by sinful human nature. If someone has inflicted harm on you, 'make them pay' by inflicting equal or greater harm on them! We see this approach all around us in the modern world. It is the philosophy of countless individuals, along with different organizations and governments. Pragmatically, the results of such a philosophy are seldom ever positive and mostly negative and destructive. Jesus demands a radically opposite direction that takes supra-human strength and commitment to follow.

**Fourth**, consistent with the other pericopes in vv. 21-48 and with the Sermon in general, Jesus' emphasis is on developing positive relationships with other people. Disciples in the Kingdom of Heaven are to be engaged in constructive -- not destructive -- relationships with others. A posture of non-aggression and non retaliation is the way for disciples to follow in the teachings of Jesus. Reaction to wrong done to us is for God to handle, not us. God is just and utterly holy and righteous. We can be certain He will respond in the most appropriate manner, both now and in final judgment.

## 2. What does the text mean to us today?

- 1) How do you respond when someone treats you wrongly?
  
- 2) Do these words of Jesus seem to advocate weakness or strength?
  
- 3) Have you found it possible to turn both injustices and those inflicting them over to God?