An Eye for an Eye, Part 1
Matthew 5:38
2223

We're continuing our study of Matthew, and this is message number 44 in our series; we've had such a wonderful time. We've been doing it on Sunday nights, and in the last two weeks, have moved to Sunday morning for our study of Matthew. We come this morning to a very potent, insightful, and misunderstood passage of Scripture: Matthew 5:38-42.

"You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I tell you not to resist evil. But whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also. If anyone wants to sue you and take away your tunic, let him have your cloak also. And whoever compels you to go one mile, go with him two. Give to him who asks you, and from him who wants to borrow from you do not turn away."

One element of the great American philosophy of life is that we all have certain inalienable rights. We're big on rights; in fact, maybe we've never been bigger on rights than we are nowadays in our society. We are hyper-conscious of our rights. We have had movements for civil rights, women's rights, children's rights, prisoners' rights; we have unions to demand rights for the employees. We are very conscious of our rights. In fact, it is not uncommon in our society to hear someone say, "You'll never get away with that. You can't do that to me. I'll get even."

The other night, I was driving home with my family and we pulled onto the freeway, and apparently pulled in front of someone a little more closely than I thought. I didn't think I hit him, but apparently, I dented his psyche. So for the next five miles, he was behind me, flashing his bright lights on and off, and honking. That was him demanding his right to a certain area of the freeway upon which no one was allowed to infringe.

Deep down in the human heart is a retaliatory, vengeful, spiteful spirit; it's part of the curse of sin and it's there in all of us. It comes out in the most strange ways. I'll always remember the story of the bride and groom who got married in the horse and buggy days. They rode off on their honeymoon, and the horse bolted, and the guy said, "That's one." The horse bolted again, and he said, "That's two." The horse bolted yet again, and he said, "That's three," and took out a gun and killed the horse. His wife said, "That's terrible; you can't do that!" He said, "That's one."

Deep down in the human heart is this retaliatory, get even kind of spirit. Frankly, in our society, we make heroes out of the kind of people who take nothing from nobody, who don't stand any guff. They are the strong, the tough, the courageous, and the macho; and our society looks down on the meek and the non-retaliating, the gentle, the forgiving, the gracious, the merciful person who demands nothing from anyone, and we say he's a weakling and a coward.

I was trying to analyze why America was so in love with John Wayne and why it was such a tremendous loss to the country to loose him. I think it was because John Wayne was, in a sense, the national symbol of the crusty, tough, 'take nothing from nobody' kind of folk hero that really symbolizes American attitudes. That's part of human nature, to not let anyone get away with anything until you've told them. Or to let them know that they can't do that to you.

Basically, that's at the heart of the Jewish misunderstanding of 'an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth,' give them what they're due. That's the way it was being applied in Jesus' time. It had become a license for vengeance, a basis for a vendetta, sort of a biblical permission to have a grudge or to strike back. But Jesus said, "If someone hits you on the right cheek, give him your left. If someone sues and takes your coat, give him your cloak. If someone asks you to go a mile, go two. And if anyone needs what you've got, give it or loan it."

That's antithetical to everything in human society; that doesn't cut it with the human heart. I've noticed something interesting in our fight for rights - inevitably, when a fight for rights takes place in a society, the upshot of it is going to be lawlessness. This is because when people begin to live on the basis of their rights, then a dominant selfishness begins to take place. And when you have a whole lot of people being selfish, they will invariably tread on each other. In a fight for rights, what is lawful just gets pushed into the background.

C.S. Lewis found the idea of the need for rights, or the struggle to get even, so true of the human heart that he used it as the basis of his argument for moral law in the universe in his book, Mere Christianity. Everyone has that in them, and we have a sense of justice, and I believe that is the image of God. But in the Fall, that sense of justice became perverted into a vengeful spirit. It isn't so much the idea that if a person does something wrong, we want it to be made right to uphold the law and to maintain a righteous standard so that God, who made the righteous standard, can be glorified; it's that we want to get even. That's the perversion of a moral righteousness given us in the creation of God.

Instead of that, we just have a retaliatory spirit, and that's what James talks about in James 4, when he says, "From whence come wars and fightings among you? They come because you lust." Because the normal desire for justice is perverted into vengeance, grasping, retaliation, and that's why we have war. So, in our society, everyone fights for their rights. We're so big on rights right now that we're setting the law aside. We have a vengeful society if they don't get their rights. I've had parents say to me, "It's just easier to give my kid what he wants than to try and discipline him." Basically, that's what society is saying.

