

38 “You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ **39** But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. **40** And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. **41** If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles. **42** Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.

43 “You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ **44** But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, **45** that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. **46** If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? **47** And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? **48** Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

For Every Law a Loophole

For every law there is a loophole. In fact for every law there is a lawyer looking for a loophole. An example of this is this child told by his mother that he couldn't go outside. Technically he's not outside. Technically he's still inside. But for every law there is a lawyer, a child, a teenager, an adult looking for a loophole or a way around the law which is why we have so many laws - to give them something to do as well as foster ingenuity.

But when Jesus starts preaching and he leaves no loopholes. Unlike the Pharisees, Jesus taught as one with authority. That's because he didn't allow loopholes or other interpretations. At that time the Pharisees set aside the least of his commands and taught others to do the same. The Torah had interpretations and these were collected in the Mishnah (about 800 pages). Then there was the commentary on the commentary called the Talmud (60 printed volumes). Jesus explores these loopholes, their teachings which allowed them to do the bare minimum of the law, while thinking, “I've fulfilled it.” But Jesus speaks with authority and cuts out every loophole.

If there is one thing about our lesson this morning, it is that preachers, including myself, are full of excuses. We struggle with Jesus words and squirm under the idea of “not resisting the evil one,” and giving up our rights. I'm immediately looking for a loophole a way out from under “*But I say to you,*” and “*It has been written.*” That's because the sinful nature is a scheming conniving scoundrel always looking for a way

out. But there are no loopholes to the law however there is a way out through Jesus. (The way, the truth, and the life - John 14:6)

Jesus says, *"You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also."*

We'll start with the easy part first - what's known as the Lex Talionis - Hammurabi's law. Many think, "That's horrible, vindictive, bloodthirsty...If everyone followed this we'd all be blind and toothless," but it's also biblical. The idea behind it is one of mercy and justice. This law was given in the Old testament to protect both parties. It was meant to protect the innocent who may suffer at the hands of those who put out eyes and or teeth because the law threatens criminals with retaliation. This law also protects criminals from the escalating threat of vengeance. The law is not intended for individual use but by those in a court of law limiting and seeing to it that justice is served.

Rather than serve as a law guarding against crime and revenge, it was seen as the little boy law. You hit me. I hit you back. But instead of a law limiting violence and revenge, in a sinful world this law it was seen an invitation and even a command to get even. God's Law was used to justify actions and retaliate against others. The intent changed a loophole was found to exploit others for self-serving purposes.

Loopholes weren't the only way, *"It has been said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'"* "As yourself" was forgotten and *"hate those who hate you,"* was added, which is found no-where in the Bible which is why it's comforting that Jesus said, *"It has been said,"* and not *"It has been written."* God's law was limited by lawyers seeking loopholes, *"Who is my neighbor?"* The letter of the law may have been in tact but the spirit of the law, the original intent had been bypassed. This still happens today.

For centuries Christians have found loopholes; ways to get around this lesson; ways to explain it away so we don't actually have to follow Jesus' Words. These loopholes, if we're honest, are really just a way of saying what everyone's thinking; "Jesus has to be wrong... he can't really mean this." What about our rights? What about justice? What about self-defense?

The point Jesus drove home is if anyone attacks you, don't retaliate. Take that evil in and upon yourself and let it die. He re-establishes the principle - the original intent of the law. There are no loopholes and if you see someone in need, help them. It's not that

Christians are foolish or naive in how they help others. God also does not want us to support sin, drunkenness, and laziness with our actions or money, but we dare never use that as an excuse not to help those *in need*.

But as soon as we bring up these questions of casuistry and start finding excuses we act like little Pharisees. That's because the little legalist inside of us wants to know, "What's the bare minimum that I have to do in order to fulfill the law and walk away justified?" How far do I have to go? How much do I have to give away? How much do I have to help? At the very least I can love and serve those who love me. But then Jesus reminds us that if you think you are so pious for loving those who love you - even the wicked tax collectors do that.

Instead be just like your heavenly father - who causes the sun to shine and the rain to fall on the wicked and the righteous alike. "*Be perfect as your heavenly father is perfect.*" Perfect. A ten out of ten. Not a nine out of ten but perfect.

Jesus gives us God's Word and tells us exactly what God expects- not just going through what the law says but it's more than that. It's the thoughts and attitude behind obedience. It's the willingness to serve others. The thought of doing even more than what is required of you. Willing to be wronged rather than demand your rights. Jesus not only lectured his disciples on God's expectations but he lived them.

Next week Jesus will once again be declared with power to be the Son of God. Once again we will see him go back down into the world and be treated as just another person, on his way to Jerusalem to suffer and die for those hostile to him. The one who taught these things shows us willing nonresistance, self-sacrifice, quiet submission to evil men. He turned his cheek even when it was more than just an insult. He did not demand his rights. He gave more than just a cloak off his back. God caused his Son to shine on the evil and righteous alike. God then sends his word which rains down on all people. This is our God who loves a sinful and hostile world, *who wants all to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth* (1 Timothy 2:4) about him and what he has done. This is how our God deals with us.

That is the same love the Father has shown us. Your sins are forgiven - even the very times you have twisted and perverted God's Word. Searched and found a way out from under the law other than Jesus. Even for the times we've demanded our rights, mismanaged the gifts God has entrusted to us, and failed at the Fatherly love God has shown us. Jesus has taken these sins, these injustices upon himself and let them die with

him. Your sins are forgiven for the many and multiple times we have not met up to perfection.

God doesn't want us to destroy or hurt his enemies. God wants to redeem them. God may even use us to redeem them. This reality lies at the heart of Jesus's teaching in this passage. In place of a grudging spirit full of justice and revenge - Jesus calls us to lives of reckless generosity. Jesus' teaching is hyperbolic but that does not mean he is not serious. Love your enemies. Pray for those who persecute you.

"Therefore you will be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:48). These words point us back to God. It's an emphatic command, using the future, "you will do this." The same way mom would say, "You will not hit your brother." But I also see that as a promise. "You will be perfect. Perfect because that is what God has made you through the perfect life, death, and resurrection of his Son. Perfect because God has made you perfect. He has made you holy, blessed, salt, and light. That's why we want to go above and beyond the letter of the law. We demonstrate what we have been made, children of our father in heaven.

You don't need a lawyer to argue a case for a loophole that doesn't exist before God. There are no loopholes but there is a way out. Jesus paid for every eye, tooth, injustice, act of violence, and failed mis-interpretation. Jesus is the only way any of us will see heaven. He suffered on the cross for it. Not so you can be free to sin, but so you can grow in your faith and understanding of God's love not only for you but also for those who hate you. *How great is his love that he has lavished on us that we should be called children of God. That is what we are.* (1 John 3:1) Amen.