

Context Matters – Lesson 5 – Matthew 5:38-42

Intro:

There's a lot of confusion about the Sermon on the Mount, particularly among dispensationalists. Some of them want to jettison the whole thing because they believe that the Sermon on the Mount is a kind of Constitution about the Millennial Kingdom, the Messianic Kingdom. And that tendency is to see passages like "turn the other cheek," and jettison it right now thinking that it belongs in a time and a category with "swords beaten into plowshares" and has no relevance for believers right now. But there are a lot of problems with the attitude that throws out the Sermon on the Mount, thinking it only applies to the millennial kingdom. For one thing, Matt 5:11-12 says that disciples will be reviled and persecuted, and falsely accused on account of Jesus. That would be a strange circumstance during the Millennial Kingdom where Jesus is said to "rule with a rod of iron." And this Sermon is only instruction for believers in the Messianic Kingdom, why pray to be delivered from the evil one, when the evil one will be bound the entire time? Welsh minister Dr. Martin Lloyd-Jones wrote of this confusion, *"Some teach a dispensational view of the Sermon on the Mount, saying that it has nothing whatsoever to do with modern Christians....it says, in effect, that the Sermon on the Mount has nothing to do with us....According to this view I need not read the Sermon on the Mount; I need not be concerned about its precepts; I need not feel condemned because I am not doing certain things; it has no relevance for me....We must likewise ignore the gracious promises in this sermon. We must not say that we must let our light shine before men."* I would say, then, that while some of the original professors of Dispensationalism took this extreme view, I am grateful that many who came after recognized that you can believe in dispensationalism and still believe the Sermon on the Mount applies today. If you check out the Bible Knowledge Commentary, which is the commentary put out by Dallas Theological Seminary, one of the original sources of dispensational thought, you'll find this note on Matthew 5: *"The sermon did not give a "Constitution" for the kingdom nor did it present the way of salvation. The sermon showed how a person who is in right relationship with God should conduct his life. While the passage must be understood in the light of the offer of the messianic kingdom, the sermon applies to Jesus' followers today for it demonstrates the standard of righteousness God demands of His people."* And I think we can all agree, that God's standard of righteousness is as unchanging as God Himself is.

Context Matters – Lesson 5 – Matthew 5:38-42 (Continued)

All of this, though, is intro and scholarly debate. But being five sermons into my “Context Matters” series, you might already suspect what I’m going to say next: the context of these difficult instructions doesn’t depend on you believing in dispensational theology, or covenantal theology, or some mix of both. They don’t depend on you having graduated seminary, college, or even high school. God gave His word for us all, the wise and the simple, the old and the young. And we’ll find that God’s Word is in itself sufficient to instruct us, and to inform us on how to interpret it. Isn’t that wonderful? God’s Word interprets God’s Word. While all Scripture is clear, not all Scripture is as clear as other parts. And when we reach difficulty in one passage, we will find clarity in another. I hope that if nothing else, through this sermon and this series we learn to trust God’s Word more and more. So let’s read God’s Word, together. Matthew 5, “The Sermon on the Mount.” Specifically, we’re going to look at that oft misapplied and misunderstood passage, *“turn the other cheek.”* But first, let’s catch up on what Jesus is doing in this section: The sermon Jesus gives follows a pattern of *“You have heard it said...but I tell you.”* In a way, Jesus is giving his own “Context Matters” series, because in this passage He is seeking to dispel the heresy, the false teaching, and the misunderstandings of His people regarding the right way of living. Let’s look at our passage now: So what does it mean, and why does the context matter? Is this a command to be Christian doormats for an evil world to wipe their jackboots upon? The short answer is: no. And I’d like to explain that in three parts: Introductory Context: Matt 5:17 *“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. Therefore, whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”*

Matt 5:38 *“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.”*

I. “An Eye for an Eye” is Legal, not Personal

Matt 5:38 *“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’*

Context Matters – Lesson 5 – Matthew 5:38-42 (Continued)

- Where did they hear it said? Old Testament Law – but note, this is always in the context of civil law, a legal context, not a code for personal revenge.