Contrast the fight for rights, the demand for your due, with what the Apostle Paul said in I Corinthians 9. "Do we have no right to eat and drink? Do we have no right to take along a believing wife, as do also the other apostles, the brothers of the Lord, and Cephas? Or is it only Barnabas and I who have no right to refrain from working?" In other words, Paul says, "I'm a minister of the Gospel; have I no right to earn a living doing that? Do I have to work to earn my living? Don't I have a right to be paid for my ministry?" Then he says, "Don't I have a right to marry if I so choose, and take a sister to be a wife? Don't I have a right to those things?" Yes.

"Nevertheless we have not used this right, but endure all things lest we hinder the gospel of Christ." In other words, Paul says, "My life is all about setting aside my rights." Look at Romans 14-15, and it says, "Don't use your liberty to make anyone stumble." We have rights, but rights can be offensive to

someone else. If pushed far enough, our grasping desire for our due, our rights, literally obliterates law. This is precisely the issue to which our Lord speaks in Matthew. He contrasts the ethics of His Kingdom, which is forgiveness, seeking nothing, no defensiveness, no self-protection, no rights for me, with a grasping, retaliatory, spiteful, vengeful, grudging spirit. It characterizes society.

Let's see what He's saying specifically. I remember several times in my life the occasion of standing on the Mount of Beatitudes, no doubt very near to where Jesus gave this great sermon. It is still a beautiful, green hillside, dotted with some trees, and it slopes down to the Sea of Galilee, where little waves just ripple on the edge of the grass. I've stood on that hillside and imagined myself there when Jesus taught. I've imagined how, beneath His feet, stretched out the vast multitude of people who were hearing the sermon. In front of the people gathered close to Him were the Pharisees and scribes, who thought they were the best of men, and perhaps even closer to Him were the disciples.

As Jesus speaks in this particular part of the sermon, He is speaking directly at the form of religion developed by the scribes and Pharisees. You see, they believed that they had attained self-righteousness on their own merit. They believed that they were able to enter the Kingdom of God on the basis of their own self-righteousness, that they had attained a standard of excellence by law, by legalism, and by ritual. They masked the reality of their sinfulness. So Jesus is busy, in the Sermon on the Mount, ripping off their masks, stripping their hypocrisies, so that they will see themselves a wretched sinners.

You say, "Isn't that rather unkind?" No, the kindest thing you can ever do for someone is show them their sin, so that they know they need a Savior. No one is going to come to a Savior unless they know they need one. So Jesus tears off the masks so that they might see the sin. He has already shown them that, in spite of what they thought, they were murderers, adulterers, liars (as we saw last week), and now He's going to show them that in spite of what they thought, they were filled with vengeful, spiteful, grudging spirits not characteristic of the Kingdom of God. They betrayed their sinfulness. Jesus is reiterating God's standard to them, and saying, "You fall short."

This passage has led to some confusion in many people's minds. People have used this passage to teach lawlessness, pacifism, conscientious objection to war, to instruct on anti-capital punishment, and to bring about a disbelief in justice and civil law. This is not atypical. In fact, Tolstoy, the great Russian novelist, used the Sermon on the Mount, and this very passage, to make his main point: there should be no police, no armies, no soldiers, no authorities in society, because then, we'd have utopia. Maybe he wasn't as great a novelist as most people think! That seems ridiculous, and it is.

This passage has confused a lot of people. We won't be able to get through all of it this morning; we'll have to finish it next time. But I'll lay the foundation, and hopefully, it will help you to get a start. Let's look at the same three points we've seen in all these illustrations in Matthew 5, as Jesus exposes the sin of the Pharisees. First, we have to note the principle of Mosaic law, then the perversion of Jewish teaching, and finally, the perspective of Jesus.

Let's look first at the principle of Mosaic law; look at verse 38. He says here, "You have heard that it was said." Basically, that refers to their tradition, but in this case, it was an exact quote from the Old Testament, "An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth." They're trying to play holy, and He's trying to show them they're sinful, so He picks another illustration.

He says, "Alright, you go on the principle of, 'An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.' That's how you operate; that's what you have been told by your rabbinical traditionalists." But behind that, it's interesting that that is a real Old Testament quote. They had just shifted the emphasis and messed up the interpretation, as they so often did with the Old Testament.

