

Saved By Grace Lutheran Church
Sermon by Pastor Tim Bartels

Trinity 4, 2104

Matthew 5:38-42¹

Part I

You don't have to look hard to see that the world is not Christian. Some opponents of Christianity do what they can to keep it that way. In order to do so, they raise objections. One such objection is that the God of the Bible is a vengeful God. They use verses like the one in our text as a case in point, "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth." A God, who says such a thing, they argue is vindictive, cruel and punitive. They don't want anything to do with a God like that.

Such arguments often are made without presenting the *whole* truth. Be that as it may, verses, like the one in our text, have to be understood in the light of the *rest* of God's word. God's word explains this text in the context of two kingdoms. That is, Christians live in the kingdom of the world and the kingdom of God. Both kingdoms operate on *different* principles. That is key for understanding today's text.

Part II

When Jesus says, "you have heard it said, 'an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth,'" he is speaking about a principle of the world. It is a principle by which the world operates. The principle is that the *punishment should fit the crime*.

It was a principle at work in the Old Testament. As such, it was part of the civil law. Civil law provided for law and order among the Israelites. Offended parties could seek *public* remedy for offenses in the courts. The punishment *was* to fit the crime. Neighboring nations at the time had similar civil laws. Today the same kind of civil laws govern our own country.

In order to seek restitution for damages, then, citizens turn to the courts. They file lawsuits to settle the matter. That was in the news this week. Perhaps you heard about a man that is bringing a lawsuit against ESPN. He was caught on camera, sleeping at a ballgame. Commentators had fun at his expense. It went viral. The offended man is seeking public remedy for defamation against his person.

Our spiritual forefathers recognize this as a legitimate course of action. It is for the Christian living in society. They say, then, in our confessions, "Our churches teach that lawful civil regulations are good works of God. They teach that it is right for Christians to serve as judges, to judge matters by imperial laws and other existing laws."

To judge such matters, then, "eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth," is a principle that has guided civil law. So, citizens seek public remedy in the courts; and the punishment is to fit the crime. Trouble comes about, though, when "eye for an eye" is used for *private* remedy. Private remedy is the same as *personal revenge*.

Wanting to "get even" is born into our sinful nature, that's for sure. It's the kind of subject that much film is made of. Just think of some examples from recent years. There is *Gladiator*, *Taken*, *Payback*, *Home Alone*, *V for Vendetta* to name a few.

Or think of some examples in the news. An ex-girlfriend turned to Google to take revenge on her ex-boyfriend. She spammed Google Search with

photos of her ex. The photos were overlaid with mocking phrases.² In Harlem, New York, seven people were wounded. Police believe the offender got revenge. Apparently the seven victims jumped him at a basketball tournament earlier that day.³ A soccer player in Michigan assaulted a referee. He fatally wounded the referee. The soccer player was “getting even” for being ejected from a game.⁴

These actions of personal revenge have become public. They made the news...but what about you? Personal revenge does not have to make the news to be guilty of it. You and I are guilty of it when we *feel* it in our hearts; and *act it out* in our deeds.

You *children* are guilty of it when you try to get even with a brother or sister who made you mad; when you say unkind words back to a playmate who picked on you; when you pout around the house because you were asked to do a chore. We *adults* are guilty of it when we make an angry gesture at a motorist that offended us; when we keep score with a spouse to use in the future; when we hold a grudge with a fellow Christian over something done in the past.

When we get personal revenge; when we see it played out on film it gives us a good feeling. We feel that the bad guy has gotten what he deserves; that he has been given a dose of his own medicine; that justice has been served.

The thing is, God *forbids* that we get personal revenge. He does *not permit* us to get it. The proverb says, “Do not say, I will do to him as he has done to me. I will pay that man back for what he did.”⁵ God says in another place, “Do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, Vengeance is Mine, I will repay, says the Lord.”⁶ The matter belongs in God's hands. When the matter requires public remedy, the courts are God's agents to settle the matter.

That's how it is in the kingdom of the word. The world operates on the eye for an eye principle. In essence, it is a principle of the *law*. You get what you deserve. Those who live by the law die by the law.

Part III

To be sure, the kingdom of the world operates on the principle of the law. In the kingdom of God this principle is turned on its head. "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 an evil person.'" That is, in the kingdom of God a *different* principle is at work. The principle is not seeking a punishment that fits the crime, but the giving up of legal redress.