o Ex 21:22-25 *22 “If people are fighting and hit a pregnant woman and she gives birth prematurely but there is no serious injury, the offender must be fined whatever the woman’s husband demands and the court allows. But if there is serious injury, you are to take life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise.”*

o Lev 24:19-22 *“Anyone who injures their neighbor is to be injured in the same manner: fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth. The one who has inflicted the injury must suffer the same injury. Whoever kills an animal must make restitution, but whoever kills a human being is to be put to death. You are to have the same law for the foreigner and the native-born. I am the Lord your God.”*

o Deut 19:16-21 *“If a malicious witness takes the stand to accuse someone of a crime, the two people involved in the dispute must stand in the presence of the Lord before the priests and the judges who are in office at the time. The judges must make a thorough investigation, and if the witness proves to be a liar, giving false testimony against a fellow Israelite, then do to the false witness as that witness intended to do to the other party. You must purge the evil from among you. The rest of the people will hear of this and be afraid, and never again will such an evil thing be done among you. Show no pity: life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot.”* o In all three instances, we see that there is reference to court, law, and judge.

- The principal of “*an eye for an eye*” is, in proper context, a legal principal. This is no call for vigilantism, mob justice, or personal vendetta. It is descriptive of the way Israel was instructed to punish criminals with a divinely ordained legal system.
- Second, the idea is that the punishment must fit the crime! God’s justice in the legal system calls to punishment to be of the same kind as the offense. 1. “*An Eye for an Eye*” is a Legal Issue, not Personal. 2. “*Turn the Other Cheek*” is Personal Issue, not Legal. 3. Both Issues Permit Personal and National Self-Defense

Context Matters – Lesson 5 – Matthew 5:38-42 (Continued)

- It's unfortunate that "*an eye for an eye*," came to be referred to as *lex talionis*, which means "*law of retribution*." It's given people the idea that personal revenge is Biblically sanctioned.
 - o "*Eye for an Eye*" was first prescribed in the first written law code, the Code of Hammurabi. Some people have taken that to be indicative of the ruthlessness of the ancient world and accuse the Bible of continuing that theme. In reality, Hammurabi included that instruction to restrict the compensation for the value of a loss. It should be better understood as "*only an eye for an eye*."
 - o And just as that was misunderstood, so this passage is misunderstood. God is calling for the punishment to fit the crime, and no more, and gives the state the legal authority to carry out appropriate punishment.

II. "*Turn the Other Cheek*" is Personal, not Legal

Matt 5:38 "*You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.*"

- "*But I say to you.*" I enjoy looking at commentaries to see what others have thought about a passage, to spur further investigations and studies, and I've found some to be more helpful than others. When Jesus gives His own commentary – it's the best! o The problem with the passage then was the same problem today: people were extending a legal command to justify personal revenge and retaliation.

o Jesus is going to clarify what He expects on the personal level and it's this: "*Do not resist an evil person.*"

- Is that an absolute command? Because Jesus, His disciples, and other Christians in the New Testament resist evil people all the time!
 - Matt 23 is a whole chapter where Jesus pronounces woe to the scribes and Pharisees.
 - Cleansing of the Temple (Matt 21:12-17)
 - In Matt 21:23 the chief priests and elders ask Jesus to tell them who gave him authority to teach, and he refuses to answer their question.
 - The Apostles are constantly resisting the will of the government in trying to silence them (Acts 4:19-20; 5:29).