Let me add this footnote. The message I'm going to give you is very important because, as I said earlier, concomitant with a struggle for rights is a certain lawlessness. This passage is fantastic in putting into balance and perspective where the law fits in the life of a believer. The Bible upholds law and order, it upholds that whole area. While we can talk about forgiveness and turning the other cheek, it is never to the detriment of what is lawful. We'll see that as we go that there is a beautiful balance in this. If you see your way clear through this, you'll understand that.

All throughout the Bible, God exalts law. God made society to be lawful. In fact, if you read the minor prophets, you will hear God, over and over, indicting Israel for unjust judges, unlawful acts, inequities in their nation. The law is an essential thing. Romans 13 says that the people put in positions of law are the rulers, or agents, of God. The government and authorities are ordained by God, that's very clear.

If you want to know why God gave the law, look at I Timothy 1:9-11. "The law is not made for a righteous person, but for the lawless and insubordinate, for the ungodly and for sinners, for the unholy and profane, for murderers of fathers and murderers of mothers, for manslayers, for fornicators, for sodomites," and that is homosexuality. In a fight for homosexual rights, we are obviating the law that God has ordained to preserve a righteous standard. Always, in a fight for rights, the law gets scuttled. Because if you let men have their way, the things they want are unlawful, because men are evil.

The law is given to stop this; the law is given, he says, "For kidnappers, for liars, for perjurers, and if there is any other thing that is contrary to sound doctrine, according to the glorious gospel of the blessed God which was committed to my trust." What is it all saying? God gave law to protect righteous men against ungodly, evil men. At no point in time are we to obviate law.

I was reading the writing of Will Campbell this week, sort of a woodsy-type preacher who is pretty much a rabblerouser. His basic statement that interested me was that what Jesus was really saying is that we need to get rid of all the law. But that isn't it at all; there must be law!

You say, "If we are to forgive, turn the other cheek, never retaliate. If someone sues us, and we're not to fight him, but give him everything we have and more. If anyone wants to borrow, we should just lend it, then where does the legal recourse come? Where is the balance? What if someone commits a crime against me; do I just say, 'It's alright, brother, would you like anything else?'" Is that what we're to do, just turn them loose, let them all go and forgive them? Is that what this is saying? Or do we uphold the law and punish them? Is that what it's saying?

I hope you want to find out. Look again at verse 38. The statement is this, "An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth." I've heard people say, "Boy, that kind of stuff is merciless; that's the bloodthirsty, Old Testament stuff." Some of the old critics of the Bible used to say there was a different God who wrote the Old Testament. They said the God of the Old Testament is not the God of the New Testament. They thought he God of the Old Testament wanted an eye for an eye and a tooth for a

tooth, and that He was saying, "I'll get you. Whoever does anything to you, get them back, and if he pokes your eye, poke his eye. If he knocks your tooth out, get his." But is that what it is saying?

Do you know why people interpret it that way? Because that's the way the human heart is. But that's not the way God's heart is, and that's not what it means in the Old Testament when it says that. Let me help you.

Starting in Exodus 20, you have the law of God basically codified, systematized. In that chapter, you have the moral law, which is between a man and God, or a woman and God. But in Exodus 21-23, you have the civil law. The moral law is taken care of between a man and God; the civil law is taken care of within the framework of magistrates, judges, courts, and duly constituted authorities. God instituted judges, magistrates, and authorities to take care of civil matters.

Now, there are three times in the Old Testament where the phrase, "An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth," is mentioned. All three of those times relate to a civil situation; they relate to something occurring within a duly constituted authority: a judge, a magistrate, etcetera. "An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth," is not a statement that is in any way related to personal relationships.

However, that's precisely what the Pharisees had done with it. They took a divine principle of judicature, a divine principle for the courts, and they made it a matter of daily vendettas. Let me show you why I say that. Let's look at the three Scriptures where this phrase is mentioned. The first is in Exodus 21:22.

"If men fight, and hurt a woman with child, so that she gives birth prematurely, yet no harm follows, he shall surely be punished accordingly as the woman's husband imposes on him; and he shall pay as the judges determine." In other words, if you harm a woman with child (and we won't go into all of the possibilities; there could be harm where she doesn't loose the child, there could be harm where she does loose the child), the point is that the husband has the right to seek damages, and the judge will determine.

So this is a civil situation; the husband doesn't get a club and beat up the guy; this is not a vigilante approach. This is not personal vengeance. In order for there to be structure in law and order, and in order for there to be preservation of society, you cannot have personal vengeance. So even in the Old Testament, in civil law, there were judges to deal with these matters; the judge determines. "But 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."

