

A HARMONY OF THE GOSPELS
XLV. The Sermon On The Mount: False And True Righteousness
H. Christ's Righteousness Regarding The Issue Of Retaliation
(Matthew 5:38-42)

I. Introduction

- A. Christ's great Sermon on the Mount provided valuable insight on God's true righteousness, what Israel's religious leaders greatly lacked as seen in their dead traditionalism.
- B. To illustrate the contrast between the false righteousness of Israel's leaders and God's true righteousness, Jesus gave six illustrations, with the fifth illustration regarding the issue of retaliation in Matthew 5:38-42.
- C. We study this passage in view of other Scriptures for insight, application and edification (as follows):

II. Christ's Righteousness Regarding The Issue Of Retaliation, Matthew 5:38-42.

- A. In Matthew 5:38, Jesus referred to the teaching of the "*lex talionis* (law of the talon [lit., claw or hand])" that directed that "a punishment should be gauged by the offense" instead of allowing retaliatory feuds to erupt and result in injuries that went beyond the level of the initial injury in unjust revenge. (Bible Know. Com., O. T., p. 209; Ryrie Study Bible, KJV, 1978, ftn. to Matt. 5:38; Bible Know. Com., N. T., p. 31) This law appeared in Exodus 21:23-25 regarding an injury to a pregnant woman that caused her to miscarry her infant and in Deuteronomy 19:21 regarding the punishment of a false witness in a court trial. The *lex talionis* was actually widespread among Semitic peoples in the Ancient Near East, seen in Hammurabi's laws of ancient Babylonia where he stated, "'Life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burning for burning, wound for wound, strip for stripe.'" (Merrill F. Unger, Archaeology and the O. T., 1973, p. 156)
- B. Though the Mosaic Law "set a boundary on retaliation . . . , no person was required by the law to react in like manner toward an offender" where the Pharisees were eager to use the right to exact punishment on one who had wronged them. (J. Dwight Pentecost, The Words and Works of Jesus Christ, 1991, p. 180)
- C. In contrast, "Jesus taught that to demand one's right was not a manifestation of divine righteousness. Christ said that righteousness, godliness, and holiness do not demand one to seek his rights. Instead, it is the characteristic of righteousness and godliness to give up rights. Christ did this when He stood falsely accused before Pilate. Thus, He was saying that a righteous man is characterized by a selflessness that does not demand his own rights." (Ibid., p. 180-181)
- D. For this reason, in Matthew 5:39-42, Jesus gave specific illustrations of the true righteousness of God where one ceased to demand his rights, but even gave up his rights in totally avoiding retaliatory feuds (as follows):
 - 1. Instead of resisting the evil injustice of being struck on his right cheek apparently in a punitive procedure, one should turn to let him strike his other cheek as well, Matthew 5:39.
 - 2. If one is sued in a court of law and his accuser takes away his tunic, the sued party should also let him have his coat, Matthew 5:40; Ibid., p. 181.
 - 3. Jesus also taught that if a Roman soldier who had the right to make a citizen carry his load for one mile had him carry his load for that mile, instead of bearing that burden for just one mile, the citizen should carry it two miles, sacrificing his right to stop carrying the load at the one mile mark, Matt. 5:41; Ibid.
 - 4. Though the Hebrews in Jesus' day were not required to give to beggars, "Christ taught that righteousness will respond to the need and will not turn away from such a person . . ." (Matthew 5:42 ESV; Ibid.)
- E. [There **is** a **limit** to following this directive by Jesus, and it is taught by Paul in 2 Timothy 3:1-5: if an **abusive** person seeks to take advantage on one's gracious, non-retaliatory response to the abusive party's wrong by perpetually abusing him, the abused party should **withdraw** from the abusive party's reach to **avoid** being **needlessly abused!** Jesus' teaching in Matthew 5:38-42 was meant to teach His hearers the path of **ending retaliatory** actions **toward wrongdoers, NOT to enable abusive** people to **further** their **abusive actions!**]

Lesson: *Though the Mosaic Law utilized the Ancient Near Eastern law of "lex talionis" to RESTRICT unjust feuds from erupting by LIMITING the punishment of wrongs to the level that the wrongs deserved, Jesus taught that this law was NOT meant to foster a SPIRIT of REVENGE even to the exacting of a punishment at a FAIR level, but that true RIGHTEOUSNESS went BEYOND a spirit of revenge to sacrifice one's rights to avoid the possibility of unjust feuds ever erupting. The LIMIT to heeding Jesus' call to sacrifice one's rights is to withdraw from an abuser who seeks to take advantage of his victim to continue to abuse his victim.*

Application: *May we sacrifice our rights as needed to avoid feuds while wisely not enabling abusers to abuse us.*