Context Matters – Lesson 5 – Matthew 5:38-42 (Continued)

- That's not even getting into Old Testament examples!
- Hebrew midwives (Ex 1:15-22) *“But the midwives feared God and did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but let the male children live...So God dealt well with the midwives”*)
- Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego defy Nebuchadnezzar (Dan 3).
 - o If it doesn't mean what it sounds like, what kind of evil person are we not to resist, then?
- The answer isn't hidden in the Greek. It's the standard word for “evil,” πονηρός. ▪ The answer is in the context, where most language lies, anyway. Jesus is telling us not to resist people who insult us.
- How do you hit someone on the right cheek? This is not an attempt to wound, this is a backslap, an insult, especially a public insult.
- Dutch Theologian H.N. Ridderbos puts it this way: *“Jesus specifically mentions the right cheek here, even though a blow from a right-handed person would normally fall on the left cheek. This probably means that the blow is delivered with the back of the hand, since then it would indeed fall on the right cheek. We know for certain that such a blow was considered particularly insulting. The injustice that is willingly accepted here is therefore not so much a matter of body injury as of shame.”*
- This is a reference to non-criminal, non-lethal actions against you. Jesus would have you not to take note of them, so much so that you'd make room for the insulter to continue. - Christians should not insult when insulted.
 - o It's in our flesh to do so, right? It seems like it would be fair, wouldn't it? But remember, fair punishment is not for personal affairs. *“Eye for an eye”* is a legal standard.
 - o 1 Pet 3:9 *“Do not repay evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary, bless, for to this you were called, that you may obtain a blessing.”* Though it is a personally challenging standard, we are promised blessings for obedience.
 - o Rom 13:16-21 *“Do not be haughty but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight. Repay no one evil for evil but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is*

Context Matters – Lesson 5 – Matthew 5:38-42 (Continued)

written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.' 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.' Do not be overcome by evil but overcome evil with good."

- There is however, a difference between insult and injury. While Jesus, Peter, and Paul all instruct us to repay kindness for insult, Jesus does not say we are morally obligated to ignore personal injury.

o John 18:19-23 *"The high priest then questioned Jesus about his disciples and his teaching. Jesus answered him, 'I have spoken openly to the world. I have always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where all Jews come together. I have said nothing in secret. Why do you ask me? Ask those who have heard me what I said to them; they know what I said.' When he had said these things, one of the officers standing by struck Jesus with his hand, saying, 'Is that how you answer the high priest?'* Jesus answered him, 'If what I said is wrong, bear witness about the wrong; but if what I said is right, why do you strike me?'"

▪ The Protestant Reformer John Calvin notes: *"Christ appears not to observe, in the present instance the rule which he elsewhere lays down to his followers; for he does not hold out the right cheek to him who had struck him on the left. I answer, in Christian patience it is not always the duty of him who has been struck to [permit] the injury done him, without saying a word.... It is a foolish exposition of Christ's words, therefore, that is given by those who view them in such a light as if we were commanded to hold out fresh inducements to those who already are too much disposed to do mischief..."*

▪ In other words, there is a point where it would actually be unloving to provide an opportunity for a sinner to go on sinning.

• I'm not saying there are never times when you should bear even injury: we all know that Jesus was said to bear torture silently. What I and others here are saying is that past a certain point you must exercise both wisdom and conscience about what you do about injury beyond insult.

• We see this in the example of the Apostle Paul, who at times enduring lashes and beatings, and at times brought up his Roman citizenship which excused him from that treatment.

Context Matters – Lesson 5 – Matthew 5:38-42 (Continued)

III. What Jesus did NOT say: Personal and National Defense are permitted! - It's clear to me, then that the Bible allows for personal self-defense.

o Some point to Matt 26:52 along with a wrong view of “turn the other cheek” and say we should all of us and at all times refuse the right to self defense *“Then Jesus said to him, ‘Put your sword back in its place! For all who take hold of the sword will die by the sword.’”*

▪ But it's important to know your Bible! Jesus ALSO said to his disciples in Luke 22:36, *“But now, the one who has a money bag must take it, and likewise a traveler's bag too. And the one who has no sword must sell his cloak and buy one.”*

o The Old Testament addresses the right to defend your home. ▪ Ex 22:2 *“If a thief is caught breaking in and is struck so that he dies, there will be no blood guilt for him.”* There is no penalty in the Mosaic Law for killing an intruder who breaks in your house at night. o Interestingly enough, you were not permitted to kill intruders during the day, because it was assumed that daytime thieves did not have the same harmful intent, and there was opportunity to identify and apprehend the thief in the daylight. o Wisdom is not the same as knowing truth – it's knowing the application of truth.