"If a man strikes his servant." So suppose you have a servant and you get mad at him, and haul off and belt him and knock his eye out, or wound his eye so that he can't see. "If a man strikes the eye of his male or female servant, and destroys it, he shall let him go free for the sake of his eye. And if he knocks out the tooth of his male or female servant, he shall let him go free for the sake of his tooth." In other words, within the framework of the civil law, God was protecting the weak from the strong, the good from the evil, by saying, "There will be just recourse."

However, notice the term 'judges' there; this is civil, it is not a matter of personal vengeance. If you're a servant and your employer knocks your tooth out, you don't catch him at an unwary moment and knock his out; you would go to the court in Israel and say, "This is what happened," and it would be

confirmed by the mouths of two or three witnesses, and the just due would be given to you: you'd be set free. So this would temper the master's treatment of slaves if he knew that if he struck his slave, and the slave lost a tooth, he'd lose his slave. That would be a high price to pay.

You see, law is a restraint, and when justice is enacted speedily and equitably, it has a great effect on society. There is a second use of this same phrase in Leviticus 24.

"If a man causes disfigurement of his neighbor, as he has done, so shall it be done to him - fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth; as he has caused disfigurement of a man, so shall it be done to him." In other words, mark this, there is to be equity. The punishment is to fit the crime, and it is in a civil setting. The third one is in Deuteronomy 19.

"One witness shall not rise against a man concerning any iniquity or any sin that he commits; by the mouth of two or three witnesses the matter shall be established." So if there are sufficient witnesses that the man has done something, where are the witnesses coming? This is a court setting, a tribunal, a magistrate, this is a civil thing.

"If a false witness rises against any man to testify against him of wrongdoing, then both men in the controversy shall stand before the LORD, before the priests and the judges who serve in those days. And the judges shall make careful inquiry, and indeed, if the witness is a false witness, who has testified falsely against his brother, then you shall do to him as he ought to have done to his brother; so you shall put away the evil from among you."

Do you know how to get rid of evil in a society? Give just punishment speedily for people who commit crimes, even perjury, as in this case. "And those who remain shall hear and fear, and hereafter they shall not again commit such evil among you. Your eye shall not pity." Notice this: there is no place in a court for pity. The law demands justice. If society is to be preserved, there must be justice. The court is not the place for pity.

I'll always remember the judge in Pasadena who felt sorry for the rapist and let him go, and he raped and murdered a 9-year-old girl. Then the judge felt sorry for the little girl. The court is not the place for pity, it is the place to hold the standard of righteous law high. Why? Because that and that alone will preserve society and put fear into the hearts of men.

Take an innately sinful man with a depraved nature and give him his rights, and he'll run right into chaos if you don't make consequences for his behavior. I'll tell you, parents, start it with your children. If there are no consequences for the behavior of your children, they will never learn what it means to live a righteous life.

So he says at the end of Deuteronomy 19:21, "Life shall be for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot." In all three of those passages, you will see that the law was for the civil courts. It even mentions judges and magistrates several times. The point is this: the law was never to be taken into the hands of an individual. God knew that would be utter chaos; you cannot have anarchy and preserve society. So the intent of the Mosaic law was to control sin, in this case, the sin of anger, violence, and revenge.

In our own rugged individualism, we want to strike back. Even in marriage, we play that one-

upsmanship, don't we? You feel like she's had the upper hand for a while, and you have to figure out a way to get back on top, to get even. God had another way to go. You say, "Wait a minute, John. You just said this is Mosaic law: an eye for an eye, tooth for tooth, maintain the standard of justice." Yes, that's right; in the courts. But that is not all the Old Testament teaches, and we'll see that in a few moments.

This is the intent of the Old Testament law. The statement, "An eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot," do you know what it means? The punishment must fit the crime; no less, and no more. It was a restraint on the innate vengeance that is in an evil heart. An eye for an eye didn't mean, "When you get it, give it back!" It meant that when justice functions, let it never go beyond its bounds. If it is only a tooth, then only a tooth should be taken, or in kind. Usually, it was money that compensated, not an actual tooth. In other words, God was limiting the innate, evil human heart, which always seeks to go beyond how it's been offended.