Jesus gives three examples. *One*, "whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also." Today we might put it like this, "When picked on by a bully, ignore him." *Two*, "If anyone wants to sue you and take away your tunic, let him have your cloak too." We might say, "If someone sues you for your shirt, give him your coat too." *Three*, "Whoever compels you to go one mile, go with him two." Go the extra mile; above and beyond what is asked.

It all goes to say that *the gospel*, not the law is the principle by which the kingdom of God operates. In the kingdom of God not demanding payback, but giving above and beyond; not getting even but forgiveness; not law, but gospel is everything. You and I *do* struggle with that. We do want personal revenge; do hold grudges; do keep score; give tit for tat; find it hard to forgive.

We do; and when we do, we hold our neighbor up to the demands of the law. They have to pay up. They deserve what they get. By holding their feet to the fire, without thinking about it, we put ourselves on the *same* footing. Jesus once put it this way, "With the same measure you use, it

will be measured back to you.”⁷ That is, you put someone under the scrutiny of the law; you put *yourself* under the scrutiny of the law.

...but neither you nor I can meet that scrutiny. *None* of us can. Not one of us can stand before God and boast in the law.⁸ The law always accuses; always condemns; always seeks remedy. The law seeks an eye for an eye, tooth for tooth, life for life – yours and mine, too.

Yes, it does. It does, so God, in his grace, has *substituted* a life for your life. Jesus put it this way, “The Son of Man (Jesus) came not to be served but to serve and give his life as a ransom *for* many.”⁹ ...so, it was *Jesus'* life for your life. In that way *God* settled the score; took out his vengeance on sin and the devil; got public restitution on the cross. He did by laying your sin on Jesus; and, in exchange, your life is spared. Not only is yours spared, so is the life of your neighbor.

This is the key principle in the kingdom of God, then. Someone explained it this way; because of Jesus' atonement, the principle of revenge cannot reign in the church. It cannot, because in the atonement of Jesus God has surrendered that right by satisfying it. What's more, claims that have men have against each other have been satisfied in Jesus.¹⁰

In other words, no longer do you have to hold your fellow Christian's feet to the fire; you don't have to because God does not hold yours to the fire. No longer do you have to keep score; you don't have to because God settled the score for you and your brother. No longer do you have to get revenge; you don't because God avenged your sin. You are forgiven. So is your brother.

And where does God hand out this forgiveness? He hands it out in the means of Grace. He hands it out everytime you hear the word of absolution, everytime the gospel preached from the pulpit, everytime you kneel at his table. Here it is that we sinners gather to hear; gather to be

forgiven. It is what the kingdom of God is about. It is, because where there is forgiveness there is also life and salvation.

IV

Its true that in today's world we hear arguments against Christianity. We hear that God is a vindictive, cruel, punitive God. Yet, those arguments need to be weighed with the whole of God's word.

God's word teaches that the Christian lives in two kingdoms. In the kindom of the world, the *law* is the operating principle. There is payback for crimes committed. In the kingdom of God, the *gospel* is the operating principle. The kingdom of God is all about the forgiveness of sins.

To be sure, the law is used in the church. It is, though, not so that God can be vindictive. That is *never* his goal. No. The law is used with the purpose to lead you to the gospel. That is *always* the goal. It is to comfort you, the sinner, crushed in your sin with the comforting solice of the gospel.

Today, God invites you to taste that comforting forgiveness at this table. Come, then. Eat and drink Jesus' body and blood. Here, he gives you his life-blood. God settled the score in that blood. Yes, he did. Your life is spared. What's more, he gives you above and beyond all you can imagine. With that forgivenss, he gives you heaven. Amen!

¹References to the text (NKJ) will not be cited in the sermon

²http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/02/05/girlfriend-revenge-goodgle_n_810975.html

³<http://newser.com/story/28516/8-shot-in-harlem-rampate.html>

⁴blogs.windsorstar.com/.../07/03/soccer-player-charged-after-referee...

⁵Proverbs 24.29 (NIV)

[6](#)Romans 12.19

[7](#)Luke 6.38

[8](#)Romans 2.23

[9](#)Matthew 28.20

[10](#)Scaer, David, *The Sermon on the Mount*, Concordia Publishing House, p. 128 summarized