- Further, the Bible allows for self-defense on the national level and permits the state to engage in and declare war.

o Pacifists throughout history have pointed to the commandment *“Thou shalt not kill”* but are reading their own desires into the text. The Hebrew word used refers to murder and is translated that way in modern translations.

▪ BDAG: *“Ratsakh”* denotes illegal behavior against the community which is always directed against an individual; the act may place in connection with blood vengeance.

▪ NET Bible Notes: *“The verb רצח (ratsakh) refers to the premeditated or accidental taking of the life of another human being; it includes any unauthorized killing.”*

▪ Killing of animals commanded.

▪ Killing of criminals commanded.

Context Matters – Lesson 5 – Matthew 5:38-42 (Continued)

- Premeditated murder prohibited.
- Manslaughter understood and provided for (Six cities of refuge provided for in the OT).
- War is commanded by God (1 Sam 15:3 and Josh 4:13). ▪ Ecc 3:8 says that there is a time for war and a time for peace.
 - o The Bible treats soldiers with respect
 - Soldiers who came to John the Baptist for repentance and baptism were not told to get a different job! Luke 3:13 *“Then some soldiers also asked him, ‘And as for us—what should we do?’ He told them, ‘Take money from no one by violence or by false accusation and be content with your pay.’”*
 - Matt 8:8-13: The Centurion who asks Jesus to heal his servant, and says he understands Jesus doesn’t even need to go personally to do it. *“Truly I tell you, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith.”*
 - Centurion at the cross: Matt 27:54 *“Surely he was the Son of God!”*
 - Centurion Cornelius (Acts 10) – First Gentile convert to the faith.
 - o Paul explicitly talks of government being a gift in that the state has the power of the sword to restrain evil and protect innocent life (Rom 13:4)
 - *“Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except by God’s appointment, and the authorities that exist have been instituted by God...Do good and you will receive its commendation because it is God’s servant for your well-being. But be afraid if you do wrong because government does not bear the sword for nothing. It is God’s servant to administer punishment on the person who does wrong.”*
 - o Capital punishment is commanded. Gen 9:6 *“Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, [Why?] for God made man in his own image.”* John Piper: *“In other words, the dignity of man and the value of man, created in the image of God, is not what hinders capital punishment. It is what requires it.”*
 - o A nation, then has both the right and obligation to defend itself against enemies foreign and domestic – the criminal who commits offenses against society, and the enemy who would carry out evil against the nation.

Context Matters – Lesson 5 – Matthew 5:38-42 (Continued)

It's important to know your Bible, and it's important to know your rights. I would add, as a summary, though, that the fact that we are together in this room interested in and appreciating God's Word is a work of the Holy Spirit, because of the work of Jesus who laid down His right as Son in order to bring many sons to glory. I said before that wisdom is not the same as knowing truth – it's knowing the application of truth. We can't be wise until we know truth, and I hope that my sermon this morning has helped us to understand what Jesus wants us to know from our passage.

I want to close with a remark from R. Scott Clark, who is a professor at Westminster Seminary. He said, *“Eye for eye, tooth for tooth” is the standard of civil justice. The civil magistrate is not a minister of grace but of law. The visible church, however, is a minister of grace. In the covenant of grace, unconditional favor is shown to sinners who deserve nothing but judgment and condemnation. As recipients of grace we are called to respond graciously, not legally, to those who, in the visible covenant community, offend us. How often have congregations been torn apart by an ungracious response to a careless or hurtful remark and how much grief might have been spared had we chosen, in the grace of Christ, in union with Christ, to imitate Christ in such situations?”*

The call to be a Christian citizen is to understand the importance of establishing and upholding a nation that preserves the rights of its citizens and defends the innocent. The call to be a Christian citizen is also one that understands the need for his and her society to experience grace, even in the face of insult, and maybe, if you choose, in the face of worse. The stakes nationally, and personally, are high, but with a high view of Scripture and a love of wisdom, and the blessing and strength of God, we will do well.