For example, go back to the illustration of me pulling in front of the guy. All I did was pull in front of the guy; he didn't even have to put his brakes on. But he was irritated because he liked looking at the back end of the other car, I suppose. He was irritated, but he didn't just pull around and get in another lane. For five miles, he blinked his lights; it was completely beyond compensating for what I had done.

You know, no one ever murdered another because he got murdered; ever! They go way beyond! "You mess around with my girlfriend and bang! You're dead." It's always beyond, always an overreaction, and that's why God said, "An eye for eye, tooth for tooth, no more, no less." He put the boundaries on justice. In the Old Testament, it doesn't mean take personal revenge. That isn't the idea at all.

This is the oldest law in the world, did you know that? It's known as lex talionis. It is the oldest law in the world, and we found it in the code of Hammurabi. It's sometimes called 'tit for tat,' sometimes 'quid pro quo.' It just means equal punishment for the crime. It is in Hammurabi's Code, and says, "If a man has caused the loss of a gentleman's eye, his eye shall be caused to be lost. If he shatters a gentleman's limb, one shall shatter his limb." In other words, bound up in the human heart is a sense of justice. But the problem is that it gets perverted into vengeance.

Don't miss the point; that is a good law. It is a law that puts fear into people's hearts. That law doesn't do anything but good for righteous people. It just protects them. People say, "We can't have all these laws, it encumbers us." The more strict the law, the more protection for the righteous people. All they affect negatively are people whom they should affect negatively, evil people whose evil is out of control.

Let me give you several thoughts. First of all, this is a just law. It is a just law because punishment should fit the crime. It's nothing more than justice, it's just equal. Let me give you an illustration. Judges 1:6-7 says, "Then Adoni-Bezek fled, and they pursued him and caught him and cut off his thumbs and big toes." Now that's strange.

You say, "Why did they do that? He was an enemy, so they cut off his thumbs and big toes?" Yes. "And Adoni-Bezek said, 'Seventy kings with their thumbs and big toes cut off used to gather scraps under my table; as I have done, so God has repaid me.'" He was busy cutting off the thumbs and

toes of others, so he got his own cut off. That is an illustration of what was done in an Old Testament setting.

Did you know today in Iran, when they catch a thief, what they do to him? They cut off his hands. That has a tremendous effect on shoplifting. I'm not saying that I want people's hands cut off; what I'm saying is that people are sinful. I'm sinful. And if there aren't rules, and if fear is not put in our hearts, we will pursue an evil path. It's a just law. "Whatsoever a man sows," said Paul, "That shall he also reap." Jesus said, "Judge not, lest you be judged. As you have measured it out, so shall it be measured to you."

Secondly, it is a merciful law. An eye for an eye is merciful because it limits vengeance; it does away with vendettas and blood feuds. You've read so many times about a native who goes over to another tribe and kills someone in the tribe. What happens? The whole tribe comes over and slaughters everyone in the other tribe. No, no. This law says, "Only the person who committed the crime, and only commensurate with the crime should be the punishment." It's a merciful law. It puts a lid on human vengeance

If a master of a slave brutally beat his slave, and the slave lost a tooth, the courts would free that slave. That slave could take his case to court and be set free. What that did was restrain an evil master, do you see? It's merciful. The law never hurts the good and the righteous people.

Thirdly, it is therefore a beneficent law. It was designed to protect the weak from the strong, the peaceful from the violent. You see, our society gets everything twisted. We talk about 'right' so much now that it seems often that today, criminals have more rights than honest people. Our suffering society, overrun with crime and violence, would do well to reexamine the Old Testament law. But you see, once you deny God and let that go, everything is gone.

I believe the pulpit must be the place to put this all back into perspective. We have to preach a just character in the heart of God, and we have to enact a just, lawful discipline in the church. We have to preach an eternal punishment in Hell. Why? So that the world will know there is right and wrong, reward and consequence. I believe that when the pulpit went liberal, and stopped preaching the character of God, Hell, and eternal punishment, and when the church stopped disciplining sin, that society just fell into the flow. Maybe we could lay the whole thing at our own doorstep.

If we have an efeminate generation that wants to abolish capital punishment, turn prisons into country clubs, and relax justice in violation of God's law, maybe it's because we haven't proclaimed it the way we should have. That's the legacy of liberalism. To restrain evil is merciful and beneficent; not to restrain evil, not to have punishment, not to have things the way they should be is to allow evil to run rampant. Then everyone pays the price.

Arthur Pink says, "Magistrates and judges were never ordained by God for the purpose of reforming reprobates or pampering degenerates, but to be His instruments for preserving law and order, and that by being a terror to the evil (Romans 13), they are to be an avenger to execute wrath on him that does evil." He is right; there is to be terror. The law has been ignored because God's character has been ignored, because a sense of eternal punishment has been ignored, because the church doesn't even bother to discipline.

Pink further says, "A conscience has become comatose. The requirements of justice are stifled. Maudlin concepts now prevail, as eternal punishment is repudiated, either tacitly, or, in many cases, openly. Ecclesiastical punishments are shelved, churches refuse to enforce sanctions and wink at flagrant offenses. The inevitable outcome has been the breakdown of discipline in the home and the creation of a public opinion which is mawkish and spineless. Schoolteachers are intimidated by foolish parents and children, so that the rising generation are more and more allowed to have their own way without fear of consequences. And if some judge has the courage of his convictions and sentences a brute for maiming an old woman, there is an outcry against him." This is the legacy we have in our country.

So Jesus, whatever He says, will uphold the Old Testament law. He won't obviate or change it. If God said, "The law is just, merciful, beneficent, and has a reason to be," Jesus will not change that. Why? Because Jesus said, "Not one jot or tittle shall pass from the law until all be fulfilled. Anyone who breaks the least of these commandments, or teaches anyone else to do so, is the least in the Kingdom of Heaven." He said, "I have not come to destroy the law, but to fulfill it." So what He's doing here when He says, "But I say," is not obviating the law but saying, "Let me clarify what God meant. I speak for God."
As I said earlier, that's not the whole of the Old Testament law; there is so much more. The law must be upheld, justice must rule, there must be a right sense of justice. But on the other hand, what should be our attitude? In the work of justice, do we hate the criminal? Do we feel vengeance and bitterness and spite? Listen to what the Old Testament also teaches in Leviticus 19:18. "You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the children of your people." That's the same book and the same author - Moses.

You should never hold a grudge, never avenge. If there is a crime committed, then you should seek the law to do its work, because that preserves society and exalts God, who wrote the law. But your heart is filled with forgiveness and love, so that Jesus says, "Love your enemies and do good to those who spitefully use you and persecute you."

I've stood at the door of my own home under the threat of a man coming in with a knife to maim one of my children. What would I do if he came in and killed one of my children? I thought that through pretty thoroughly in those days when we were going through that. What would I do? Well, what Jesus is saying to me to do would be this: catch the man, hold the man. If he was hungry, feed him. If he was thirsty, give him something to drink. If he needed Christ, give him the Gospel. Most of all, forgive him and love him, and then let the law do exactly what God gave the law to do. They work together; one belongs in the courts, and the other belongs in my heart. It's an attitude of forgiveness.

That's why Proverbs 25:21 says, "If your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat; and if he is thirsty, give him water to drink." And we're talking about a real enemy here, not the guy over the fence who doesn't cut his weeds and they grow into your yard. We're talking about someone who comes to kill your family, a serious enemy.

I couldn't help but think of that film of Nicaragua where the soldier was standing over Bill Moyers, the NBC correspondent, just watching him lie on the ground, and blew a bullet into his head. That is human vengeance. The Old Testament says, "If your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat; and if he is thirsty, give him water to drink." But it also says, "If he commits a crime, take him to court, to the judges, to give him due punishment for his crime."

Proverbs 24:29 says, "Do not say, 'I will do to him just as he has done to me.'" Don't say that. That's vengeance. Jesus hangs on a cross, and they've set about to murder Him, and He knows it will be a little time until they will murder His disciples. So He looks down the ages and sees all the heroes of the faith who will die in martyrdom. He looks at an ungodly, unruly world and says, "Father, forgive them. Forgive them."
He knew that justice would take its course; He knew if they died without repentance, they'd spend eternity in Hell. And yet His heart was a heart of forgiveness. So when I catch that man in my house who has killed my child, I must forgive him in the love of Christ, I must tell him about Christ, I must feed him. On the other hand, I must let the law take its course because that it to uphold the divine standard. I cannot say, "I will do to him as he has done to me."

This is precisely the point, beloved. We've come to the second thought, and I'll just mention it, and then we'll close. The Pharisees had perverted this great truth into a personal vengeance principle. "If someone gets your tooth, get his." Instead of taking it as a limit on vengeance, they took it as a mandate for vengeance. Their emphasis was wrong; they removed it from the courts, made it a personal revenge, and used it to justify hearts full of hate. Jesus is saying to them, "You're not righteous. You're not righteous at all. If you were righteous, you wouldn't be vengeful." They cherished a spirit of retaliation.

You say, "John, how do you find this kind of balance where you can uphold the law of God and still be free in your heart to forgive?" I'll tell you how, it's very simple, at least the concept is stated simply. The only person who is non-defensive, non-protective, non-vengeful, never bears a grudge, has no spite in his heart, is a person who has died to self. What is there to defend? If I die to self, what is to defend? But if I'm going to fight for my rights, then I prove the point that self is on the throne, self is ruling.

Jesus had died to self in the sense that He had abandoned Himself to the Father's will, so if He died, He died. Paul had abandoned himself to the Father's will and died to self, so that he said, "If I live, I live to the Lord. If I die, I die unto the Lord. So whether I live or die, I'm the Lord's." He knew what it was to say, "I die daily." If Paul had lived for himself, he would have gone through his life defending himself against his critics; he never did.

You see, selfishness is defensive, protective, vengeful, spiteful, reactionary. So if we are to have the Spirit that Jesus asks for, we have to die to ourselves.

One of the biographers of William E. Gladstone, the great British Prime Minister, said this of Gladstone, "Of how few who have lived for more than 60 years in the full light of their countrymen and have, as party leaders, been exposed to angry and sometimes spiteful criticism, can it be said that there stands against them no malignant word and no vindictive act? This was due, not perhaps entirely, to Gladstone's natural sweetness of disposition but rather to self-control, and a certain largeness of soul, which would not condescend to anything mean and petty."

Well, you can be in a situation like that, where you're the Prime Minister (and he was a Christian), and you're criticized by everyone, and never have a vindictive response or a malignant word in response. You're manifesting the spirit Christ is talking about. What about the death of self? If someone kills my child, if I have died to self, I don't take it as a personal grief. I will uphold the law for the glory of God, but I'm not going to strike that man back out of personal anger and vengeance of, "Look what you've done to me." No.

The heart of the matter, then, is to understand what it means to die to self. Listen, maybe this will help. When you're forgiven, or neglected, or purposely set at naught, and you sting and hurt with the insult of the oversight, but your heart is happy, being counted worthy to suffer for Christ -- that is dying to self. When your good is evil spoken of, when your wishes are crossed, your advice disregarded, your opinions ridiculed, and you refuse to let anger rise in your heart, or even defend yourself, but take it all in patient loving silence -- that is dying to self.

When you lovingly and patiently bear any disorder, any irregularity, or any annoyance, when you can stand face to face with waste, folly, extravagance, spiritual insensibility, and endure it as Jesus endured it -- that is dying to self. When you are content with any circumstance, any food, any offering, any clothing, any climate, any society, any solicitude, any interruption by the will of God -- that is dying to self.

When you never care to refer to yourself in conversation, or record your own good works, or itch after any commendation from others, when you can truly love to be unknown -- that is dying to self. When you can see your brother prosper and have his needs met and can honestly rejoice with him in spirit and feel no envy nor question God, while your own needs are far greater and your circumstances more desperate -- that is dying to self.

When you can receive correction and reproof from one of less stature than yourself, and can humbly submit inwardly as well as outwardly, finding no rebellion or resentment rising up within your heart -- that is dying to self.

Ask yourself a question: are you dead yet? If we are to know the balance between holding up the law of God in an evil society and pouring out a heart filled with forgiveness and love, and empty of any vengeance, any self, it will be when we learn what Jesus meant when He said this, "If any man will be My disciple, let him deny himself, take up his cross daily, and follow Me." Let's pray together.

I think, Father, of the words of the Apostle Paul, whose great prayer was, "That I may know Him by being made conformable to His death." We learn from the sufferings of Jesus Christ how He responded in His heart, forgiving the very crucifiers. Being reviled, He reviled not again, only reaching out His love.

Father, may that spirit be in us, may we die to self as Christ did, in the sense that He obeyed the Father's will, even in death. May we be willing to crucify ourselves; may we not be defensive or protective. Like Paul in I Corinthians 4, may we not justify ourselves. God, help us to know the balance between holding up Your law for Your glory and the preservation of righteousness in society, and having hearts of forgiveness even to the people who break that law, even if they break it against us and wound us in the breaking. Teach us to die to ourselves and live unto You. We pray for Christ's glory, Amen.

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